If Aristotle Ran the Writing Center: Classical Rhetoric and Writing Center Administration

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If Aristotle Ran the Writing Center: Classical Rhetoric and Writing Center Administration

by Melissa Ianetta

One step to develop the potential for systematic research in writing centers is to attempt to renegotiate the writing center statement of purpose, rewrite its myth of origin. —Harvey Kail, “Writing Center Work: An Ongoing Challenge”

[Our heritage] stretches back... to Athens, where in a busy marketplace a tutor called Socrates set up the same kind of shop: open to all comers, no fees charged, offering, on whatever subject a visitor might propose, a continuous dialectic that is, finally, its own end. —Stephen North, “The Idea of a Writing Center”

Recent explorations of writing center research encapsulate the often-conflicting professional demands we face as administrators. On the one hand, we acknowledge the need for research to improve our understanding of the past narratives, present effects and future possibilities of writing center work. On the other hand, our individual identifications and disciplinary ethos often rely on the notion of a writing center director whose priorities include, as Harvey Kail writes, “teaching, service, service, service, and then research—on our service” (28). Added to this already-overburdened schedule is the privileging of place in writing center studies; if each center is uniquely shaped by its context, as the common argument goes, what kinds of research can speak across these myriad locations, moving beyond what Jeanette Harris has termed the "this-is-what-we-do-at-my-writing-center" genre? (“Review” 663). In other words, both our individual professional lives and the scholarship of our field are marked by our attempts to reconcile our identification as a highly communal professional group with our allegiance to the primacy of individual context.

About the Author

Melissa Ianetta is Assistant Professor of English and Director of the OSU Writing Centers at Oklahoma State University. Her research interests include history of rhetoric, feminist rhetoric and writing center studies. She has published essays and reviews in The Writing Lab Newsletter, Issues in Writing, and The South Atlantic Review.
Given this attention to immediate locale and emphasis on service-related research, it is perhaps ironic that one area of scholarly inquiry that consistently receives disciplinary attention is abstract theorization of the writing center. Often-reprinted intellectual touchstones such as Stephen North’s “The Idea of a Writing Center” and Andrea Lunsford’s “Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of a Writing Center” create philosophical knowledge about the writing center by offering us “a different set of questions, a different way of imagining the work of writing centers and the work that goes on in them” (Boquet 3-4). And yet, as North observes, such inquiries leave themselves open to critiques that the “body of knowledge [they produce] is not instrumental: the great debate does not lead to action” (North, Making 96). Philosophical knowledge thus can be viewed as an abstraction removed from daily reality and so further aggravates that theory-practice binary which estranges Kail’s service-oriented practitioner from the scholarship of the field.

This essay does not argue for writing center studies as a purely applied discipline, however. Rather, it uses Classical rhetorical theory as one means of addressing the theory-practice binary. In turning to the rhetorical tradition to balance the competing claims of our profession, I argue that such paradigms offer us a way to bridge the perennial divide between research and practice. That is, in the Aristotelian tradition of the search for “available means,” I use a survey of four rhetoricians from Classical Greece as a heuristic to examine the rhetorical systems embedded in writing center scholarship. As the epigrams to this essay suggest, however, connecting Classical rhetorical theories to the writing center is not an entirely novel approach. Jeanne Simpson draws upon Aristotle and Plato in her 1982 dissertation, A Rhetorical Defense of the Writing Center, and, as Steven North playfully argues, the ultimate paradigm of the center might be traced back to “a tutor called Socrates” (North, “Idea” 446). More recently, in the pages of this journal, Julie A. Bokser has used Gorgias’ Encomium of Helen to “help us understand the rhetorical implications of aggression and persuasion in the writing center” (24). As these examinations demonstrate, Classical rhetoric can provide a useful analytic framework for our examinations of one-to-one tutoring as well as the nature of the writing center itself.

However, while North and Bokser illuminate what Classical rhetoric can bring to our understanding of tutoring practice and writing center philosophies, this essay focuses on the rhetoric(s) of writing center administration. By reading writing center studies alongside rhetorical traditions, I add to this conversation by improving our understanding of the reciprocal relationship between the history of writing center
studies and the history of rhetoric, for such an argument reveals how the rhetorical tradition and contemporary writing center studies can illuminate one another. Admittedly, given constraints of space and the complexity of the Classical tradition, the treatment of Greek rhetoric in this essay is highly selective, and so this essay is intended as an invitation to the possibilities offered to both disciplines when the history of rhetoric is read alongside writing center studies. That is, casting key thinkers in writing center studies as rhetoricians not only taxonomizes extant theories of persuasion but, as Kenneth Burke describes, gives rise to new ones:

A rhetorician, I take it, is like one voice in a dialogue. Put several such voices together, with each voicing its own special assertion, let them act upon one another in co-operative competition, and you get a dialectic that, properly developed, can lead to views transcending the limitations of each. (63)

Ultimately, then, this essay is an attempt to create such a dialogue among rhetorics of the writing center and to show what the history of rhetoric and writing center studies might offer one another.

