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Some Millennial Thoughts about the Future of Writing Centers

Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford

When most writing centers in the United States were being founded and developed, colleges and universities had very few entities they labeled “centers.” Today, however, centers are cropping up with increasing regularity. At our own institutions, we have (between us) Centers for Humanities, Centers for Advanced Materials Research, Centers for Cognitive Studies, Centers for the Study of First Americans—even a Center for Epigraphy. It seems worth pausing to consider this phenomenon: Where are all these centers coming from, and why are they proliferating so rapidly?

One strong possibility: Centers create spaces for the kind of work that needs to be done in higher education, work that is difficult or impossible to do within traditional disciplinary frameworks. In almost every case, for example, the previously mentioned centers allow for inter- or cross-disciplinary research and scholarship, and at their best they encourage highly productive forms of collaboration. Furthermore, they often initiate projects designed to bring college and community closer together. In short, these new centers seem to us one of the major signs of stress on old ways of taxonomizing and creating knowledge. Their growing popularity signals, we think, one institutional response to changing educational demands, populations, budgets, and technologies.

We are well aware that these are difficult times at most community colleges, colleges, and universities, and that faculty and staff in many writing centers must spend an inordinate amount of time struggling to provide basic services. Nevertheless we wish to emphasize those opportunities that we believe are available to writing centers, even those that are in various ways marginalized on their campuses. The opportunities that we will discuss involve four potentials that we see for institutional refiguration: the refiguration of institutional space, of concepts of knowl-

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edge production and intellectual property, of research paradigms and rewards, and of budget allocations.

Institutional space on traditional campuses is defined by the classroom, which in turn is carefully circumscribed and regulated. Distance education has presented strong challenges to the sacrosanct space of the campus classroom, of course, but most often the institutional “space” available online is equally, if differently, circumscribed. In fact, students are already complaining about the lack of access to teachers in distance education courses, about the rote nature of some online work, and about their sense of isolation. Writing centers offer a clear and compelling alternative use of space, one that in many instances combines the best of face-to-face and virtual education.¹ In our centers as in many others, for example, the physical space allows for one-on-one consultations, for small group work, for individual work in quiet reading or writing corners, as well as for online access either within the physical center or from a distance. This new mix of space and use seems to us a very important but often taken-for-granted contribution writing centers make to refiguring higher education.

Perhaps even more important, writing centers make the borders of the university more permeable than they have traditionally been. That is, writing center work often moves not only across but well beyond our campuses—to outreach efforts with schools, community organizations, business, industry, and government. We believe that this feature of writing centers will be especially important as universities seek to re-imagine themselves in ways that better serve the public good. In this regard, writing centers are more like what Shirley Brice Heath calls “organizations for learning” than disciplinary-based departments. For they can, as Heath observes, respond quickly when the demands of a swiftly changing society outstrip the university’s ability to respond creatively and efficiently.²

In traditional institutions of higher education, knowledge and intellectual property are the products of individual research and scholarship, dispensed through classroom teaching and stored in archives. In recent years, electronic forms of communication—with their ability to disseminate and duplicate material instantly—have put an enormous strain on these concepts of knowledge production and ownership. Even as we write these brief reflections, the struggle over how to regulate the production and dissemination of knowledge grows ever more intense. While writing centers can hardly resolve these struggles, they do hold out an alternative view of how knowledge can be produced and possessed. The relationship among writing tutors, academic staff, and students, for instance, is intensely collaborative. In addition, the knowledge created within writing centers is most often communal knowledge, and materials

developed there are generally intended for public use.³ In many ways, the writing center's value is figured in the way it generates and organizes knowledge (collaboratively) and circulates it (widely and freely), rather than in the creators of the knowledge or its textual representation. It is not surprising to us that writing centers have been particularly eager to take advantage of the opportunities for sharing resources via the World Wide Web.

Given the points we've just made, it seems clear that writing centers offer new and provocative ways of thinking about research paradigms and rewards. Rather than a model based on highly competitive individual research, writing centers foster team-based and collaborative research. Moreover, such research aims less toward individual advancement and more toward programmatic and institutional improvement and, as a result, collapses the binary between theory and practice in particularly interesting ways. In such research, theory and practice exist in a reciprocal and dialogic relationship. Finally, in writing center work, the extrinsic reward structures of the university—represented by grades and class standing for students and promotion criteria tied almost completely to individual “original” research for faculty—is replaced by intrinsic rewards measured in improved performance and satisfaction for students and faculty alike.

This is the moment, no doubt, to acknowledge the fact that there are downsides, as well as benefits, to resistant forms of research paradigms and rewards. Despite the increasing presence of various kinds of centers on our campuses, those involved with such efforts still must work within an institutional environment that values individual, rather than collaborative, efforts. Those who direct writing centers know how easily what they experience as important scholarly and pedagogical work can be valued (or more accurately devalued) as mere academic service. Many leaders in the writing center movement—we think here, for instance, of Lou Kelly, Muriel Harris, and Jeanne Simpson—have had to work in an almost superhuman fashion both at their local institutions and nationally to further the project of writing centers. That they have had the stamina and dedication to think and work globally as well as locally is something for which all who work for and believe in writing centers must remain grateful.

