The Polyvalent Mission of Writing Centers

Phillip J. Gardner
William M. Ramsey

Follow this and additional works at: https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/wcj

Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1571

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.
The Polyvalent Mission of Writing Centers

by Phillip J. Gardner and William M. Ramsey

Rented Tuxes and Tattoos

Even as writing centers have proliferated across American campuses, writing center discourse has been characterized by deep uncertainty. In a provocative, signature moment, Terrance Riley in his 1994 article "The Unpromising Future of the Writing Center" took a retrospective look at the writing center movement and made a gloomy prediction of its future. What he feared most was that the revolutionary potential of writing centers was ending, about to be replaced by a bland era of "business as usual" (21). This would happen because writing centers would progress in finding an "institutional niche" (26). Riley noted that academic disciplines go through developmental stages before achieving institutional recognition, and he recalled how the early teaching of American literature lacked an academic status equal with the study of British and ancient classics. Unfortunately, in Riley's view, once American literature gained recognition as an academic field, it lost an initial, non-elitist, "revolutionary energy" (21). Writing center work likewise, he feared, is well on its way to becoming just another field resembling others. Because the proper mission for the writing center, he argued, is to be "an alternative to mass education" (20) and a "project of countering the hierarchy" (21), successful assimilation of writing centers into institutions will end their effectiveness. Privileging populist resistance over what he saw as elitism, Riley stated that "our most exhilarating successes derive from our intermediate, outside-the-mainstream status vis-à-vis the university" (28); consequently, mainstream success will spell the loss of a "liberatory and contrarian" mission (29).

About the Authors

Phillip Gardner directed the Francis Marion University writing center for fifteen years. He is the recipient of the 2004 Southeastern Writing Center Achievement Award and the author of Someone To Crawl Back To, a collection of short stories.

William M. Ramsey is a member of Francis Marion University's English department. His specialties are black American literature and American literature. He has taught composition for thirty years.
Situating himself near the end of the second of three phases in writing center development, "high idealism," "frustration," and "business as usual" (21), Riley admitted—was frustrated. And from that stance he employed contrarian assumptions widespread during the last twenty-five years of the writing center movement, years in which a deeply felt exclusion from mainstream status fostered a highly oppositional outlook. For, regardless of the work actually done in writing centers, the prevailing view of theorists has been that writing specialists do their best work when opposing the practices of mainstream education, creating an anti-space where the oppressive and mass template methods of the academy can be undone. Routinely those mainstream practices are described in journals as teacher-centered, hierarchical, culturally hegemonic, neocolonialist, or directed toward regulatory control of passive and victimized students.

As a consequence, theory has focused more on difference than on articulating the vital common ground—which we will argue is critical inquiry—where mainstream education and writing centers can be seen to stand together in a shared educative mission. Indeed, the current gap between theory and working actualities is so immense that writing center discourse inaccurately describes what we do, or why we do it, or the benefits we bring to our students, colleagues, and institutions. Dismayingly, our theory has left us with no effective language for sitting down with deans, vice-presidents, or boards of trustees and describing in a discourse they can understand our contributions to the mission of the university. What we need, in short, is a theoretical perspective that more productively centers us in the university even as we offer space for difference.

Yet, currently, we are a highly conflicted group. While demanding higher institutional status, we confide in our journals the secret that we are all about resisting hegemony. Success, whispers Riley, is something to be feared. Having lived on the margin for so long, we cannot relinquish the language and paradigm of an oppressed group. Wanting membership in the Academic Country Club, we desperately seek appropriate recognition from the very folk we say are so different from us. Frustrated, standing outside in rented tuxes, we await the benefits and blue-blood status possessed by those who belong to the party. But, ambivalently, we cling perhaps to our outsider, rebel status while tucking rattail haircuts under starched collars or hiding sinuous tattoos under prudently high necklines. Even as we gain entrance to the dance, we feel secretly subversive, defiantly contrarian, uncertain of who we are and how to belong.¹

We argue that positioning ourselves in terms of marginality has neared the end of its usefulness. That is because no group, we think, can sustain its long-term health by defining itself chiefly in terms of mutually excluding polarities, or by what it is not.
Our root problem is that over the last twenty-five years our collective discourse has melded into what postmodernists term a "grand narrative" or metanarrative. Its assumptions, often implicit rather than explicit, are those of antagonistic struggle, opposition, and contested values. We are not mass lecturers, we insist. We are not teacher-centered, we proclaim. To which one might ask: Who in fact expects us to operate on the mass-template model? Does not the one-to-one ratio of tutor to client naturally lead to its specific pedagogical orientation? Behind pedagogy, what is the general educative mission that we positively serve, and how do we define it according to what it is, rather than what it is not? If we could answer that, the convergent interests of writing centers and universities could be better foregrounded.2

What the Power Company Sells

One alternative to the bleak future of "business as usual," therefore, may depend on reframing a key assumption of the writing center movement, one taken to involve its "essence." It is that the practices of the writing center are a kind of anti-curriculum. We contend that what Riley and many others would call the movement's most "exhilarating successes"—highly fertile learning methods such as collaborative, dialogic, and student-centered practices—should be framed in terms of shared mission with mainstream education, rather than as a subversion of it. Yet, long ago the die was cast. As Stephen M. North, by no means a radical contrarian, explained in 1984, the writing center "defines its province not in terms of some curriculum, but in terms of the writers it serves" (438; emphasis added). Shifting writing center rationale from the simplistic remediation model to the dynamic complexities of the writing act, North argued against "a generalized model of composing" and for a dynamic focus on persons themselves, or "the activity itself," because "the subject is in the learner" (439).