Platonic Aspasia: Liminal Rhetorics and the Mistress of the Situation

If, as North argues, Socrates might be the father of writing center studies, on our mother’s side the tradition can be pushed back even further. As she is described in Plato’s Menexenus, for example, Aspasia of Miletus stands as a useful paradigm of postmodern theories of writing center administration.1 Although many of the historical details of her life have been lost, we do know that Aspasia was born in Miletus in the fifth century BCE and spent much of her life in Athens. She rose to prominence for her learning and eloquence—remarkable for a woman of this time—as well as her position as the consort of Pericles, a powerful political figure. While tradition thus provides us a rich picture of womanly eloquence, we attribute no primary texts to Aspasia’s authorship, and few incontrovertible biographical facts remain. Yet, through Classical sources she has come down to us as a teacher of Socrates, an educator of young women, and the collaborator and concubine of Pericles. As Cheryl Glenn observes in Rhetoric Retold, while Aspasia’s social role and chosen profession were culturally tenuous, they offered comparative freedom, if little civic protection:

Aspasia was freed from the rigidity of traditional marriage and from the identity that arose from that fixed role. […] Nor was she accountable to the severe strictures applied to an aristocratic Athenian woman,
whose activity, movement, education, marriage and rights as a citizen
and property holder were extremely circumscribed by male relatives.
Aspasia could ignore—even rupture—the traditional enclosure of the
female body. [...] She could—and did. (37)

As a metic—a resident alien in Athens—Aspasia was simultaneously barred from the
privileges of citizenship and freed from its responsibilities. Accordingly, while her
teaching was suspect and her morality derided, she was able to choose a life of unconven-
tionality that defied gender roles. The benefits of this outsider role for Aspasia
appear to have been multiple: she could choose to live openly with Pericles; she was
able to participate in public life; and her son was even able to obtain citizenship, an
unusual attainment for a child with a foreign mother in xenophobic Athens. Such a
range of personal choices and professional accomplishments would have been
unavailable to native-born Athenian women whose social role was firmly fixed by cul-
tural tradition and social pressure.

Aspasia is not only remembered for her unique status as foreign consort to Pericles;
indeed, her primary interest for scholars of rhetoric is based in her reputation for elo-
quence. In Plato’s Menexenus, for example, Socrates even suggests that Aspasia craft-
ed the funeral oration Pericles delivered for those who died in the first year of the
Peloponnesian War. As Socrates tells his interlocutor Menexenus:

I heard Aspasia composing a funeral oration about these same dead.
For she had been told…that the Athenians were going to choose a
speaker and, she repeated to me the sort of speech he should deliver,
partly improvising and partly from previous thought, putting together
fragments left over from the funeral oration which Pericles spoke, but
which, as I believe, she composed. (683)

The proto-postmodern bricolage here attributed to Aspasia—with its blending of
extant speeches with original text—reveals her rhetorical virtuosity, for as Quintilian
later described in Institutes of Oratory (95CE), improvisation was held as the apex of the
oratorical arts (X.vii.1). Given Aspasia’s facility with this most difficult mode of
rhetorical performance, it is no wonder that in the Menexenus Socrates calls her his
“excellent mistress in the art of rhetoric” (682).

While it thus establishes Aspasia’s eloquence for historians of rhetoric, this
description also seems to predict Elizabeth Boquet’s contemporary description of
improvisation in the writing center:

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Improvisation is largely about repetition, repetition, repetition. It is also a question of expertise, mastery and risk. [...] Improvisation is...a skillful demonstration performed by someone who knows the tones of her instrument, the rhythms of her musical traditions so well that she can both transgress and exceed them...The most interesting improvisations work because they are always on the verge of dissonance. They are always about to fail. (76)

As does her Classical predecessor, Boquet here offers us an improvisatory model in which tradition is blended with innovation and in which virtuosity is expressed through risk. Further, this improvisational rhetoric—whether in a Classical symposium or a contemporary writing center—is characterized by a combination of the traditionally known with the inspiration of the moment; it simultaneously reproduces traditional knowledge while altering it for the immediate context, thereby creating something new.

And yet, as Susan Jarratt and Rory Ong have argued, the speech attributed to the foreigner Aspasia concerns the glory of being born an Athenian male. Aspasia’s countercultural role is decidedly ambiguous, for she lauds the virtues of Athenian manhood, and so, as Jarratt and Ong note, "ironically emphasizes the Platonic disdain for the foreigner/woman/sophist who would presume to have knowledge about the virtues of Atheno-androcentric citizenship" (Jarratt and Ong 20). In other words, that she engages in public rhetoric might disrupt notions of "woman" and "foreigner," yet that of which she speaks reifies cultural norms of these constructs. Aspasia’s persuasion thus works as both insider and outsider rhetoric; ambiguous, it revels in its own indeterminacy.

When read alongside contemporary writing center studies, this rhetorical model illuminates scholarship that celebrates our difference from discourses of institutional power and urges writing center administrators to use their seemingly-peripheral locations as a position of rhetorical strength. Thus, Boquet urges her reader:

Rather than adhering to the marginal mindset that writing centers are "underdogs" [...] rather than assuming writing centers arise from the margins, exist on the margins and are populated by the marginal, we might instead view the work of the writing center staff and students as bastardizing the work of the institution. [...] We might seize the designation of institutional illegitimacy as a way of explaining our lack of faithfulness to our origins. (Their fathers, after all, are inessential.) (32)
In topic, style and argument, Boquet here echoes elements of Aspasian rhetoric. First, Boquet’s subject revises the natal trope of her predecessor’s speech, for just as Aspasia argues that the early men of Athens sprung not from women but from the soil, so too does Boquet wrest from its institutional origins the writing center, and by extension, its citizens—”Their fathers, after all, are inessential.” Stylistically, through illicit punning and postmodern wordplay, Boquet urges her reader to celebrate institutional illegitimacy, just as her Classical predecessor employed antithetical and symmetrical structure and alliterative and assonant sounds to draw in her auditor. As their subject matter celebrates ambiguity, then, so too do both rhetoricians reinforce their topic by drawing upon the playful qualities of language.

