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Writing Centers in Times of Whitewater¹

Lester Faigley

Assessing how our institutions, and, therefore, our writing centers are changing requires understanding how the larger culture has changed and continues to change. One literature that is obsessed with change is books on business and management. Metaphors of chaos and whitewater became fashionable in popular books in the early 1990s, written before “whitewater” took on new meaning in the Clinton administration. While I infrequently read popular books in the business section, the whitewater metaphors resonate for me because I have spent so much of my adult life in a kayak on moving water. Rapids are the reason I boat. The enjoyment of kayaking, unlike rafting, is not simply going through the rapids but what you can do in them. The greatest pleasure comes when you can balance on moving fluid and use it to do what you want to do—surf a wave, turn 360° spins, or pop up in the air, sometimes getting the entire boat out of the water vertically. But it took me a long time to get over some basic fears of rapids and to understand that until rivers become unrunnable with waterfalls and unavoidable hydraulics, going down most rapids is not much more difficult than driving on a mountain road if you can stay focused, read the water, react, and be decisive. The times I’ve gotten into trouble are when I stopped paying attention and floated into places where I didn’t want to be.

Every era has been a time of change, but river metaphors suggest that some times of change are more accelerated and more turbulent. For

¹ This article is a version of the keynote address at the 1994 ECWCA conference in Toledo, Ohio.
American business over the past thirty years, that metaphor has been accurate. American industry went from having no competition in the years immediately following World War II to being uncompetitive by the 1970s, falling hopelessly behind other nations, especially Japan, whose corporations were the envy of the rest of the world. The American stock market plunged during 1973-1974 and didn’t regain its 1972 level until 1982. Now the gloomy days of American corporations in the 1970s seem long ago. The United States was able to adapt more quickly than other nations to the new economy that uses technology to integrate the world into a network of commerce. Today it is Japan that is mired in recession, and the American economy remains resurgent, with the stock market still setting all-time highs led by companies that didn’t exist or few had heard of 30 years ago: America Online (founded in 1985), Charles Schwab (1971), Cisco Systems (1984), Dell Computer (1984), FDX (1973), Intel (1968), Microsoft (1975), Sun Microsystems (1982), Wal-Mart (1962). For most wealthy Americans, the experience of whitewater has been a blast.

But in other respects comparisons of kayaking and the last thirty years of the economy are not apt. When I kayak, I always know what’s ahead. When I cannot see all of an unfamiliar rapid, I get out of my boat and take a look. If I don’t like what I see, I put my boat on my shoulder and walk around it. It’s not quite the same as predicting that one of the best performing companies during the last thirty years would base much of its business on selling Happy Meals. Many in the economic rapids have found the ride precarious. Even at a time when those in high-tech industries claim they cannot find enough domestic workers, the largest nongovernment employer in my city, Motorola, announced in spring 1998 that it will cut its workforce by 10% across the nation, reminding us that the record number of high-tech start ups is accompanied with high-tech failures. Furthermore, not everybody in America has been on the river. Study after study show that the bottom 80% of Americans have not shared in the wealth during the last thirty years, with the wages for workers in 1994 3% below the 1979 level when adjusted for inflation (Uchitelle and Kleinfield).

Among those on the bank have been much of higher education. Wages in higher education have stagnated and the hiring of part-time teachers has increased, but we have not experienced the massive disruptions that closed hundreds of factories in America. While corporate America merged, downsized and relocated overseas, much of higher education remained in the smoother water because it was subsidized with tax dollars. Those days are coming to an end. Subsidies have continued to diminish to the extent that a recent President of the University of Michigan described his institution as going from state-subsidized to state-assisted to state-located. Now increasingly privatized higher education is
in competition with for-profit educational enterprises like the University of Phoenix, which claims an enrollment of 48,000 in spring 1998, and various consortia of colleges offering courses via the Internet. There’s every sign that higher education has entered a period of radical transformation of its mission and the circumstances of its existence. It’s not a time when we can float, lie back, and look up at the sky.

What then is going to happen to writing centers when higher education fully experiences the turbulence of the whitewater it has entered? There is no one way of answering that question, of course, because each writing center has a different institutional setting and set of circumstances. But as I am going to argue later, we who work in and support writing centers must have a sense of how our potential roles are changing if we are to provide the institutional leadership that we are capable of providing. One of the lessons for academics in the 1990s is that history (much less the future) needs to be understood with little narratives as well as big ones, that the big trends play out differently in different lives. Those in writing centers as a group perhaps understand better than any other faculty that larger issues must be connected to our students’ lives.