With remarkable percipience, North predicted and called for new and creative learning protocols such as have emerged in the last twenty years, and which have helped rejuvenate writing instruction in the academy. But North and many others were situated in such profound institutional marginality that they perceived writing center activity (and composition) in contradistinction to mainstream disciplinary fields. That writing center/curriculum gap is what our argument addresses, because the gap has grown wider and wider as theorists with more oppositional and postcolonialist outlooks have come to dominate writing center discourse. Typically such theorists have attacked oppressive and hierarchical hegemonies, worldviews which, they argue, writing centers must help clients negotiate. (Writing-center clients' own subject positions are often profoundly in tension with practices of the university.) These theoretical discourses of oppression and liberation developed, much like the black liberation
struggle of late 1960s to early 1980s, a profoundly subversive, separatist tone, premised as it was on critiquing the mainstream curriculum. In effect, as the vital links and continuities between classroom teaching and writing center conferral were muted, the tensions between the two were foregrounded. We argue, however, that tensions and links are equally important, and that writing center work is profoundly polyvalent.

In the mid-1980s, the oppositional discourse then emerging can be seen in the metaphorically graphic arguments of Harvey Kail and John Trimbur. Like Riley’s later argument, these were signature moments in our discourse. In 1983 Kail proposed that collaborative learning practices of peer tutors must counter or “disrupt” the “lineal” authority of teachers. Lineality and top-down verticality were images of critique, as Kail attacked the transmission model of classroom education, by which teachers with virtually “sacred” (596) authority and power impose on totally passive students a body of knowledge. Such teaching authority is excessively “lineal,” a term Kail defines as a “relation among a series of causes or arguments such that the sequence does not come back to the starting point” (595). A top-down, unidirectional teaching process stifles productive learning by precluding student agency in the teacher-student relationship. Further, Kail stated (drawing on critics such as Paolo Freire, John Holt, and Ken Macrorie), the whole structure of institutional power from “grades, acquiring credit hours, commencement…moves in the same direction, from us to them” (595). Kail’s argument was a classic, early critique of top-down hierarchy.

In 1987, Kail and Trimbur offered readers of The Writing Center Journal a graphic metaphor for perceiving the coercive authority of lineal teaching, which they saw as similar to a power plant’s generation and transmission of electricity in a one-way energy flow to consumers. They warned against writing center tutors’ extending in surrogate fashion the transmission-model authority of teachers. In this view, teachers sit near the top of a hierarchical order figured as a power plant that generates all power (knowledge) vertically downward, through various levels of electric lines and substations, to students at the bottom. Those power lines can be subversively cut, argued Kail and Trimbur, in writing centers, where students can be empowered through collaborative and independent learning activities.4

With the totalizing tendency of a grand narrative, Kail and Trimbur’s metaphor suppresses other realities, such as this one: When a power customer flicks on a lamp switch at home, the result can be light. This light can enable one to read, learn, and thus perform one’s own acts of empowerment. In effect, reductive readings suppress the polyvalent or mixed resonance of many situations, as it does here with both teachers and students. First, teachers may be engaged in creating their own liberatory space, working in potential or actual tension with institutional and social pressures.
Indeed, in the Vietnam-era counter-cultural moment, faculties were popularly regarded as subversive of mainstream cultural values. If that view was simplistically stereotypical, at least it recognized a teacher’s polyvalent potential to work within institutional authority while also questioning and changing it. Second, students too are not totally helpless and passive victims of a coercive power flow. The power plant metaphor sells them seriously short. We strongly doubt that the very active enterprise of earning grades, credit hours, and diplomas—while growing intellectually and maturing socially—makes students akin to a grocery sack passively being stuffed. Yes, institutions carry coercive cultural weight, but students are not mere sacks. Writing in the 1980s, when the revolutionary fervor of civil rights and war protest still had a potent legacy, Kail and Trimbur offered a discourse of oppression and political liberation from a binaristic stance that suppresses more richly nuanced, assimilationist scenarios.

The effect of such discourse has been long-lasting, for much of the significant theorizing from the 1980s to the present is colored pervasively by the binary antitheses of an oppressed group’s outlook. A totalizing, grand narrative of resistance, with its attendant fear of cooption, implacably severs writing centers from the general mission of the academy. If writing center professionals take as “natural” only a set of oppositional assumptions, they will not ask questions that can point the way out of their binaristic trap, i.e., the impasse between hegemony and counter-hegemony. Their grand narrative of resistance permits them to engage only in a kind of anti-curriculum.