Likewise, both the Classical rhetorician and her contemporary counterpart use the ethos of the margins as a position of argumentative strength. The Milesean Aspasia used her Otherness—those gender and ethnic differences that would have marked her as inherently inferior—as a source of rhetorical power, while Boquet argues that, rather than seeing our bastardy as a form of degradation, we can value it as the source of our (il)legitimacy and potential power. Marginality therefore is not the obstacle to negotiating with the institutional discourses; it is the means by which we might do so. Both rhetoricians argue that we can accept our position on the margins, but we redefine what this location means. Like Aspasia, who both accepted and disrupted Athenian concepts of race and gender, administrators can simultaneously embrace and exceed marginality as a persuasive strategy. Given these similarities, it is perhaps unsurprising that Boquet, like Aspasia, has been associated with the Sophists,² those itinerant early philosophers whose linguistic games and relativistic epistemologies have provided the source of much lively debate among contemporary rhetoricians.

In both pragmatic and theoretical terms, however, Aspasian rhetorics, which are “potentially a way in/out/around the central/marginal/community quagmire” (Boquet 3a), can hold powerful appeal. Embracing such a perspective encourages administrators to accept the unchanging facets of their professional realities even as they remain responsive to the essential fluidity of their situation. By viewing the center’s position as liminal—a place of creation and transformation rather than a place of alienation and exile—this Aspasian rhetoric can empower administrators to see the possibilities of their situation and to reject the victimization often associated with the writing center’s institutional location. Or, as Michelle Eodice puts it, “while our farm may be on the outskirts of town, our campuses need what we grow there” (117).
Such a rhetorical stance is not limited to postmodern abstractions, however; it has also had practical applications in writing center studies. For instance, Lil Brannon and Stephen North argue that by seeing their situation as liminal, administrators can improve the center's institutional position:

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. [...] Understanding how writing centers work to stabilize and enrich the institution is crucial 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 to learn in new ways. [...] So learning how to exploit the margins both to their institutional advantage and their enviable teaching advantage is crucial to the future of writing centers. (Brannon and North 10)

Under the nominalization of "rhetoric of marginality," North and Brannon construct the writing center as a site of the liminal. Through its examination of new teaching practices, the center can both "stabilize and enrich" the institution even while "work[ing] underground." Like the metic who embraced her outsider role to her own benefit as well to that of Periclean Athens, North and Brannon argue that administrators can adopt an insider-outsider perspective. In this rhetorical model, the writing center administrator works to ally her interests with those of the institution, even as she recognizes that while the interests of the margin and the center may overlap, they may also largely remain distinct.

Such an embracing of liminality means focusing on those options, strategies and resources which would be unavailable were it not for the writing center's ambiguous intellectual, institutional and political location. Just as the position of Other allowed Aspasia to exceed boundaries of gender, race and class, so too the hybridism of writing center leadership—always a combination of administrator, teacher and researcher—offers a distinctive set of resources to the individual and to the institution. Analyzing administrative issues from this position focuses on the peculiar nature of the writing center. It causes us to question what we offer the campus that is unavailable elsewhere and to consider how the mission of the center simultaneously creates dissonance and harmony with other agendas. The fluidity of the margins also encourages a resistance
to categorical definitions, positivist arguments, fixed binaries and unilateral solutions.

Not that an Aspasian rhetorical perspective offers writing center administrators a universal panacea. While this perspective might encourage us to see the possibilities of liminality, for example, such a rhetoric may oftentimes be more effective in a community of like-minded writing center professionals than persuasive in an institutional context. A scholarly community of peers might value fluidity, encourage resistance to prescriptive norms, and reject positivist claims, but an institutional audience may well find such arguments unintelligible. Until recent recovery efforts gave us new definitions for women’s rhetorical acts, after all, Aspasia was understood as either the illicit paramour of a Greek hero or, more simply, a glib Milesean prostitute. Even now Aspasia’s speech in the *Menexenus* is open to ideological critique, for as one *Writing Center Journal* reviewer responded to an earlier draft of this essay:

> The speech that she supposedly wrote for Pericles […] is a troubling one because the speech’s espousal of Athenian autochthony, [the notion] that only true Athenians are men born not from mothers but from Athenian soil, denies Aspasia any status in Athens. If that’s the only way her rhetoric worked, it’s a rhetoric that directors should avoid—Aspasia seems to have advanced by selling out who she is, if the story in the *Menexenus* speech is accurate. (“To the Author” n.p.)

This reader’s reaction concisely articulates a problem confronting both feminist scholars of Classical rhetoric and writing center administrators: while we may reject notions of marginality prescribed by our professional discourse communities, we will nevertheless be held accountable by these certifying bodies and judged by their rules. Aspasia improvises a speech that draws upon the cultural commonplaces of Periclean Athens as related to gender and citizenry and in so doing she rejects the one authorized role for Athenian women—the reproduction of male citizens. Such a rejection can be condemned as selling out the only cultural capital accorded to women in Periclean Athens or, at least, critiqued as an overly-enigmatic rhetorical strategy. Likewise, when Boquet writes a book that urges writing center directors to resist fixed definitions, she is accused of argumentative vagueness and trying to “make well-intentioned people comfortable” (C. Murphy 5, italics original). Both rhetoricians, then, as they celebrate ambiguity and resistance to positivistic norms, risk charges of rhetorical obscurity and “selling out.”

