

1-1-2000

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### Recommended Citation

Brannon, Lil and North, Stephen M. (2000) "The Use of the Margins," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 20 : Iss. 2, Article 3.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1445>

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## The Uses of the Margins

*Lil Brannon and Stephen M. North*

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The editors have asked us to respond to three questions. The way the questions have been posed, however, presupposes our agreement with the editors' premise that writing centers are viable parts of the academy and writing center directors and tutors are viable contributors to the research community. In order to begin answering these questions, we had to ask ourselves, first of all, "Have writing centers ever been 'viable' parts of the academy? What do the editors mean by 'viable'?" When we began our work in writing centers in the late 1970s as graduate students at two different institutions (Steve at SUNY, Albany; Lil at Texas A&M, Commerce), the work seemed viable to us and to the students with whom we worked. But we were asked to do these jobs by our universities precisely because the work was an afterthought. It truly wasn't viable institutionally because viable work was done by full-time tenured or tenurable faculty. Our writing centers had no institutional budget lines; tutoring money was cobbled together with a few dollars coming from the Dean of Undergraduate Studies, a few from the Department of English (and so on). We would go hat in hand every semester, every year, hoping that money would be there to hire other graduate student tutors or undergraduates to work with the increasing numbers of students who were seeking help with their writing.

The writing centers we began in the late 1970s were viable to the students because the work we were doing offered a different model of teaching and learning than was offered anywhere else at the university. In the writing center there was no body of knowledge to be mastered at the pace prescribed by a teacher's syllabus; rather the learner was the center of the learning, her needs the primary focus of instruction. The learner was allowed to learn at his own pace and not at the teacher-assigned moments

*The Writing Center Journal*, Volume 20, Number 2, Spring/Summer 2000

during a fifteen-week semester. The writing center created a site of caring and of collaborative learning, quite a contrast from the dominant institutional model of the isolated learner, working in lined-up desks, her every move being watched and her silence being assured by the professor proctoring a test.

Not being constrained by the day-to-day grind of academic terms gave us an (en)viable freedom. The work was never scrutinized in the same way, say, that first-year writing is held accountable at some institutions with exit exams. While we saw our work as (even argued that our work was) CENTRAL to the work of the university, we were, in fact, from the vantagepoint of the institution, marginal. And as young academics, interested in transforming the institutions in which we worked, we figured the best way to change things was to beat the institution at its own game. We would make the case as academics for the viability of the writing center.

The irony of holding this position was not lost on us either. We knew every day the contradictions that were inherent in our positions as tutors. We were being paid (and paid poorly) by the institution in order that those who were viable would not have to deal with the “problems” that were given to us. In those early years, it was often the graduate students who were not “ready” for whatever reason to enter the classroom who were given the job of tutoring. And the assignments were made not by those of us in charge of those centers, but by the graduate program director or department chairs—many of whom had never set foot in the Center and may not have known its location.

We remember asking CCCCs to allow us time to have a writing center special interest group meeting at the annual convention. In fact, it was there that we first met each other and decided after only a brief conversation that we needed to start a journal in order to give writing center voices a new place to be heard, one that might complement in a relatively formal way Mickey Harris’s *The Writing Lab Newsletter*. One might say that this was our effort to become professionally viable. The newsletter had already become invaluable for exchanging information, but it also faced real logistical limits on the kind of work it could publish. More to the point, none of the professional journals at that time had published anything on the work of writing centers and it didn’t appear likely that they would find much more than a few pages once a year to devote to our work. We knew the conversations we were hearing were richer and deeper—more viable—than that. We also knew that in order to be heard, we had to make a place for these voices.

The complexities of being entitled to speak and write and the importance of being heard were as much a problem for us as tutors and directors of writing centers as they were for the students with whom we worked. By the time we began the journal, we had managed to find tenure-track jobs directing writing centers. As untenured assistant professors, we

were asked, for our one course-load reduction, to “train” each semester or each year a new group of tutors; to tutor students; to seek external funding to support the writing center; to publicize the writing center; to work with faculty in understanding student needs; to keep meticulous records demonstrating that our work was important and necessary. Our colleagues in literature taught their classes, wrote their articles, played tennis, and lamented the sorry state of writing on our campuses. They were institutionally viable. We were often seen as working with “remedial” students, and colleagues would sometimes speak to us more slowly and more loudly, projecting their images of these students on us. We were constantly misunderstood, and Steve’s article in *College English*, “The Idea of a Writing Center,” tried to capture what it felt like to lack viability. The essay explained how viable we thought we were (at least, it did to ourselves, if not to our institutions).

When we were beginning writing centers in the late Seventies and early Eighties, we thought these places could be institutionally viable. Now even while most every institution in the country has a writing center, their institutional viability is still questionable. So far as we can see not much has changed in this 20-year-old description of our work, except that there is more of it. Writing centers remain, for the most part, underfunded. The staff is comprised primarily of underpaid student workers who change from semester to semester and year to year. While writing centers may still be extremely viable to students and have become more customary on campuses, they are not institutionally viable in the same way that, say, the Center for Study of Molecular Biology might be, or even in the way more recent and less-than-fully viable units like Centers for Excellence in Teaching and Learning usually are. And professionally, *The Writing Center Journal* has extended and enriched the conversation about teaching in ways that were impossible for us to imagine 20 years ago. Scholars writing for *CCCs*, *College English*, *Rhetoric Review*, or *Composition Studies* rarely cite this work to enrich their own understandings, yet *The Writing Center Journal* is filled with scholarly references to the field of composition and English studies. People who work in writing centers are still, for the most part, talking a lot to each other and little to the viable.