The signature moments provided by Kail, Trimbur, and Riley thus reflect a general discourse that is pervasively contrarian, especially in its well known tropes such as basements, sub-basements, and cross-cultural contact zones. Among the best known examples, Nancy Welch in 1993 saw writing centers as places of “critical exile” where one “not only questions received knowledge and social norms but transforms them” (“From Silence” 4). In writing centers, she argued, one is a “dissident” (11) and resists “the codes that create and control conversations” (7) in order to “write and act in the world rather than be written and acted upon” (4). Her 1995 characterization of the writing center as a “crossroads” (“Migrant” 5) was another of the era’s many metaphors of embattlement at the margin. In the same year Mary Soliday described tutors as both “outsiders as well as insiders” whose role was to cultivate “the art of boundary crossing” (59). More recently, Bonnie S. Sunstein suggested that writing centers be places of geopolitical “liminality” to offer students the temporary “in-betweenness” (7) of “a demilitarized zone” or a “borderland” (20). Exile, boundaries, borders and other liminal zones are tropes that foreground tension and antithesis, not shared institutional mission.
By the mid 1990s, a term used widely by theorists was the word “dominant,” usually preceding nouns such as “culture,” “order,” or “group” and indicating a rigidifying of political outlook. In 1994 Marilyn M. Cooper had argued that writing centers are a “site of critique of the institutionalized structure of writing instruction” and must “empower students” (98), vis-à-vis the “constraints on writing imposed by the dominant order” (102). Drawing on Foucault’s dominance–submission paradigm, Nancy Grimm criticized writing centers’ “regulatory role” of constraining students to write in culturally accepted forms so as “to reproduce the social order” (5) and “reinforce the status quo” (11). Because we cannot “pretend that this regulatory power is liberating or culture-neutral” (8), she urged writing specialists to become social “change agents” that mediate culture (17). In sum, our grand narrative relentlessly privileges one preferred side of bivalent political values, perceiving mainstream education primarily as the power of cultural inscription and writing centers as the reaction of a negotiated resistance. Thus, Suzanne Diamond feels that writing centers, whose missions are “imposed by external...forces” (6), must confront the “power of an existing hierarchy...to sustain its foundational inequities” (1). Anis Bawarshi and Stephanie Pelkowski, summing up in 1999 the Foucaultian and postcolonial currents now dominating the discourse, have advocated Edward Said’s notion of “critical consciousness.” They argue that we must resist the idea that writing is “ideologically innocent or even empowering” because the hegemony’s aim is “to transform the student and his or her texts into the acceptable standard of the university” (46), in other words to enact a colonialist aim.

What is the gist of all this? Higher education is mean, nasty, and brutish cultural reproduction. The dominant order’s teaching of its values, though “natural,” is starkly oppressive. Writing within and for that order is not empowering because when students write they are, quite passively, being written upon. And if such is the case, according to the scholarship, then writing centers must not belong.5

A Deconstruction

Several signs indicate that the profession is ready for a deconstruction of the binaristic thinking—either regulation or emancipation—that we have fallen into. There is a general sense that we have been victims of our tropes, that in proposing to administrators that we belong, we must move beyond our hands-on-hips posture of insisting on outsider status yet wanting insider money and position. Most astutely Eric H. Hobson contends that we have fallen into a “dualist trap,” trying to see all in terms of right or wrong while failing to find one theory that adequately describes our “hodgepodge practices” (107).6 Elizabeth H. Boquet cogently has explained that writing
centers currently are caught between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic missions. Our profession’s tropes of embattlement are also slipping. Andrea Lunsford’s image of the writing center as a “parlor” instead of a “storehouse” or “garret” is (though perhaps classed) one of the few spatial tropes characterized by sociality not liminality and embattlement. Lise Ede has critiqued the “binary” tendency to view writing centers as marginal and oppositional. In an important insight that anticipates ours, she faults all binary schemas for failing to situate centers in specific local contexts, suggesting that writing centers are situated in “inevitably mixed” sets of “tensions, and possibly even contradictions” (120).

The problem has been that in the subsuming of diverse educational practices under a signifying system of rigid binaries, only one pole has been privileged, yielding a false impression of unitary essence. If education is either hegemonic and conformist or about student agency and autonomy, our grand narrative has privileged only the latter. One set of binary assumptions has been repudiated so that an “opposing” set could be valorized. This is the trap of essentialist thinking that our discourse has fallen into, arising from the impulse to define oneself by what one is not. In the schema below, we indicate the opposed valences on which the narrative is constructed, noting that theorists have subordinated valences in the left column to privilege their “preferred” counter-hegemonic values.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hegemony</th>
<th>Counter-hegemony</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>regulatory</td>
<td>liberatory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>site of cultural inscription</td>
<td>method of negotiating subject positions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>conformist authority</td>
<td>autonomous agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hierarchic</td>
<td>contrarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>coercion</td>
<td>empowerment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>control</td>
<td>freedom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>acculturation</td>
<td>struggle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>molding</td>
<td>discovery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teacher centered</td>
<td>student centered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teaching</td>
<td>collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>text correction</td>
<td>consultation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>depositing a body of knowledge</td>
<td>active-learning practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>passive students</td>
<td>interacting students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lecture</td>
<td>dialogic practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mass education</td>
<td>learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We characterize the left column’s valences as values of sociality and the right column’s as values of autonomy, and we propose that both polarities are present in learning situations that we find more mixed than unitary. Educational practice is, we insist, unavoidably polyvalent, rather than arising from one column’s presumed
foundational essence. In sum, practices that acculturate (the regulatory) also can potentially liberate (the emancipatory).\textsuperscript{7}