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The critiques that have been leveled at both feminist revisions of Aspasia's improvisation in the *Menexenus* and Boquet's revision of the improvisational mode for writing center studies suggest that improvisation is a rhetorical strategy that might best be used in the center rather than when dealing with an institutional audience. By necessity, institutional rhetoric is often founded on fiscal positivism, and writing center administrators must take this into account when attempting to persuade a university audience. In other words, one's annual report might not be the place to embrace ambiguity, engage in sensuous word-play, and reject prescriptive norms. Given the disparity between Aspasion rhetorics and institutional realities, when dealing with audiences external to writing center studies such "rhetorics of liminality" are perhaps most useful as analytical rather than persuasive tools, a way for us to determine our assets rather than expressing them to others.

**Socrates: No Apology?**

In that both rhetoricians advocate the argumentative power of the outsider, the rhetorical model attributed to Socrates by his most famous student—Plato—initially appears akin to that associated above with Aspasia. Such similarities are to be expected if Aspasia was, as Socrates claims in the *Menexenus*, his teacher in the arts of rhetoric. Nevertheless, differences useful to writing center administrators emerge from comparing the individual rhetorics Plato associates with Aspasia and Socrates.

As elucidated in the Platonic dialogues, Socrates' opinion of the art of rhetoric is famously ambivalent. That is, while in the *Gorgias*, he defines rhetoric as "flattery," (246) and calls it a mere "knack" (2546), in the *Phaedrus* he recasts it as a potentially lofty, if seemingly unattainable, act:

A man must know all the truth about all the particular things of which he speaks or writes, and must be able to define everything separately; then when he has defined them, he must know how to divide them up by classes until further division is impossible; and in the same way he must understand the nature of the soul, must find out the class of speech adapted to each nature, and must arrange and adorn his discourse accordingly, offering to the complex soul elaborate and harmonious discourses, and simple talks to the simple soul. (Plato, "Phaedrus" 571)

While dizzying in its range of knowledge and abilities that the aspiring rhetor is to attain, this passage offers a useful overview of the Socratic art of rhetoric as it is described by Plato. To speak well, a man must know the truth, must know how to
logically divide his topic into its constituent parts, must understand the souls of his interlocutors, and must be able to adapt his style of discourse to the souls he addresses. The best use of rhetoric, then, is as a means of discovering philosophical absolutes and of communicating these truths to others. Unlike the ambiguity articulated in Aspasia’s playful speech, this rhetorical model appears clear in its intention and uncompromising in its values.

Whether in Classical Athens or contemporary writing centers, this rhetoric would not appear to be for the fainthearted, however. In Plato’s *Apology*, which recreates the trial that led to Socrates’ death sentence, Socrates claims he is a “sort of gadfly, given to the state by God; and the state is a great and noble steed who is tardy in his motions owing to his very size, and requiring to be stirred into life” (Plato, “Apology” 355). Just as Socrates acted as a gadfly—spoke truth to power and so embraced his outsider role—so too do writing center theorists who advocate this paradigm encourage administrators to embrace the margins as a counter-cultural rhetorical space from which to critique and improve disciplinary and institutional hierarchies. In “The Unpromising Future of Writing Centers,” for example, Terrance Riley advises:

The lessons of history are fairly clear. But they are hard lessons. Fall out of love with permanence; embrace transience. Stake your reputation on service rather than publication. Acknowledge that directing a writing center does not involve the kind of difficulty for which advanced degree preparation is necessary. Stay impure: welcome mixed descent, and cross purposes. [...] “Hard” is perhaps understated. But if we want to offer an alternative to mass education, we must reject its mythology of expertise and permanence. (150)

By urging his peers to reflect upon the dangers of professionalism and conformity to institutional norms, Riley sounds very much like a Socratic gadfly nibbling at both the field of writing center studies as well as institutional culture. First, he asks readers to resist attempts to shape writing center directors into the preexisting professional mold of English studies. Second, in his call for writing center professionals to focus on service not publication, to eschew the certification of the advanced degree, and to position themselves as “an alternative to mass education,” Riley urges his reader to question traditional definitions of success in the university. He argues that to embrace an accommodationist perspective or to accept currently-valued models of academic professionalization will diminish the individual effectiveness of writing center administrators and dissipate the general energies of the emerging field of
writing center studies. It is only by maintaining our outsider status, he claims, that writing center administrators will maintain their vitality.

This outsider rhetoric sounds Socratic not only in its adherence to philosophical ideals of the writing center, however; taking such an administrative stance can create a *diaeresis*, an oppositional binary between the institution and the center that recalls the antithesis of the Socratic method. That is, just as "the [Socratic] method is based on the use of *antithesis*—the pairing of contradictions to display the necessity of choosing between them" (J. Murphy 17, italics original), so too in a Socratic paradigm, writing center administrators can work *with* the institution or we can work *against* it. Kevin Davis invokes such a Socratic framework in "Life Outside the Boundary: History and Direction in the Writing Center" when he argues "[r]egularly, we are forced to choose between allegiance to students or allegiance to faculty, between knowledge-centered education or teacher-centered education, and between a people-centered or an institution-centered role" (5). There is no Aspasian ambiguity here; we are choosing students or faculty, knowledge or teachers, people or the institution. By antithetically framing the reader's options in a binary in which the first term will inevitably be privileged by a writing center community, Davis presents a forceful argument under the guise of choice. Like Riley, Davis thus demonstrates the rhetorical force of this paradigm.