And what could better link us to our next topic—the challenges that writing centers offer to traditional budgeting systems—than the notion of the superhuman. For it goes without saying that, even at institutions with a good deal of cultural capital and financial resources, writing centers have often had to struggle to establish and maintain themselves. And yet we see a potential advantage in what is from another perspective an acute disadvantage. For like it or not, institutions of

postsecondary education are changing. Budgeting systems have traditionally been based on a model measured in terms of what we might, for lack of a better term, call disciplinary capital. This system tends to assume that some academic units merit appropriate and stable funding, while others do not. In the brave new world of academic entrepreneurship, such assumptions no longer hold. Increasingly, all academic units are required to justify their worth and funding, and to do so not just once but continuously. Writing centers are (for better or worse) well positioned for such budgeting practices and priorities. For writing centers have most often not relied upon traditional means of budgeting and have instead adopted a mixed—and decidedly entrepreneurial—approach. We know of centers that are funded through general funds allocations, private endowments, student fees (much like those added on for computer technology), pay-as-you-go fee structures for tutorials, “taxes” on traditional disciplines, and some form of course credit. In short, the kind of imaginative scrambling writing centers have done to build and maintain budgets may turn out, in this changing scene of higher education, to provide examples that other parts of the university can learn from.

Those whose experience of writing center work and life has been one of constant struggle for the most basic resources might well at this point exclaim, “I hope not!” So we hasten to add that we realize the potential we have sketched out here for writing centers to serve as models for institutional change and improvement are in many ways generalized and idealized. Given the limitations of space, we’ve necessarily been short on concrete details and examples. But we hope we’ve provided enough information to suggest some of the ways in which writing centers could serve as catalysts for educational reform, while also strengthening their own institutional positions.

What will it take for such a goal to be realized? The following suggestions are hardly as inclusive or specific as we might like, but they do, we hope, point in a useful direction:

- Take all the advantage that you can of your Center’s multi-bordered, multi-positioned status at your institution. Be a briccoler, trickster, inventor. Work with disciplinary and institutional capital when you can. (Lisa’s Center, for instance, has recently instituted a student-fee-supported Craft of Writing lecture series that sponsors the presentations of local, regional, and national writers; novelist James Welch—co-sponsored with the English department—was the first lecturer in this series.) But work against these forces as well. Alliances with community projects or with public schools—alliances that do not necessarily command broad disciplinary or institutional

attention—can nevertheless have important intrinsic and extrinsic consequences. So look for new opportunities to position and define your Center.

- Take advantage as well of broad disciplinary and institutional changes. Each time an individual writing lab or clinic redefined itself as a writing center the local impact was undoubtedly limited. (Some faculty and students perhaps never even noticed the change.) But the global impact—the long-term impact and the ability of writing center directors to argue for enabling visions of their centers—was substantial.
- When thinking about your Writing Center, think both locally and globally. The politics of location is essential in writing center work. You have to understand not only the nature and mission of your university but also the exigencies that constrain you and the opportunities that (if you can only see them) also exist. But if your vision is too local, you risk not recognizing alternative ways of re-conceiving or repositioning your Center.
- Be prepared to take significant risks. Sometimes it's necessary to say "fund us or close us."
- Finally, look to other centers, both literal and metaphorical. Does your campus have a center for excellence in teaching? A distance education program? Like your Writing Center, these units are outriders in the conventional academic hierarchies. How can you work with them to effect institutional change and to better the situation of your programs?

Working on this essay, thinking and talking about our own experiences with writing centers, we have been reminded again and again of how quickly centers and margins can shape-shift. We have each had our moments of deep despair, when we have felt that institutional arrangements would always leave our writing centers at the margins. But we have also had moments of exhilaration—moments when we felt that we had the privilege of being at the very center of a new way of thinking about writing, teaching, and learning. Center? Margin? Perhaps the new millennium will make it harder to tell the difference.

Notes

¹ In addition to the classroom, departmental and college-level offices also play an important role in defining—and claiming—institutional space. Though a mix of undergraduate students taking general education courses in a certain department may at times visit its office, in general, the circulation of students in departments is much more restricted. In this regard, writing centers again provide a more open, equitable, and flexible use of instructional space. Indeed, in many institutions, writing centers are both explicitly and implicitly defined as spaces where commitments to students and to student learning are made visible.

² Heath argues that recent increases in the number of youth groups, groups that are completely separated from formal education but serve important educational functions, represent a similar response. Her film, *Art Show*, examines some of these organizations and provides a powerful argument for institutional change.

³ Of course, many writing center staff worry about whether they are doing too much for and with student writers—e.g., doing their work for them. But to what extent does this stance result from a desire to avoid the criticisms of those most committed to hyper-individualism and hence suspicious of any kind of collaborative work? What if (for instance) we took seriously educational research by Vygotsky and others that argues that novices learn particularly well by working with those who are within (but slightly advanced in) their “zone of proximal development”? When we think back to the process of writing our dissertations, for instance, we realize that if our Ph.D. advisors had taken the same “hands off” stance that many tutors take, we might never have graduated.