This state of affairs causes us to wonder about the writing center’s future. As Tilly and John Warnock argue in their essay “Liberatory Writing Centers” in *Writing Centers: Theory and Administration*, it may be that this precarious position is in fact necessary for writing centers to do viable work. The tutors and the students they work with are both positioned within and against the literacy demands of higher education. Writing center tutors with just slightly more experience and somewhat more success at university work help the student understand what they know of the social structures and relations through which literacy is practiced in the institution. Their viable work is enabled by their lack of

institutional viability: no grades, no mandatory attendance, no classroom, no professor. The writing center offers straight talk, informal conversation, someone who cares, someone who can demystify the institution without making the student feel dumb. But keeping one's enviable teaching edge should not also mean that one must be exploited and silenced in order to do one's work.

For writing centers to become institutionally viable without losing their enviable site of teaching, writing centers will need to exploit their marginal position, that is, develop a rhetoric of marginality that will use their status for institutional advantage. Writing centers are much like the feeder roots of a plant: they nourish the plant system by transforming organic matter into nutrients that feed the system. They give the system stability. Yet feeder roots are not part of the world in the same way that the plant is: feeder roots remain underground, extending themselves into the earth, pushing always at the edges. Understanding how writing centers work to stabilize and enrich the institution is critical to writing center work, if tutors are to demand better wages and more security. At the same time, working underground at the periphery allows the writing center the possibility to teach and learn in new ways. When no one outside of writing centers notices or cares, writing centers have created for themselves an enviable site where transformative work might actually be possible. So learning how to exploit the margins both to their institutional advantage and to their enviable teaching advantage is crucial to the future of writing centers.

Another part of developing the rhetoric of marginality is exploring how writing centers can create institutional memory from which we can continually learn. The problem became clear to us when we left our positions directing writing centers and the work we did there. We were among the few faculty members who actually knew what went on in a writing center. We also knew that we had learned more about how to teach because of our work one-to-one with writers of all sorts. But we had gained tenure, better salaries, and the institution "needed" us to do "other" (should we say, more viable) work—teach graduate classes, direct writing programs, direct teaching centers. Within one year of being "away" from the writing centers we had both directed for years, most of the people teaching there didn't know we had ever set foot in one or knew its location. Those working within the writing center were unable to form alliances with us because they did not know we existed. We should not lose track of those individuals who have been shaped by and profited from their work in writing centers. Those who have become more "viable" to the institution are in a strong position to work in alliance with tutors to reshape the institution and inform others of the necessary work that is going on there. Without institutional memory, however, writing centers lose track of their networks of colleagues.

One of the strengths of the writing center is also a clear weakness. The writing center is able to stay exciting and fresh because yearly it is always remaking itself. Yet the problems of remaking are many. Not only is developing institutional memory problematic, so is how we grow and develop professionally as educators when each year we have to begin anew with new tutors who are often new to teaching. No doubt these tutors' fresh perspectives on teaching make our work exciting and productive. Yet if we are honest, we know as well that the quality of the work is often uneven, and the yearly educational programs for new tutors can become exhausting. Nonetheless, it is important that writing centers keep inviting in those who have never taught before to keep us open to new ideas and new energy. Writing centers need to stay institutionally nimble without being institutionally naïve. A rhetoric of marginality would exploit the contradiction that arises around the arguments we make that experience does and does not matter when it comes to the quality of the work in the writing center. On the one hand, there is an entire field of knowledge devoted to the theory and practice of teaching writing and a specialized knowledge of teaching writing one-on-one that requires doctoral level work to explore fully, understand, and contribute to. On the other hand, undergraduates can learn in a matter of a few weeks how to teach writing to other undergraduates in a tutorial situation.

A rhetoric of marginality would claim as its knowledge the knowledge of practice rather than the institutionally viable knowledge-making practices of the educational research establishment. The knowledge of practice, the lore of teaching, gives tutors a systematic way to investigate the kinds of problems that arise in their specialized site of teaching. Through reflective, action-oriented practice, the tutor is able, for example, to explore the logic behind a particular writer's choices in writing a particular piece. The tutor does not separate thinking from doing; rather, the tutor's job is to make her and the student's reading of the student writer's text visible to the writer so that both have access to their competing theories-in-use. The student writers, then, are not objects of inquiry as they often are in viable educational research; they are co-investigators, key sources of knowledge and insight. The knowledge of practice in a writing center informs our understandings of the quality of teaching and learning. It seeks to describe the complexity of human interaction without reducing it to simple cause-effect relationships or to dependent variables that can be isolated and tested. Writing center research at its best aims at probing the questions tutors and their students ask, the ways tutors and their students use the occasion of students' writing and the talk that surrounds that writing to understand the interpretive frames that the tutors and students use to make sense of their worlds. The knowledge that is made is reflexive: the learner's insights improve the

quality of teaching; the teacher's insights improve the quality of the learning.

For writing centers to continue to be en(viable), those who teach and learn there must exploit the uses of the margins. They must claim their institutional space within the academy as well as their connectedness to the periphery, to the areas and spaces outside. They must find ways to build alliances within the university, while continuing to open its doors to those who have traditionally been excluded from university life. Writing centers must take advantage of the contradictions on which their work depends. In that way they can remain en(viable), while defining in new ways what it means to be viable.