Unlike the Aspasian writing center director, who uses perceived marginality as a malleable position from which to negotiate with other university forces, this administrative perspective often connotes an adversarial administrative role that prioritizes truth over expediency and moral good as opposed to pragmatics. The writing center is a liberatory force and the administrator a champion of justice. Such a perspective not only offers an attractive, if idealized, picture of the administrator and her sphere of influence, but it also draws our attention to many of the benefits of writing center work for both individual writers and the institution as a whole. As illustrated by Steve Braye's comments in "War, Peace and Writing Center Administration,"3 such a perspective foregrounds the ability of the center to transform students' lives and the institution itself:

*It seems to me that writing centers exist because there was no place in the institution, or in the spaces sanctioned by the institution, to do what centers attempt. I don't know whether this is because colleges and universities don't want to admit to teaching some of the things we do [...] or that such problems seem outside what we want the curriculum*
to include. But this means that centers were (are?) beating against the institutional current. [...] If centers have been successful, I would think that they are breaking down this institutional view. (Simpson, Braye and Boquet 66)

The Socratic administrator engages in a dialectical relationship with the university, and this dialectic, if successful, can beat "against the institutional current" and break down "this institutional view." The center might have been created by the institution, but it is not necessarily of the institution. Its original purpose may merely have been to fulfill a curricular gap created by a deficit in the university curriculum, but the center is subversive; it not only fulfills its purpose but exceeds it. And, through this very excess, it works to erode hierarchical norms. By being more than a site of remediation, for example, it works to change university notions of writing instruction—who needs it, who can give it. As with Socrates, whose dialogues served to illustrate the weaknesses of his interlocutors' arguments and Athenian society, the activity of the writing center serves to reveal the inadequacies of the institution and the shortcomings of the academy itself. By extension, individuals performing as Socratic administrators participate in this assault on hegemonic forces as "renegades, outsiders, boundary dwellers, subversives" (Davis 7).

While perhaps in danger of inciting an unpersuasive arrogance, this Socratic rhetoric can contribute significantly to constructions of writing center ethos. Moral appeals to the center's support of student literacy, for example, align this work with those larger cultural values that ideologically support the educational enterprise of the university. Similarly, staking one's reputation "on service rather than publication" (Riley 150) associates the administrator with civic service rather than personal aggrandizement, and critiquing "mass education" (Riley 150) correlates the writing center's interests with those of disenfranchised students. In this manner, a Socratic administrative rhetoric can help marshal considerable ethical appeal.

As Jeanne Simpson points out in her exchange with Braye, however, such a revolutionary posture can be problematic for writing center administrators; ultimately, she argues, the center is itself a part of the institution that such a perspective critiques. As Simpson notes in an email to Braye:

I still wonder why you perceive your goals as being contrary to the goals of the institution. Most institutions have the goal of survival. The rest—educating young people, etc.—are part of that matter: "we want to survive because we like this life; the way to do it is to perform well.
enough to get continued approval, the functions required of us." Your
goal in the center is 1) to survive and 2) do the function as well as pos-
sible. (Simpson, Braye and Boquet 69)

We have seen the enemy, and they is us. In some ways, then, this Socratic perspec-
tive might appear a dangerous position for writing center directors to assume on a con-
sistent basis. It can blind us to that fact that while as individuals we might oppose
institutional forces, as members of the institution we are nevertheless part of its hier-
archy. Moreover, positioning oneself against the university would seem a tall order for
a single being, and not productive of collaborative work with other, less Ideal, institu-
tional bodies. The writing center administrator as institutional "gadfly" might have
powerful ethical appeal and considerable rhetorical force, but as a unvarying rhetori-
cal strategy it would seem a dangerous approach.

Isocratic Arete: The Writing Center vs. as the Institution

While the Socratic rhetorical perspective facilitates opposition to the university—the
writing center vs. the institution—other rhetorics draw our attention to the ways in
which we can work within the university, focusing on the identity of the writing center
as the institution. In this manner, writing center administrators can base their
attempts at persuasion on arete, communal notions of personal excellence and civic
virtue. For example, Jeanne Simpson’s above comments concerning institutional
"survival" illustrate an administrative rhetoric that draws a correlation between the
good of the center and the good of the institution. Such an approach can be usefully
associated with Greek rhetorician Isocrates, a well known teacher of rhetoric who lived
and worked during the same period as Plato. In fact, Isocrates may have studied with
Socrates and, like Plato, Isocrates ran a school in Athens. Indeed, one tradition holds
that Aristotle first began to give his lectures on rhetoric because of Isocrates’ success.

While Plato believes that the educator’s goal was to facilitate the students’ attain-
ment of absolute truth, Isocrates’ notion of rhetorical education had a far more prac-
tical focus:

Both Isocrates and Plato emphasized the educational development of
whole human beings and the importance of ethics. Both thinkers also
based their educational theories on what each called "philosophy,"
although they differed substantially on the definition of that concept.
While Plato promoted the idea of the immutable and transcendent
Forms, and the relationship of those Forms to the soul and to knowl-
edge, Isocrates did not claim to understand ultimate reality. He was
more concerned with the palpable issues of practical education, the establishment of a unified Greek culture, and the inculcation of values. (Welch 119)