In our view, theorists’ imperviousness to seeing any value in the schema’s left column has been flabbergasting. Let us compare the polyvalent character of education to speed limit signs. Such signs are explicitly regulatory, controlling, molding, and coercive, instruments by which the state inscribes its hegemonic will onto private desire. But who would argue that speed limits in their “essence” are bad and to be resisted for the sake of autonomy? Our desire is actually mixed. While our private desire surely is to drive faster than the posted limit, we also value social cohesion, civic order, consideration—and freedom from road accidents. Autonomy has limits, society sometimes wisely limits, and by virtue of guiding limits we may construct freedoms. Perhaps freedom is another name for good regulation.

The coercion/submission paradigm, therefore, misreads the complex educational situation because neither student nor teacher is a univalent entity. To use a trope that avoids the univalence of a garret, basement, or exile zone, we see the writing center as magnet. Each pole requires the other, and a writing center is constructed of its very polarities. Situated in the regulatory context of university requirements, it performs mind work that limits and frees simultaneously, client by client and assignment by assignment. In our view, students may desire (with ambivalence, of course) exactly the cultural inscription that theorists feel uncomfortable with. If a college degree brings increased economic and social advancement, students will regard it not just as a stultifying of personal desire but also as a means to empowerment, agency, freedom, and choice—a way to escape the underclass.

Our argument is not, then, the naïve one that education should be taken as “ideologically innocent” or “culture-neutral,” but that it is rarely univalent. We think that writing center professionals, even while embracing values in the schema’s right column, might feel more positively enmeshed in the left column’s values. If we may paint with a broad brush, the personalities drawn to writing center work are conspicuously social and nurturing, conscientiously concerned with the successful social integration of their clients. In such professionals, the values of sociality are powerfully salient. A grand narrative that terms their magnificent sociality as oppressive and regulatory perhaps divides them against themselves.\textsuperscript{8} So we call for a critical discourse that affirms more of what we accomplish within the official aims of the academy. We suspect that resistant readers may view our argument as theft of the writing center’s essential mission, and that we are advocating a massive cooption by the hegemonic establishment. We suggest, however, that situating ourselves only in a marginal zone of resistant exile is depriving ourselves of enjoying a great social enterprise.
Critical Inquiry in the Mosaic of the Curriculum

By its very presuppositions, whatever narrative that we write about our professional selves limits us to which questions we ask about our mission. The narrative of resistance now pervading our discourse has done just that, leaving us trapped in an impasse of warring binaries. Elizabeth H. Boquet sensed this when, in reviewing the history of writing center thought, she concluded, "We are left to wonder, then, what we are failing to imagine now for our writing centers... What is left out of our discussions on teaching writing by our failure to account for the work of the writing center in a critically intellectual manner" (479; emphasis added).

The argument that we present is a response to that question. Indeed, our view amplifies one of her most cogent observations, that the work performed in a writing center is compatible with "the nature of scholarly inquiry" (478) and that the writing center is "a place where students and tutors alike... profit intellectually" (479). We too believe that something "is being left out of our discussions" and that it very much involves the intellectual work of the academy.

We suggest here a curricular trope that encompasses more than resistance and alienation. The curriculum, we propose, is a mosaic. Biology, physics, literature, psychology, economics, mathematics, and the rest are individually colored tiles that somehow, by the cohering magic of an observing eye, yield a greater picture. The writing center, however, especially in times of budget crunch, can seem the smallest, most indistinctly colored of the tiles, a chip that may fall from the mosaic with least harm to the picture's grand effect. The problem, almost too well known to state, is the writing center's apparent lack of disciplinary content. Writing centers present to clients not a subject content but a set of practices, not a body of knowledge but the methodologies born of the field's knowledge. By contrast, mainstream disciplines define themselves by the purity of their tile's color, or exclusive field content. For as long as that remains the perception, writing centers will suffer the fate of being treated as ancillary and expendable support services.