As an example, I offer a short narrative of my experience of the transition from industrial to postindustrial America. I was born in 1947 in West Virginia and grew up in a community beside the Elk River named Mink Shoals. When I was growing up, I thought it would be a great place to be from if I were a professional baseball player. Mink Shoals, West Virginia. I loved baseball as a kid, but I didn’t play much baseball because there were no baseball fields in Mink Shoals. The community sat on top of a hill surrounded by a dense hardwood forest. When we tried to play baseball, the games abruptly ended when the ball was hit to the wrong field and rolled down into the thick undergrowth. Sometimes even basketball games in our driveway ended when the basketball took a bad bounce off the rim and went MIA in the deep gully below our house.

In spite of its local color name (there really are shoals in the Elk River where we waded and caught crawdads), growing up in Mink Shoals didn’t seem very special at the time. In its broad outline, the story of my upbringing is similar to those of many other white Americans who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s. My parents were teenagers during the tough times of the depression. My father went off to World War II; my mother went to the city to find a job. They met after the war, got married, and added me to the baby boom. As soon as I started first grade, my mother went back to work. With two incomes they enjoyed the affluence of the 1950s in being able to build a new prefab house and to buy a new Studebaker, a Formica kitchen, and a variety of gadgets to fill it. They made it into the lowest reaches of the American middle class. Life was good.

The main difference between my story and that of millions of
other white Americans is that it was situated in West Virginia. The majority of white people in America did well economically in the 1950s, including those in the working class. If they had union jobs in automobile plants and steel mills, they made about as much money as middle-level bureaucrats. The decade likely will be remembered as the closest America ever came to achieving a classless society (that is, of course, if people of color are excluded from the picture). But in West Virginia in the 1950s, even many white people remained at the 1930s’ level of poverty. My grandparents lived on a small hill farm in the next county to the north, and they received electricity only in the mid 1950s. They still had split rail fences, gas lights, horse-drawn machinery, and a Sears catalog nailed up on the outhouse wall for toilet paper. When I visit farm museums that depict farm life in the late nineteenth century or even earlier, I know what all the hand-cranked machines were used for because my grandparents owned them and used them. I never thought of them as poor because they always had bountiful fresh food to eat, but by any statistical standard they were most definitely poor.

Neither did I think of many of my neighbors and the kids I played with as poor because it wasn’t an operative category. Poor people lived in other countries like India. Nevertheless, I was aware early in my childhood that West Virginia wasn’t the same as everywhere else in America because every fall my family went to Columbus for a weekend. A friend of my father’s was an Ohio State alum and season ticket holder, and each year he gave my father tickets to one of the early Ohio State football games before they got to the meat of the Big 10 schedule. It was the high point of our year. Downtown Columbus was a real city with hotels, restaurants, and, best of all, Lazarus—the only real department store I’d ever been in. Even when I slept on the way to Columbus, I knew when we had crossed the Ohio River because the road surface suddenly became smooth. The only four-lane highways I’d ever seen were in Ohio. Everyone we knew had friends or relatives who had gone to Ohio to work, and from them we learned about the rubber plants of Akron and the steel mills and other industries in Cleveland and Toledo.

I still have the World Book Encyclopedia set that my parents bought in 1957. The entry for Ohio conveys my childhood vision of the state:

Nature and man have combined to make Ohio one of the best-balanced and most varied of states. It ranks thirty-fourth in size, but only New York, Pennsylvania, Illinois, and California have greater population. Ohio ranks high in the value of manufactures. Beds of the finest iron ore lie to the north in Michigan and Minnesota, and the ore can be easily brought to Ohio. The coal
needed to turn that ore into iron and steel is found within the borders of Ohio and in nearby Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Kentucky. Ohio has become the meeting place for these basic raw materials, and an ideal location for the mills needed to change them into countless products for daily use throughout the United States. Only Pennsylvania exceeds Ohio in the production of iron and steel. Only Michigan produces more automobiles and motor vehicle bodies and parts. Thousands of other manufactures, ranging from matches to dirigibles, pour from Ohio’s factories and mills in a steady stream. (5858)

The remainder of the text is a series of economic superlatives: “a leading state in the total value of farm crops,” “first among the states in the total value of clay products,” “the largest factory in the world for weighing scales,” “half the nation’s tire production,” “the deepest limestone mine in the world,” “the most productive commercial fresh-water fishery in the world,” 10,000 miles of railroad track, 460 newspapers (“more in proportion to the population than any other state”), and 22 miles of the Ohio Turnpike, near Youngstown, opened in 1954 (5862-66).