Isocrates’ ideal was not the Platonic philosopher-rhetor, best represented here by the Socratic perspective, but the statesman-rhetor, who used his training and ability for civic benefit. At Isocrates’ school, then, both the curriculum as a whole and rhetorical training in particular focused on preparing the student to succeed in daily life and to function as a good citizen. Accordingly, Isocrates claims in the Antidosis, "I hold that man to be wise who is able by his powers of conjecture to arrive generally at the best course, and I hold that man to be a philosopher who occupies himself with the studies from which he will most quickly gain that kind of insight" (335). As it is thus the duty of men to pursue wisdom for practical uses, so it is the responsibility of schools to equip their students for such deliberations. Therefore, in his Encomium on Helen, Isocrates asserts that schools should take as their goal "to pursue the truth, to instruct their pupils in the practical affairs of our government and train to expertness therein, bearing in mind that likely conjecture about useful things is far preferable to exact knowledge of the useless" (63). Truth in this context means the best option rather than the Platonic determination of the Ideal. In this way, Isocratic rhetoric can be said to have a decidedly practical focus.

Isocratic practicality should not be confused with moral relativism, however. Rather, Isocrates’ conception of arete is rooted in communally-accepted notions of virtue. Broadly speaking, Isocrates believed that the best way to persuade one’s audience was through the appeal to socially accepted morals. Indeed, in the Antidosis he argues that the man who wishes to persuade an audience will not only speak from society’s notions of virtue but will live according to these dicta:

[T]he man who wishes to persuade people will ... apply himself to establish a most honorable name among his fellow-citizens; for who does not know that words carry greater conviction when spoken by men of good repute...? Therefore, the stronger a man’s desire to persuade his hearers, the more zealously will he strive to be honorable and to have the esteem of his fellow-citizens. (339)

Such an acceptance of community notions of ethos leads the rhetor to draw upon and reinforce culturally dominant values; thus, as Janet Atwill notes, "for Isocrates, character is measured neither by an external ideal standard nor by a private internal plumb line but rather by the esteem one earns from one’s peers" (28).
As an administrative lens, Isocratic rhetoric foregrounds those scholars like Simpson who openly identify the good of the center with the good of the institution and who argue for a practical approach. Often, these individuals urge writing center directors to work with central administrators, no matter how misinformed and capricious this latter group might sometimes appear. Indeed, in this view, such negative assessments of central administration might be a fault in our perspective as much as in their judgment. Such is the situation described in Simpson’s “Perceptions, Realities and Possibilities: Central Administration and Writing Centers”:

[C]aprice is complicated and costly. It is very, very seldom what is behind a Central Administration decision. Rather, funding in whatever form, is at the bottom of most Central Administration decisions. Period. All decisions, including tenure, are ultimately budgetary in their implications. Caprice, on the other hand, leads to lawsuits and other difficulties. It creates unusual and time-consuming problems to be solved, distracting Central Administration from the routine work that must be done. (52)

As this excerpt shows, Simpson’s essay works to demystify “Central Administration,” a conglomeration of departments and titleholders that is often puzzling and Byzantine to neophyte administrators. Despite a writing center director’s likely lack of administrative training or easy access to Central Administration, Simpson argues that it is in the center’s best interest for its leaders to learn administrative culture generally and institutional culture specifically and then adapt to them. In other words, Simpson argues that the writing center director must adjust her arguments to the institutional audience, keeping firmly in mind the language and values of “Central Administration.” Like Isocrates, Simpson here advocates employing a practical rhetoric that is founded on community values.

In her rhetorical position, Simpson evidences a primary difference among the Aspasian, Socratic and Isocratic administrative rhetorics as they are defined here. While Aspasian administrative rhetorics attempt to use the center’s liminality as a position of strength and Socratic theories construct the center’s marginalization as a vantage point from which to critique and improve the university, the Isocratic perspective casts such marginalization as an effect of the perspective from the center as well as an irrelevancy to administrative rhetoric:

The concept of “marginalization” would be a surprise to Central Administration. If a program is being funded, space provided, salaries...
paid, assessment and evaluation being conducted, then the assumption of Central Administration is that it is a part of the institution and some part of the institution’s mission is being addressed. [...] The situation is not changed by this difference in perceptions. It is still unpleasant and limits options and possibilities. But the understanding of how to respond to the situation, the development of realistic and effective responses, depends on how the check-signers perceive the situation. They do not perceive themselves as oppressors and tend to react defensively to such accusations. Even an intransigent, blockheaded Central Administration will react negatively to such accusations. (Simpson “Perceptions” 50)

In her emphasis on the fiscal and political realities of the writing center and its relationship to the “check signers,” Simpson is the quintessential Isocratic rhetorician. Thus, much of her scholarship is characterized by the argument presented in "The Administrative Audience: A Rhetorical Problem." Here, she and Joyce Kinkead urge administrators to “find the common ground they share with other administrators—to reckon with them”:

Rather than work against the institution, we need to acknowledge that we are part of the institution and can be effective change agents. Our success in writing programs can translate to success for the university at large. By communicating well with the administrative culture in the terminology of administration, we stand to gain resources and respect. (72)

Kinkead and Simpson then go on to outline a rhetoric of administration that is Isocratic in its emphasis on the realities of university administration, its equation of what’s best for the center with what’s best for the institution, and its argument that administrators must acclimate themselves to the larger culture of the university. In this model, then, the administrator is neither the Aspasian mistress of language nor the Socratic philosopher above pettifogging administrative myopia, but instead a citizen-administrator, a cultural insider who focuses on contributing to the good of the institution through her work in the center. Such a temperate view of the administrator-citizen can seem a natural extension of the writing center’s collaborative ethos. In other words, as Josephine Koster notes, since tutors “attempt to understand the forms and practices of many specialized areas,” so too should writing center administrators strive to communicate effectively across the curriculum (151).