The challenge facing theorists, then, is to explain writing center mission in terms of the plaster in which the tiles of all disciplines are set. We believe that the cohesive material is critical inquiry. No field exists without it, and all fields exist because of it. Further, in that critical thinking practices are similar across the curriculum, critical inquiry directs attention to shared affinities rather than exclusive tendencies of the disciplines. This frame of reference is more beneficial to perceiving the vital force of writing centers. In our view, the work of writing centers is not an anti-curriculum but is the same work of the disciplines and an extension of them.
For instance, when a student enters the writing center for help on her term paper about the French Revolution, is the work we perform either regulatory or liberatory? Let us say the course is taught in mass lecture form. The professor in this instance has had no choice but to be a “sage-on-the-stage” lecturer to two hundred students, reluctantly and no doubt guiltily dispensing knowledge in top-down, hierarchical, teacher-centered fashion then testing mechanistically by multiple choice. The administration, for its part, with a state-funded budget marked by stinginess, has had no choice but to staff the history department at half the level needed for small-class format, with graduate teaching assistants paid meagerly to grade any papers or research essays. All players—teacher, administrators, teaching assistants, and students—know that this mass template education is less than what they hope for. Is the writing center now complicit with the values indicated in the left column of our schema—imposing conformist control on passive students? Indeed, is the student herself complicit, seeking only a quick fix for getting a B on a paper she does not care about in a system that overpowers her? Our answer to that question is, Yes, the writing center is in a regulatory situation.

On the other hand, does the critical thinking prompted by the writing center tutor oppose the situation’s coercive force? Is the student inspired to engage in productive study of the French Revolution? We answer, Yes, the writing center is in a liberatory situation. Since both valences are present, we argue that neither column in our schema adequately explains the mixed potential of this learning transaction. We are observing both waves and particles. That is why contrarian discourse alone fails to explain the mission of writing centers. In the hands of an effective tutor, the student in our example is doing history when developing her paper; thus, the tutor is an extension of the professor, helping the student perform exactly the kind of thinking that a history course hopes to elicit. Yet, the tutor has no professional credentials for teaching history. “Doing history” in this case is effecting a critical inquiry whose operations belong not to history but to all disciplines, and preceding them all, as plaster that holds tiles in a mosaic. The tutor, radically unbound to any specific discipline, works to uncertain and indeterminate end. Who, in fact, can predict that students coming out of this center will later develop either revolutionary or Napoleonic impulses? Both might happen.

That is because critical inquiry is an equal-opportunity employer. It can be accountable to the standards and authority of an institution, but the very ideas it hones can liberate from hegemony. Reactionary ideologues as well as iconoclasts can employ it even while debating the same issue. Serving both the status quo and change, the operations of critical thinking are politically neutral even though, ironically, always
attaching themselves to contexts with political valence. In sum, critical inquiry is the soul of the curriculum, always relativizing fixed positions to enable the emergence of new ones. When a student who is mentally blocked on a paper enters the writing center and asks questions that set the agenda of her own inquiry, the tutor now is committed to liberating her from a previous point of view. Rooted in the values of open inquiry, the writing center worker stands on the same common ground as the whole faculty. Importantly, it is simplistic to say the tutor in the above example is serving by regulatory proxy the history department. Rather, the tutor is serving the intellectual discipline of history, which ideally that department itself must serve even while embedded in a structure of hierarchical authority. The primary allegiance of the writing center, therefore, is to the curriculum, or rather the habits of thinking that the curriculum invites.

In this context, writing centers are not peripheral but integral to highly important work of the academy. They are not contrarian refuges from the alleged horrors of the classroom. They are not nonacademic support services. They are hardly intellectually marginal. As polyvalent sites of thought, their work can contain both the regulatory expectations of the institution as well as liberatory resistance. More important, they aid in the growth of the mind. As we have argued, the process of critical inquiry is owned by neither teacher nor student, each being required to serve the event of learning. For learning to occur, each must serve the demands of critical inquiry, which include openness, tolerance for alternative perspectives, collaborative receptiveness, and a disposition toward discovery rather than defense of a fixed position. In even the most routine writing center consultation, perhaps discussing a draft for some sentence-level issues, such qualities must be at least minimally present. In fact, unless there is that cognitive disposition, no critical examination of a communication act can begin. When tutees are asked, What do you want to say? and To whom are you saying this? and What effect are you seeking here? and How might someone else interpret this? they are led into the clarity of thinking that must precede good writing—and good writing is good learning. In nurturing the maturation of students' cognitive dispositions, we argue, writing centers serve central ideals of the mainstream curriculum.

Many students first entering writing centers, however, are in their late teens, an age when cognitive development is insufficient to experience comfort and skill with the process. For these persons, looking at work self-critically, reassessing one's beliefs, and performing related cognitive operations are major challenges. The work of Patricia King and Karen Kitchener sheds some light on this issue. According to their seven-stage developmental model of reflective judgment, high-school seniors at age 17 simply lack the epistemic maturity to perform advanced cognitive operations. Although
they have progressed well beyond Stage 1, a level of pre-reflective thinking at which "knowledge is assumed to exist absolutely," they are far from Stage 7, at which "Beliefs are justified probabilistically on the basis of a variety of interpretive considerations" (14–16). In King and Kitchener’s 1977 study, the mean score of high school juniors was at Stage 2.77, and college juniors measured only at Stage 3.76 (importantly, later testing yielded scores about a point higher) (133). Doctoral students alone scored in the Stage 6 range (133), at which "beliefs are justified by comparing evidence and opinion from different perspectives," and "solutions...are evaluated by criteria such as the weight of the evidence" (15).