There are two pages of composite photographs in the Ohio entry: one of Ohio landmarks including the capitol and the birthplace of Thomas Edison, the other of “Industrial Ohio,” including images of the two-and-a-half million dollar wind tunnel at Wright Field in Dayton, the manufacture of tires and life rafts in Akron and cash registers in Dayton, steel mills along the Cuyahoga in Cleveland, and an ore boat on the Maumee River approaching the docks and railroad yards of Toledo. These are proud images, proof of the enormous wealth described in the text. There are no worries about water pollution or acid rain. There is no voice of Randy Newman singing “Burn on, big river, burn on.”

When I went back to Ohio in 1970 to work on a master’s degree at Miami University, I found an Ohio that was beginning to feel the pressure of world competition. The unprecedented position of the United States following World War II as the only major power unscathed by the ravages of total warfare had come to an end. A rebuilt Europe, a surprisingly resilient Japan, and a host of new challengers from the developing world began to cut into American markets, taking aim first on the industries that had made Ohio the model of capitalist prosperity. The steel towns by the early 1970s were in deep trouble. A young woman from Steubenville was in one of the first classes I taught at Miami. She was struggling to keep up with the other students, in part because her high school was closed most of her senior year when voters repeatedly turned down school levies. It wasn’t just the steel towns that had hit the skids. When I went to Columbus to use the Ohio State University Library, the
downtown had all the signs of a city in decay. The stores, hotels, and restaurants that I remembered as the epitome of prosperity from just a few years earlier were either closed or dying. The story of progress that I had grown up believing was supposed to turn out the other way. West Virginia should have become more like Ohio than Ohio like West Virginia.

It was incredible to me that by the time I finished my doctorate that the place I had grown up seeing as America's shining example of economic success would be described as the "rust belt," the example of an America unable to keep up with a changing world. The consequences were devastating. For many people in Ohio whose lives were tied to industries celebrated in the *World Book Encyclopedia*, everything they thought was secure was taken away from them. Rather than the streamlined locomotives of progress that would transport society to the good life, large corporations like B.F. Goodrich, U.S. Steel, and General Motors came to resemble outmoded and inefficient steam engines in disrepair, ready for the scrap heap. The encyclopedia's boast that Ohio was one of the "best-balanced states" didn't prove to be true. The economy was far too dependent on a few industries that in turn were dependent on an ephemeral set of conditions: cheap resources and high demand without competition. When the cheap resources began to run out, the demand leveled off, and the competition intensified, the weaknesses of these industries were quickly exposed.

The decisive enemy of stable industrial capitalism turned out to be capitalism itself. Multinational corporations produced an enormous flow of goods and capital across boundaries. Those corporations involved in heavy industry that survived were able to diversify and relocate factories in countries where labor was cheap and pollution laws lax. But the demise of the factories didn't necessarily mean the demise of Ohio. The economy bounced back in ways unimaginable in the 1950s: not through the growth of corporate giants but the creation of many small businesses, the great majority run by their owners. Large corporations increasingly follow this model, forming small working teams rather than the military-like organizational structure of the assembly-line factory. From the time I was in elementary school to the time I received my doctorate in 1976, every assumption about industrial America had changed. Reading the 1957 encyclopedia entry makes the shift in our economy seem just as remarkable as the sudden collapse of communist governments in Eastern Europe.

In the rest of the encyclopedia entry on Ohio is a section about education. "Ever since pioneer days," the entry reads, "Ohio has been noted for its colleges and universities" (5867). The wealth produced by Ohio's factories helped to build one of the foremost state university systems in the country, with the largest single campus university in the
nation as it flagship. The belief that supporting higher education in turn supported economic growth led to the enormous expansion of the public universities across the nation in the 1950s and 1960s. The relationship was mutually beneficial; the products of universities—sponsored research and degree recipients—were closely tied to the needs of an industrial economy. Because these needs were relatively stable, reasonably accurate forecasts could be made of, say, how many civil engineers would be required in five years. Many sectors of American industry had never experienced international competition.

As the “American century” comes to a close, American industry has been integrated into a postindustrial world economy where corporations must compete against other multinational giants around the globe. No longer do corporations expect to hire long-term workers in a particular occupations, but rather they anticipate that their own structure will continually transform and their workforce along with it. Workers who remain with a particular corporation will have to reeducate themselves periodically and often will have to change occupations. More likely, they will change careers and employers on their own.

Universities, however, remain deeply traditional in their structure. They are divided into discrete areas of specialization called departments, and they are governed hierarchically. They expect to keep their faculties in place for many years and guarantee this stability with the system of tenure. They are designed to reproduce themselves by granting degrees according to their departmental structure. This system worked well in the stable postwar industrial economy which grew incrementally. It is not working well in a postindustrial economy. The problem lies not in graduates being turned out in the wrong fields but in the basic assumption of a college degree leading to steady employment. The traditional structure of a university, like that of a traditional factory, has become increasingly anachronistic.