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As with the other administrative perspectives identified in this essay, however, this approach has its potential hazards. Like Isocrates himself, who "has been dismissed by some scholars as politically unimportant and a base opportunist" (Conley 17), appropriating institutional rhetoric can leave the administrator open to criticisms—and self-recrimination—of "selling out" (Simpson, Braye and Boquet 158). Indeed, the Isocratic perspective might be viewed as ceding the Socratic moral high ground. A more subtle rhetorical critique of an Isocratic approach to administration, however, can be found in its acceptance of the "terminology of administration" (Kinkead and Simpson 72), for while Kinkead and Simpson cast institutional rhetoric as the means of "communicating well with the administrative culture" (72), adopting such a rhetoric adds an institutional terministic screen to the writing center administrator's message. Writing center administrators must thus maintain an awareness that employing an Isocratic administrative rhetoric of FTEs, earned hours credits and retention rates privileges these concepts over, for example, a Socratic allegiance to the individual student and so shapes the administrator's message as well as its medium.

Aristotle: Administrative Method and the Available Means

Just as Isocrates' rhetoric focuses our gaze on institutional ethos and its relation to the writing center, so too does Aristotle draw our attention to the persuasive resources of our immediate rhetorical context. While aretē is at the heart of Isocratic rhetoric, such community notions of morality are less central in Aristotle's On Rhetoric. George Kennedy observes, for example, that Aristotle's treatise is a "'formalist' treatise, largely an objective, nonjudgmental analysis of the forms that rhetoric took in his times" (Kennedy, Art 56), rather than a treatment of the "legitimate or illegitimate uses of rhetoric in a society or the duty of an orator" (Kennedy, Art 55). For Aristotle, rhetoric is "an antistrophos to dialectic" (Aristotle I.i.i); it is a counterpart to the philosophical method privileged by Plato, and the rhetorical method deals with those situations in which philosophical absolutes cannot be known. It concerns the contextual probabilities of the rhetorical situation. Rhetoric therefore is complementary, not inferior, to philosophy. Rather, to practice rhetoric is to enact a method, "an ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion" (Aristotle I.i.i). In this "non-judgmental" approach towards a theory of rhetoric, Aristotle conflates a range of intellectual activities:

Aristotle divided intellectual activity into (1) theoretical sciences, which included mathematics, physics, and theology; (2) practical arts, including politics and ethics; and productive arts, including the fine
For Aristotle, then, rhetoric has an innate hybridity; it cuts across disciplinary divides, and employs a variety of methods.

Given On Rhetorìcs methodological emphasis on context and association of rhetoric with multiple modes of intellectual inquiry, its contemporary counterpart in writing center studies might best be represented in the work of Muriel Harris. In essays such as “Writing Center Administration: Making Local, Institutional Knowledge in Our Writing Centers,” “Solutions and Trade-Offs in Writing Center Administration,” and “Diverse Research Methodologies at Work for Diverse Audiences: Shaping the Writing Center to the Institution,” Harris theorizes an instrumental writing center rhetoric. In each of these essays, she examines methods by which administrators can find their “available means” of persuasion even as she refrains from determining their ultimate goals. Rather, in a manner reminiscent of Aristotle’s incorporation of theoretical, practical and productive knowledge in his art of rhetoric, Harris emphasizes the varieties of knowledge the writing center administrator should have at her disposal and the importance of these methods of inquiry when ascertaining her potential rhetorical appeals.

In her 1999 essay “Diverse Research Methodologies for Diverse Audiences,” for example, Harris situates her notion of writing center research by aligning herself with a comment from “In the Temple of the Familiar: Writing Center as Church” in which Dave Healy writes, “[a]lthough we sometimes talk about ‘the idea of a writing center’ as if there were a Platonic form we could all recognize and delineate, most discussions of writing centers eventually descend to the particular—or at least they should” (Healy 13, qtd in Harris “Diverse” 1). In Aristotelian fashion, Healy (and by extension, Harris) thus aligns himself with a rhetorical model which privileges local knowledge—with its reliance on probability, contingency and attention to context—over those Platonic idea(l)s of the writing center that privilege the theoretical and the abstract. Both Healy and Harris thus distance their positions from any Aspasian celebration of ambiguity or Socratic exhortation to subvert institutional hierarchies.

With her focus on institutional context as the source of available means, at first glance the methods outlined in Harris’ essay may seem related to the Isocratic administrative rhetoric’s reliance on aretē. Harris, however, does not identify the good of the...
writing center with the good of the institution; indeed, she is often at pains to differ-
entiate the identity of writing center director from that of her institutional audience. Here the administrator is drawing her evidence, not just her ethos, from local context. In describing for her reader "The Need to Justify the Writing Center to Others," for example, Harris acknowledges that writing center administrators know their work "is a drain on some administrator’s budget, and so they seek some way to demonstrate that they should continue to be supported" ("Diverse" 8) even as she cautions that

the audience to which such proof is to be offered usually comes from different epistemological/research traditions. Acknowledging that difference means that writing center directors also need to present their work in different ways, with different methodologies. Quantitative data are simply more convincing to most administrators than qualitative results, and so, writing center directors also seek methodologies that produce quantitative data. (Harris, "Diverse" 8)

Rather than espousing an Isocratic rhetoric that correlates the moral good of the center with that of the institution, Harris here articulates an instrumental approach to persuading an administrative audience through the use of quantitative means. She does not recommend assuming the ethos of institutional culture; rather, she focuses on the methods that will appeal to that culture and so aligns herself with an Aristotelian rhetorical system. An Isocratic rhetoric is reconcilable to the approach Harris describes; however, the two paradigms offer the writing center administrator different persuasive resources, namely, the virtues espoused by the institution and the methods of inquiry valued by an institutional audience.