The ramifications of these findings for writing centers are enormous because so many unique and humane methodologies of writing center workers have grown from these epistemic realities. We are not advocating that writing center professionals become educational psychologists, but we believe that writing centers must be promoted for their vital work with the mind. At the cognitive development level, what tutors confront in the writing center is exactly what professors face in classrooms. Teachers complain that college students initially struggle to see the difference between reasoning and opinion, or argument and exposition, or evidence and trivial matter. They may cling to established beliefs rather than revise views in the face of contradictory information. They may respond to value conflicts with emotionally loaded language and an absolutist sense of knowledge. Claims may be supported by beliefs rather than inferences from evidence. These very issues also look into the eyes of writing center workers each day, from those needing help on a journey of critical inquiry.

Professional Validations of the Work We Do

In the current climate, key validations of our professional work are hard to find. As we write this article, a national recession has led to budget cuts in writing centers across the country, often with swift surprise. In one instance a writing center worker came back from an overseas sabbatical to find the center closed. In another, a memo from a provost informed one director of a meeting at 10:30 the following morning “to discuss the future of the writing center.” Elsewhere, positions in a writing center were converted from faculty to student services status with altered reporting and budgetary lines, and with the loss of tenure possibilities and associated benefits. On another campus the center closed because, in the director’s view, her personality failed to induce her provost to save the operation. Her view contains an astonishing assumption, that a vital service’s continuance can depend, precariously, on one person’s being liked.10
Theory has let that director down as much as personality or administrative fiat because a language is not readily available for explaining the mission of writing centers in broadly understandable terms. No compelling discourse has emerged (or can emerge, if we define ourselves by what we are not) to ground writing center work on central curricular values that academics already believe in. We have argued that the cognitive impact of writing centers on students, at key stages in their development, is wholly congruent with the aims of the mainstream academy. Though writing centers do not focus primarily on field content, they focus intensively on how students dispose themselves to think in field, and therefore are highly effective tools for academic maturation.

How, then, in an administrative office, might a writing center director appeal to a provost whose budget axe is raised? Perhaps the director could state that in the writing center students learn through active discussion and problem-solving sessions. That students are helped with higher order thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. That the instructional tone is always positive, collaborative, and nonjudgmental, because judgmental authority undermines self-confidence and willingness to take risk, conditions essential to critical thinking. That students perform recursive and reflective thinking; process alternative points of view; practice belief revision; defer less to expert authorities when, self-reliantly, their academic confidence grows. That students come to the writing center from courses all across the curriculum, and that in the writing center a university’s curricular effectiveness is therefore magnified many times over. That when writing center specialists assist the faculty in test and research paper designs, they are developing instruments for producing and measuring intellectual work. In a word, to cut the writing center from the budget is to impair student thought across the whole curriculum. We conclude that the most important curricular decisions should be driven by program value, not the fickle consequences of personality.  

Prevailing writing center discourse fails because it is more expressive than descriptive. In the period of frustration that Riley describes, writing center professionals profoundly needed a language to express their alienation. However, that language, stressing primarily separation and resistance, fails to describe the value and place of a writing center in an academic setting. What deans and boards require from writing center administrators is not an understanding of how they feel but a description of what they do and why they do it. Writing centers, then, must shift toward a descriptive language, one that we believe must focus on acts of critical inquiry. When we do, we will find the common ground necessary to be understood in terms of institutional contributions.

The Writing Center Journal Volume 25, No. 1 (2005) 37

Published by Purdue e-Pubs, 2022
If the description given in the budgetary scenario above may be termed an argument of "curricular intensification," another side of writing center work is the full array of activities outside course-related tasks. We hesitate to call these "extracurricular" or "support services," because collectively they are a fairly robust mix of learning acts. Nor would we call them a "counter-curriculum." Perhaps this kind of contribution should be called, simply, "holistic." In our own campus writing center, which is representative of many others, such activities include freshman seminar support; resume writing; consulting with students with learning disabilities; creative writing consultations (students not in creative writing courses who seek an ear for their poems or short stories); applications to graduate and professional schools; test preparation for the MCAT and similar exams; answering queries from community businesses (the legal secretary needing to know where to place a semicolon on an important document); and consulting in area schools.

Beyond these activities, who can measure the unusually humane and sensitive contributions of writing center folk to the retention of students facing challenge, self-doubt, and duress? In our anecdotal experience that holistic impact seems great. In terms of retention, at least, university culture can understand the writing center's unique validation of the individual.12

It is as much an institution's collective values as its fiscal realities that determine whether writing centers close or retrench while swimming pools, for instance, stay open. If the faculty at large strongly support the values of writing and critical thinking, the outlook for writing centers will be positive, and for that reason we are very hopeful about the future. The contrarian outlook that we have criticized was shaped in different times, in an era of frustration, when mass education looked far more static and entrenched than now. But in two underlying ways education has changed rapidly, and what we once resisted now has changed its face. First, the transmission model of education has given way to many of the very learning methods that writing centers first privileged. Like writing centers, academic disciplines increasingly have adopted discovery-based methods over deposition of facts by lecture. That old, professorial sage on the stage, always a bit of the straw man, is increasingly a rare bird. To the extent that writing centers have won that battle of methodologies, toward what are we to remain contrarian—if we remain contrarian at all?

