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From the Editors

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From the Editors

The search for historical knowledge is largely a search for origins. In that spirit, we begin this "From the Editors" section with the narrative of our first meeting, which occurred at the 1996 Northeast Writing Centers Association conference, where Neal was presenting on the subject of the history of conferencing in the teaching of writing and Beth was in the audience, having just finished her dissertation, which focused on the history of writing centers. Today, nearly 10 years after that NEWCA meeting at UMass-Amherst, we are still students of writing center history, and we continue to be amazed by just how rich and substantial that history is. Indeed, over the course of the last 100 years, many writers have extolled the virtues of writing centers, writing laboratories, or writing via laboratory methods. What follows is a decade-by-decade sampling of some of our favorite writing center history moments:

In 1895, Fred Newton Scott wrote that "the teaching of composition is properly laboratory work [. . . and] the student in composition needs as much personal attention as the student in chemistry" (122).

In 1902, Francis Lewis told us that "class-room work, once entirely recitation from a text-book, is now often on the laboratory plan, with questions to lead the pupil to make his own discoveries and form his own opinions" (15).

In 1917, Francis Walker claimed that "the laboratory system, then, as applied to the composition work, relieves the teacher of a large part of the burden of red ink, stimulates friendly relations between teacher and pupil, and inspires the pupils to put forth their very best effort" (451).

In 1928, E. L. Holcomb described her writing laboratory as a place where "my English students should write, and write for the joy of writing, 'each in his separate star.' Here sometimes they should play word games and letter games and grammar games. Here sometimes they should give debates and make oral reports. Here they should even learn rules. But most important of all, here they should write. They should learn the joy of expression. This should be our workroom, our laboratory" (51).

In 1935, Mable Scheide wrote that "an English laboratory equipped with working space and facilities for elementary research and exploration pays rich dividends in alertness and an interested consciousness of the value of the activities of the English class" (25).

In 1941, J. Hooper Wise noted that “the [writing lab] instructor need not be the one for whom the student is writing; rather the instructor is collaborating with the student to help him produce that piece of writing which the latter wants to produce anyway. Outside forces may provide the motivation; the writing laboratory instructor helps the student satisfy the felt need” (167).

In 1951, Andrew Kafka, summarizing a 4C’s workshop, wrote that “the availability of a [writing] laboratory helps to generate confidence and lifts morale in a real way. It has been proved that a student invariably receives better marks when he has the opportunity to attend a writing lab. Often there is noticeable improvement even in non-English subjects as well” (330).

In 1960, Harold Madsen reviewed the literature on writing laboratories and concluded that “even though the writing laboratory has only of late achieved widespread recognition, it has a surprisingly long history. Generally quite successful in improving student writing, the laboratory and its several modifications serve a variety of purposes, as attested by a number of experiments and by a great many well-established courses in both the public schools and the colleges” (52).

In 1977, Muriel Harris told us that “the most useful resource the [writing] lab probably offers is a meeting ground where composition is spoken, a gathering place to talk and to exchange suggestions on that most complex of tasks, learning how to help students write” (378).

And, finally (for readers can amply fill in this history over the last 20 years), in 1984 Stephen North told us that “writing centers are simply one manifestation—polished and highly visible—of a dialogue about writing that is central to higher education” (440).

The consistency and persistence of the one-to-one teaching of writing tell us several things: 1) that writing centers have often been the answer to the question of how best to teach students to write; 2) that writing centers fulfill an institutional role, one comfortably turned to in times of crisis and in times of plenty; and 3) that writing centers, in their continual rediscovery, somehow represent both a new and a long-standing approach. This apparent contradiction—which Beth has described elsewhere as the tension between writing centers as method and writing centers as site—demonstrates the often uneasy relationship between writing centers and their institutions.

Lest this 100-year history be interpreted as an admission of “been there, done that” and that there is consequently very little new on the writing center landscape, we have chosen in this issue to highlight the tension between the past, present, and future of writing centers, between writing centers as site and writing centers as method, by including two

"retro" pieces along with our three current articles. All five articles foreground the dialogic interplay between writing centers and their various constituencies: students, tutors, faculty, and administrators.

The first two articles are reprints that originally appeared over 15 years ago in *WCJ*: Carol Peterson Haviland's "Writing Centers and Writing-Across-The-Curriculum: An Important Connection" (5.2/6.1, 1985), and Louise Z. Smith's "Independence and Collaboration: Why We Should Decentralize Writing Centers" (7.1, 1986). In addition to the original articles, readers will find brief introductions to these pieces from the authors themselves. The next three articles talk back to the "retro" pieces in interesting ways. Cross-disciplinary connections are explored in Julie Bauer Morrison and Jean-Paul Nadeau's "How Was Your Session at the Writing Center? Pre- and Post-Grade Student Evaluations." Next, Beatrice Mendez Newman considers the ways in which writing centers are uniquely positioned to help Hispanic students find their voices across their Borderlands colleges and universities in her article "Centering in the Borderlands: The Writing Center at Hispanic-Serving Institutions." Finally, in "Creating Theory: Moving Tutors to the Center," Sue Dinitz and Jean Kiedaisch highlight the voices of undergraduate tutors integrating and extending theory as they work with their peers in the writing center.

In beginning this "From the Editors" section with a Top Ten Moments in Writing Center History, we have admittedly constructed a linear version of the march through time that we have both critiqued elsewhere. In containing writing center history in this way, however, we hope we have left room for leakage. For example, our efforts to include the Smith and Haviland pieces, both of which were secured from the Writing Centers Research Project (www.wcrp.louisville.edu), speak to our expectation that the WCRP will provide (indeed is already providing) an exciting resource for scholars seeking to use the history of writing centers to shape the future of our field. Indeed the Smith and Haviland pieces (along with their corresponding updated introductions) provide important historical contexts and counterpoints for the cross-disciplinary perspectives offered by Morrison and Nadeau, for the contributions of tutors elaborated in the Dinitz and Kiedaisch article, and for the cautions against decentralization raised by Mendez Newman in her article on Hispanic students at Borderlands institutions. The official launch of our first-ever website affiliated solely with *The Writing Center Journal* (www.writing.ku.edu/wcj) marks another attempt to exceed the boundaries of what has been the traditional discursive containment for this journal, at least. (We are deeply indebted to Michele Eodice and Sean Ringey for their leadership and vision with this website.)

We encourage our readers to use this issue to question the ways in which our current practices and configurations may be contained and constrained by institutional and disciplinary forces we may be uncritically reproducing. To consider these sorts of questions, it is vital to consider what our histories might teach us about where we have been and where we are going. Sounds like the perfect project for a hot, hazy day. Best wishes for a healthy, relaxing, and productive summer!

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