Higher education in the United States has enjoyed a long run of success, remaining the uncontested giant in the world. Only three nations, Canada, Australia, and the United States, have over 30 percent of the population who have completed some postsecondary education. A higher percentage of young people go to college in the United States than in the most prosperous countries of Europe; for example, the proportion of young people who graduate from college in the United States is four times that of Switzerland. The United States spends more per capita on higher education than any other nation except Austria (although its spending for elementary and secondary education from both public and private sources is in the middle ranks among developed nations ["Educational Attainment"]). But as we near the end of a century of unprecedented access to higher education in the United States, government is increasingly refusing
to pay the bills, and, as a consequence, the poor are being squeezed out of four-year public institutions. The gap between whites and non-whites going to college is greater today than in 1980 (Bronner). More African-American men of college age go to prison than enroll in college.

A crisis is looming on the immediate horizon for American higher education now that the "baby-boom echo" generation had reached college age joined by a huge influx of immigrants. The situation is especially critical in Western states, which will see a 60% growth in the college population by 2008, in contrast to 10% in the Midwest, 21% in the Northeast, and 22% in the South (Honan). In the late 1960s and early 1970s, in response to the surge of baby boomers, California built 42 new community colleges, 4 state colleges, and 3 new UC campuses. Such building is unlikely to happen again. Spending on higher education in the Western states fell in during the 1990s, especially in Washington, Oregon, and California, where voter-led tax initiatives restrict money spent on higher education. Governors of Western states including Pete Wilson of California, Mike Leavitt of Utah, and Gary Locke of Washington proclaim "no more bricks and mortar," forcing many students to look for courses on the Internet rather than attending traditional classes.

Not surprisingly, faculty members have responded with alarm. In a June 1998 letter to Governor Locke signed by 800 faculty members at the University of Washington, the faculty maintains that "calls for 'downsizing', productivity increases, and greater 'accountability' carelessly echo corporate fads without taking into account the already downsized nature of the state's universities and colleges" (Diment). Like faculty members elsewhere, they express concern over proposals for a virtual university delivered by the Internet. But what really touches a nerve is the suggestion that "teachers should be subject to the same kinds of limitations that healthcare providers have experienced under the rule of HMOs. This prospect is frightening—deeply contrary to the foundations of higher education and its role in fostering a free and democratic society."

I am fully in sympathy with the faculty at Washington, but, at the same time, I find their letter neglects one very important constituency—the students. Students increasingly are voting with their feet, leaving college before they receive degrees if they get the job for which they are looking. Governor Locke's assertion that many students want something other than "designer label" educations at prestige institutions is more accurate than the faculty would like to admit. The prominence of debates over the future of tenure and the effectiveness of online education tends to obscure the fact that colleges and universities have already had to redefine themselves to meet the needs of their students. With more and more nontraditional students coming to higher education, traditional notions of instruction will have to continue to change. More than 80
percent of students enrolled in postsecondary education do not live in dormitories. Close to half are older than 25 (Bureau of Statistics 174).

A different college population with different needs and expectations is bringing different models of learning. Writing centers offer some valuable lessons to the faculty at large, who must realize that they have more alternatives that simply holding on to the status quo or putting all courses on the Internet. The letter from the faculty at the University of Washington to Governor Locke defends an education that "is an intersubjective and social process, involving hands-on activity, spontaneity, and the communal experience of sharing in the learning enterprise." The irony, of course, is that most undergraduate students at large research universities do not receive such an education, making the definition sound hollow and self-serving. Writing centers embody the sharing of the learning enterprise. They work outside of the course and degree structure. They can provide support to faculty, staff, and even people outside the university as well as students. And, not the least, they treat students like people instead of assembly line commodities. They meet students where they are but they don't leave them there. They have the flexibility to adjust to different needs as they arise at a time when more and more people will need additional education.

But if writing centers are indeed the way of the future, then why do they operate on such tenuous ground on so many campuses? Why are they so vulnerable in times of budget cuts? My simple answer is that writing centers threaten the status quo. Operating outside of course structure is only the beginning, although that fact alone causes enormous difficulties for writing centers on campuses where money is awarded on the basis of credit hours generated. More radical is the mode of instruction. Most students come to writing centers on their own volition. They decide what kind of advice to seek. Often the person they talk to is a fellow student. The writing center consultant most often does not give directives but helps the student by becoming a reader or listener.