Second, even the disciplinary term scholarship is being powerfully redefined, and in a way that offers full recognition of what writing center people do. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, in its 1997 report, criticizes the narrowly specialized definition of scholarship privileged at research institutions, by which professors pursue abstruse scholarly topics while remaining disengaged from institu-
tional and other communities, and divorced from the practicable consequences of knowledge. The report proposes an expanded definition of scholarship in four ways:

- **Scholarship of Discovery**: traditional investigative activities such as specialized research in discipline to extend theory and knowledge.

- **Scholarship of Integration**: synthesizing and integrative activities that draw connections between areas of knowledge, including interdisciplinary work and the directing of in-field knowledge toward nonspecialist results.

- **Scholarship of Application**: work applied to consequential problems (campus, community, government projects, etc.), and considered "scholarship" if professional knowledge is employed.

- **Scholarship of Teaching**: one’s record of teaching; knowledge activities applied to teaching; course development; etc. (Glassick)

As much as any of the academic constituencies, the writing center community embodies such principles:

- **Discovery**: It has developed a scholarly knowledge base that (despite our critique here of one element of it) is distinguished in the connection of theory to praxis.

- **Integration**: It has connected, client by client and paper by paper, in-field knowledge across the disciplines to the practical needs of students.

- **Application**: It has applied most adeptly a knowledge of critical thinking skills to the problem of campus literacy.

- **Teaching**: It has contributed to education a full array of learning methodologies.

By the Carnegie definitions, stating that scholarship is far more than writing specialized books in discrete fields, writing center professionals are fully and equally scholars of the academy, and their work should not be dismissed as adjunctive service.

We argue, then, that the mission of writing center professionals is in diverse ways to perform scholarship, and in that manner to contribute to the life of the mind. The manifold methodologies of writing centers are directed intensively, in one-to-one sessions, to precisely that aim. Looking forward to an era that Terrance Riley feared would be "business as usual," we believe that in both research and discourse there are opportunities to articulate better what we do for the academy by virtue of being very much in it.

**Socrates in the Academy**

Looking back to Stephen North’s 1984 essay, we are struck by his final paragraph, offered as a kind of afterthought. Noting that writing centers exist to talk to writers, he recalls the great talker and "tutor" Socrates, who set up shop "open to all composers, no fees charged, offering, on whatever subject a visitor might propose, a continuous
dialectic that is, finally, its own end” (446). In this graceful coda to a far-sighted argument, North actually pointed the way to the kind of scholarship the academy seems at this time poised to appreciate, in which active dialectic serves as plaster to the disciplinary tiles.

We are keenly aware that for his contrarian and liberatory impulses Socrates was killed by a hegemonic state, illustrating the difficult and uncertain situation of courageous tutors. As a critic of Athens, Socrates had an agenda of questioning popular values. But as with all college faculty, his situation was polyvalent. If you stand today atop the Acropolis and gaze downward toward the old agora, you see most vividly that he positioned himself wholly in the center of the polis. Situating himself in the heart of Athens, he tutored future civic leaders. A distinguished citizen, he was proud of his military service. He argued memorably at trial that as his “punishment” the state should pay him money for outstanding public service.

Given the example of Socrates, we do not sweep under the rug the hard realities that writing center work includes frustration, tension, misunderstanding, and conflict, and that in the fickle fluctuations of power writing centers will know both marginality and belonging. For us, the lesson of Socrates was his dedicated focus on clear thinking. This really is the work of writing centers, as it is of the academy at large.¹³

NOTES

1 Perhaps no single issue has generated more pages of writing center text than that of status. Whereas we might claim that our professional values rest upon higher moral ground, our sense of professional status seems remarkably similar to other academics. “Professional status as equated with institutional security and leverage,” writes Neal Lerner, “can come in many forms in many different contexts. The key for institutional status is to be as close to the money as possible” (44). Though writing center theory pulls in the direction of contrarian resistance and reform, fiscal and security issues pull toward institutional belonging. Writing center theory needs to address the realities of leverage and security in terms of institutional mission.

2 We doubt that race car drivers would define their work as such: “We are not canoe paddlers.” Or that U.S. citizens would define their national identity as such: “We are not Tahitians.” What would be the point? Canoe paddling, like race car driving, has a specific reason for existing as a means of transportation, and the collective identities of Americans and Tahitians have positive, specific reasons for existing. Definitions based on mutually excluding negations, such as the argument that writing centers are “an alternative to mass education,” overlook those important reasons.