Harris’ attention to different kinds of knowledge further distinguishes her approach from the other administrative rhetorics described in this essay and identifies her approach with an Aristotelian administrative rhetoric. The focus in "Diverse Research," for example, is a particular kind of intellectual activity, which is "locally produced for local use in the administration of a writing center" (3). Here, Harris seems to be associating herself with that knowledge Aristotle termed "practical" (knowledge which results in its own practice, like dancing). And yet, she also acknowledges the manner in which writing center administrators both use and contribute to our theoretical common ground, a category akin to Aristotle’s theoretical knowledge (a category that contains such fields as the theoretical sciences, whose result, he claims, is the attainment of more abstract knowledge). As she moves into her analysis of institutionally specific knowledge, however, Harris talks about the manner in which the
knowledge created by local inquiry shapes the writing center and associates her inquiry with Aristotle's notion of productive knowledge (a mode of inquiry which results in a discernable entity, like architecture). Like Aristotle's discussion of rhetoric, the multimodality of writing center inquiry that she describes cuts across the Aristotelian categories of knowledge. Thus, when Harris says the "interplay of local use and knowledge for the profession is a complex one with borderlines that are, at best, hazy" (3), her comments seem equally applicable to the method of inquiry she describes and Aristotle's concept of rhetoric.

This in-depth attention to context and its attendant multimodal methodology can be seen as the model's weakness as well as its strength, however. For the newcomer to writing center administration, for example, such a high attention to context and reliance on a broad methodological expertise may seem to re-problematize the already daunting task of running a writing center. That is, as Harris describes, administration can oftentimes seem overwhelming to a new director:

Writing center administration, a highly complex task as is, has an added complication in that so many new directors plunge in with an almost total lack of preparation. Undertaking new responsibilities with the best of intentions but with high levels of anxiety, they normally begin by seeking out the books, journals and conferences that will help them, and they journey to other kinds of writing centers to take notes and ask questions. They inquire about all kinds of specifics on the size of the budget, ways to select staff, methods of evaluation, types of computers, and other materials that should be purchased, and so on. [...] We share our knowledge, experience, and handouts with newcomers, but we may be also inadvertently passing along a message we don't intend to distribute—that there is a "right" way to structure a writing center. ("Solutions" 155)

Recast in Aristotelian terms, Harris' assessment of the situation might be read thus: the new administrator, in the search for Aristotelian "available means," turns to the paradigm of an already successful writing center rather than to an intensive multi-perspectival examination of her own context. As Harris rightly states, such a monolithic paradigm that neglects context may impede one's ability to develop a successful center. Gaining the methodological expertise to marshal a writing center rhetoric that draws upon theoretical, practical and productive knowledges can seem well-nigh unattainable, however. Thus, part of the reason the "right" way to run a writing center...
might appear attractive to newcomers is that the interpretation of context is often predicated on familiarity with both the institution and the goals of the center. Such a situation can appear a Catch-22: success in writing center administration relies on interpretation of context, but successful interpretation of context often relies on expertise in writing center administration. While doctrinaire models of The Writing Center are not the solution, a multi-modal focus on context can likewise seem problematic.

**Writing Center Administration and Rhetorical Range**

As indicated by the partial catalogue offered in this essay, the paradigms of persuasion available to a writing center administrator are varied and none of them will be universally applicable. For whether we turn to Aspasian improvisation, Socratic dialectic, Isocratic aretē or Aristotelian multimodality for our rhetoric depends on the purpose of and audience for our argumentative appeals. Thus, the taxonomy described in this essay is intended to be neither hierarchical nor definitive; instead, it is meant to suggest the variety of persuasive models available to writing center administrators and to encourage these administrators to develop a range of rhetorical strategies in their work. Rather than approaching administrative rhetoric as a monolithic system in which alterity, subversion, community or context is the single driving force, writing center directors should embrace the wealth of persuasive appeals to which they have access and in the knowledge that each kind of appeal will have its occasional value in formulating a response to the wide range of situations, challenges, and opportunities with which all centers are faced. Operating in that liminal space at the margins of the university, yet vulnerable to being co-opted to agendas that are not their own, writing director centers must avoid either imbibing the hemlock or drinking the Kool-Aid; being conscious of the options various rhetorical postures can offer may strengthen their resistance to both unsavory options and provide instead a variety of strategies for the administrator-rhetor in the writing center.
NOTES

1 While recent studies of feminist rhetoric have read Aspasia achronically—combining representations of this figure as they have manifested from 585 BCE to the present—in keeping with the chronological focus of this essay, "Platonic Aspasia" here designates the specific formulation of this figure as she is represented in the Menexenus. For a detailed description of the multiple formulations of Aspasia, see Henry.

2 In her review of Noise, Christina Murphy describes a passage as "language juggling" as only a rhetorician can do—or a Sophist* (8).

3 This essay is comprised of a series of email messages exchanged among Steve Braye, Jeanne Simpson and Beth Boquet.

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*To the Author of 'If Aristotle Ran the Writing Center: Classical Theories and Administrative Rhetorics." Unpublished ms. 6 pgs.