This model of education, of course, is quite different from the lecture hall where information is dispensed. The knowledge required of the consultant is not the factual knowledge acquired over many years of higher education but rather the ability to recognize difficulties that students experience in writing and to empathize with the student's situation. Universities for the most part are run by administrators whose training in and notions of the humanities remain traditional. Writing centers don't fit a traditional concept of instruction in the humanities. Writing centers work against the model of expertise on which the hierarchical research university is based.

What then can writing centers do in the meantime while they wait for their institutions to catch up? Patricia Lambert Stock offers a detailed
answer to this question in a recent issue of *The Writing Center Journal*. In “Reforming Education in the Land-Grant University: Contributions from a Writing Center,” Stock first analyzes the institutional landscape, including the mission of Michigan State University in relation to ideals set forth by presidents of state and land-grant colleges and universities in the 1997 Kellogg Commission Report, *Returning to the Roots*. The three foremost ideals in the Kellogg Report are to make the institutions genuine learning communities, to make learning student-centered, and to provide a healthy learning environment. Stock then describes how the MSU Writing Center implements those ideals in separate named initiatives aimed at (1) enhancing the quality of literacy of undergraduate and graduate students at MSU, elementary, middle, and secondary students in Michigan, and the larger community, (2) improving the teaching of writing at MSU and across the state, and (3) making resources for writing available through the World Wide Web. But Stock makes clear that these various initiatives must have high visibility to be effective, and she describes a variety of forums the writing center has used to publicize its efforts and to build and disseminate knowledge.

I fully agree with Stock that writing centers should and must take a leadership role—*should* for the good of the institution and *must* for their own continuing development. To take a leadership role:

- First, we have to act, not react. Quietly doing a good job at what we do now is not going to cut it over the long haul. One-on-one consultation with undergraduate students will remain the bread and butter of most writing centers, but we have to be attentive to where else we can make a difference. Supporting faculty who teach writing in other disciplines, assisting in outreach efforts, helping teachers in the schools, providing online resources for the college or university community, and conducting research on writing have also become important missions for writing centers.

- Second, we have to stop being a cheap date. Too often writing programs and writing centers attempt to do more than they have resources to do. Admittedly, often they do not have a choice. But the ethos of service in writing programs often conceals fundamental problems that ultimately diminish the effectiveness of those programs. With the increasing privatization of colleges and universities, people expect to pay for the services they receive. Like other consultants, writing center professionals should determine what their services are worth and charge accordingly. Quality cannot be achieved for long without adequate financial support. Sometimes you have to be willing to play hardball. We were ready to close the doors of our writing center if we had not received stable long-term funding.
Third, we have to be a lot smarter about funding writing centers. Being smarter means identifying more than one source of funding. If a writing center has multiple missions, it should have multiple sources of funding. When outreach to the schools, for example, is an institutional priority, institutions will find funds. If writing centers participate in such efforts, they should receive a budget proportional to their level of effort. Every writing center should have an endowment, even if it is a very small one. People like to give money to writing centers. The trick is to convince your development office that people like to give money to writing centers so they will identify potential donors. But even without your development office’s help, you can sometimes attract support by maintaining a high profile in your community.

Fourth, we have to educate continually the larger community what a writing center does. The Director of the Undergraduate Writing Center at the University of Texas, Sara Kimball, and the Coordinator, Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton, frequently make appearances before university groups, enrolled and prospective students, and community groups. They have written stories for and have been featured in local newspapers, and they have appeared on local radio and television programs. These activities are not the usual ones for college faculty, but they are necessary to achieve a larger presence and to overcome perceptions that writing centers are concerned primarily with remediation. Perhaps even more important is to get people to visit the writing center. Nearly every day I tell someone, “If you’re on our central campus, stop by the writing center. You’ll see students at work.” One place where learning is always hands-on, spontaneous, and communal is in the writing center. We need to make more members of our communities aware of this fact.

Predicting the future is always risky, but I feel many writing centers are ready for the ride through the whitewater. Writing center professionals are well prepared to meet the needs of students in times of change. What I am suggesting—if I can carry the metaphor a bit further—is that we pause to scout what lies ahead. Even if we cannot see all the rapids, what we can see will allow us to put ourselves into better positions. If writing centers thrive in times of whitewater, our students and our communities will greatly benefit. And like my experience of whitewater, it might be fun for us too.
Works Cited


Lester Faigley directs the Division of Rhetoric and Composition at the University of Texas at Austin. He was the 1996 Chair of the Conference on College Composition and Communication. He believes that a writing center’s nest can never be too well-feathered.