3 A great irony in the history of writing centers is that, as theory increasingly stressed separation from the academy, writing centers were altering mainstream pedagogy with a robust array of new, student-centered practices. While prevailing theorists have stressed the importance of resistance to the academy—English departments in particular—readers who have served on composition text committees know that core elements of writing center practice—collaborating, talking, listening, and responding—have become almost commonplace in composition classrooms.

4 Kail and Trimbur thus advocated peer tutoring as “an implicit critique” of hierarchy, successful when in contrarian fashion it “precipitates a crisis of authority” through “an exercise in unlearning” (207–208). Such highly charged, oppositional terms work against articulating the important common ground that writing centers have with the mainstream curriculum.

5 We do not question the usefulness of current theory in the evolution of writing center history. We see that theory as a set of voices that
reflects a period of frustration. Collective feelings of frustration seek an expressive discourse that can articulate and give meaning to those feelings. But an expressive discourse will not give us a framework to communicate with others in the academy. For that a descriptive discourse is needed.

6 Outlining three theoretical epistemologies that have competed to explain what constitutes writing center educative goals—the objectivist, the expressionistic, and the social constructionist—Hobson concludes that "to find the one system of thought in which the writing center fits" is "a hopeless effort" (108). Our contention is that we must expand our theorizing to include the established discourse of critical inquiry, so as to recognize and embrace the mixed, competing valences in our mission.

7 One commonly hears in writing centers and conference meeting places comments such as, "I wouldn't want to impose myself hierarchically onto the client" In this enormous reticence to impose on the student's subject position, the "values of autonomy" are palpably present and perhaps in conflict with personal instincts.

8 At a recent writing center conference, we observed how reticently, almost apogetically, various speakers proposed ideas such as directive learning protocols, which (heretically) center the tutor somewhat in learning transactions. Again, theory's grand narrative seemed visibly to resist such leanings. Yet most of the conference's sessions focused on activities reflecting institutional "values of sociality" rather than counter-hegemonic resistance. Theory may be inhibiting new practice.

9 Our sense, over years of conversation with fellow colleagues, is that most professors involved in mass lecturing, even if they think they are good at it, consider the pedagogy less desirable than small class approaches. Whether or not this is so, we argue that writing centers must base their mission on the critical inquiry occurring in the tutor-tutee relationship (on what the writing center is) rather than in opposition to academic practices it naturally does not follow (on what it is not).

10 On a writing center listserv, a director recently posted a frantic query in reaction to the incipient termination of her operation: "What I need are studies, articles, etc., on the benefits of writing centers....What do you suggest?" (Graham). Several directors' responses were that data don't count even when demanded. One said: "no one was interested in looking at our figures. Or rather, the only figures they saw were the costs of salaries" (Boswell). Another response was: "schmoozing has gotten us far more than data" (Johnson). The general situation, as we have argued, is that theory has failed us. That is why so much depends currently on the unreliable vagaries of "schmoozing."

11 There are concrete signs that a linking of critical thinking theory to writing centers is underway. In a listserv discussion, Lisa Johnson has noted that her Washington State University writing center's staff has worked with faculty "to involve them in a common conversation about writing and critical thinking" in a "sincere attempt to bring together a community of teachers so we can discuss our values about education—and good writing and critical problem-solving are things we have gotten almost all faculty to agree that they value." She concludes: "I say data schmata, establishing good relationships with departments and faculty has proven far more effective." We would add, however, that a paradigm shift is emerging there.

12 Examples of the writing center's contributions to curricular and "extra-curricular" needs are abundant. Lester Faigley, in "Writing Centers in Times of Whitewater," places the work of writing centers at the cusp of innovative education. "The traditional structure of the university, like that of the traditional factory," he says, "has become increasingly anachronistic" (13). Faigley cites Patricia Lambert Stock's "Reforming Education in the Land-Grant University: Contributions from a Writing Center," where she shows how writing centers contribute to learning communities, incorporate student-centered pedagogies, and contribute to an atmosphere for learning, three ideals in the 1997 Kellogg Commission Report. Faigley's explanation for the marginality of writing centers is, however, typical of current theory: Writing Centers "threaten the status quo" (15). Our contention is that we have not articulated a theoretical framework; a descriptive discourse, that demonstrates the link between the work we do and the aims of existing and emerging educational practices such as group learning and problem-based learning.

13 The idea for this article grew out of a Francis Marion University English department workshop on critical thinking, in which the ideas of Mary McNulty, Betty Ramsey, and William Ramsey were helpful in perceiving parallels with writing center work. For invaluable manuscript editing we thank Kenneth Autrey, coordinator of...
Francis Marion’s composition program, and Terranee Riley. For her critical reading of the manuscript, as well as research leads, we thank Jennifer Liethen Kunka, director of our writing center.

WORKS CITED


Boswell, Lena. "Re: Writing Center Closings." Online posting. 1 May 2002. WCenter <wcenter@lyris.ttu.edu>.


Johnson, Lisa. "Re: Writing Center Closings." Online posting. 1 May 2002. WCcenter <wcenter@lyris.ttu.edu>.


