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“Concerns are Translated into Conversations of Sudden Community”: Identification at the IWCA/NCPTW

by Melissa Ianetta

Here are the ambiguities of substance. In being identified with B, A is “substantially one” with a person other than himself. Yet at the same time, he remains unique, an individual locus of motives. Thus he is both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another. —Kenneth Burke (545)

My conference poem busts at the heart-seams when the crowd likes its paper even if they didn’t attend, didn’t listen, didn’t seem to quite understand.

My conference poem goes down on its knees at the exhibit hall trampled by a pod of discount purchasers and last day pack-aways.

My conference poem is an expectant handshake and wink late night lobby dark where the unsayable is finally said and concerns are translated into conversations of sudden community. —Wendy Bishop (332)

As Wendy Bishop eloquently suggests in her “Conference Poem,” academic conferences are paradoxical sites of community. At these events individuals gather not only to retell those disciplinary master narratives that solidify a sense of group identity but also to share new knowledge that challenges these communal stories and thus to argue for disciplinary growth. Conferences are rhetorical occasions, then, where participants not only reinforce the shared qualities of their professional identities but shape the future by reflecting upon the difference between their professional goals and daily realities. As described in its call for proposals, for example, such questions of identity and difference were central to the 2005 International Writing Centers Association.
Writing Centers Association/National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing meeting:

As a discipline, we have noted the heterogeneity of our institutions, organizations, philosophies and practices and, simultaneously, attempted to secure some measure of permanence and universality. We have sought a more stable sense of identity, institutional and disciplinary recognition, and an understanding of the ways in which the illusion of permanence co-opts as well as enables writing center theory and practice. ("International Writing Centers Association")

As represented in its CFP, a central concern for the IWCA/NCPTW 2005 conference was the multifaceted role of identity in writing center studies. Our home institutions are defined by “heterogeneity,” yet we strive for a degree of “universality”; even as our discipline celebrates fluidity, we nevertheless experience and work to understand “the illusion of permanence.” Our identities are thus paradoxical, simultaneously uniting us as writing center folk and dividing us from one another. Certainly we define ourselves by the warm welcome we give disciplinary neophytes, yet, if the adage is correct and “every writing center is different,” our high level of individualism means we are also defined by division.

In light of this positioning of identification, it is unsurprising that many of the papers presented at the 2005 IWCA/NCPTW conference can be read productively through Kenneth Burke's theoretical framework, for Burke's rhetoric defines identification as an interaction of similarity, difference and the desire for community. As described in his Rhetoric of Motives, since people are ultimately separate from one another, all acts of identification are partial and passing. However, we are nevertheless united by our desire for a communal sense. This desire for “community” would certainly seem to be the case at gatherings of writing center administrators, individuals who are often all too aware of their separateness at their home institutions where they are often the only specialists in their field. To join for a few days a group that shares their professional concerns and fundamental pedagogies satisfies, on some levels, this Burkean desire for conjoined identity.

Indeed, given the repeated citations of his theories in attendees’ presentations, it seems that Burkean analysis as a means of better understanding the writing center is itself emerging as a site of identification for the field. As Sue Mendelsohn argued during the first session of the conference, for example, Burkes's theories and writing center work seem well matched. Like writing center work itself, the theoretical oeuvre of Kenneth Burke is pragmatic and paradoxical:
Burkean thought is ripe for discussion in writing center studies for a number of reasons: he bravely resists being limited by any disciplinary boundaries—or it might be more accurate to say that he refuses to acknowledge disciplinary boundaries; he grapples with communication across difference; he unmasks rhetorical strategies of identity making; and he theorizes at the point of overlap between theory and practice, the praxis where writing centers exist. (Mendelsohn 2)

In addition to Mendelsohn’s reflection on the ways in which our writing center histories and metaphors reflect our self-definition as a field, Burke was invoked in arguments as apparently disparate as Margaret Weaver’s narrative of the “Theft of a Writing Center Director” and Victor Villenueva’s interrogation of the relationship between writing, identity and racism in his compelling keynote address. Perhaps, as Mendelsohn suggested, it is time to move our field’s engagement with Burke beyond the image of the writing center as Burkean Parlor in Andrea Lunsford’s “Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of a Writing Center.”

Even when considering papers that did not explicitly include Burke’s theories, this critical perspective seems particularly appropriate in light of the many rhetorics of identification pervading presentations at the IWCA/NCPTW conference. Throughout my three days in Minneapolis, I was struck by the ways in which conference attendees aligned and realigned their identities as tutors, teachers, administrators and scholars. Focusing on these positionings of identity not only gave me a way of integrating the plethora of research presentations I was privileged to enjoy, but also fostered a re-viewing of the promise and peril of our daily work in the writing center.

A defining form of identification among conference attendees, for instance, was the manner in which writing center administrators identified with tutors. The most obvious source of this rhetorical perspective was the positive energy added to the conference by the presence of the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing. The high caliber of the peer tutors’ papers not only illustrated the national commitment of writing center studies to tutor mentoring and development but also gave writing center administrators a chance to show how we work with our tutors locally. For example, in “Origami, Anyone?: Tutors as Learners,” Elizabeth Boquet, Anne Ellen Geller, Michelle Eodice and a group of peer tutors from Rhode Island College (Nicole Colasanti, Kristin Cook, Amanda DiSanto, Melissa Kusinitz, and Monika Messore) demonstrated creative strategies to foster tutors’ ongoing learning. During the Q&A, much of the discussion focused on the ways in which directors and tutors continually learn from one another. On a similar note,
Trixie Smith and Rachel Robinson’s presentation looked at the relationship between a writing center director and her graduate student assistant directors. For her part, Robinson reflected on her identity as a graduate student administrator who exists on the border between Smith, the director, and Robinson’s peers who staff the center.

Conference attendees not only talked about the ways they identified *with* tutors and writers, however. Many individuals, in fact, explored their roles as tutors and writers. Brian Fallon’s “Flirting in the Moment: How Peer Interactions Change Writing Center Sessions,” for example, examined gender identity in the writing session by investigating the ways in which flirting between tutor and writer can define a tutorial. As I’ve never previously considered tutorials in a “flirting” frame—nor thought much about the limitations imposed by the attendant presumption of gender norms—this paper gave me a new way of looking at tutor-writer interaction. So too, Neal Lerner’s “Tutoring the Case Western Shooter,” prodded at the audience to (re)consider the ways in which we define the writers who come to the center. By focusing on his experiences working with Biswanath Halder, nationally known for the 2003 Case Western shootings, Lerner offered a drastic example of the ways in which later events can cause us to reassess the individuals who come to the writing center, and our interactions with them.

Such presentations that position writing center professionals as writers and learners akin to those individuals who use the center’s services articulate an integral element of our shared identity in writing center studies. Colleagues in other disciplines may locate their professional ethos in ever-more specialized displays of disciplinary expertise, reward the new knowledge created by the expert practitioner and restrict their pedagogical conversations to a consideration of student learning. By contrast, identifying with/as our students in writing center studies allows us to emphasize *their* expertise and *our* learning. Creating such an egalitarian environment at IWCA/NCPTW reinvigorates our local practices and so helps us to bring renewed energies to our own centers. Ironically, however, such identification may well further divide our practices from our institutional norms, and so alienate our professional identities from those of our professional colleagues even while reinforcing our sense of community with “writing center folks” at other campuses.

Exploring our commonalities with tutors and writers was not the only form of identification at IWCA/NCPTW. Complementing the work of presenters who identified with their local constituencies were those presentations whose authors were reaching across campuses. Some of these presentations were coalition building at an administrative level—as in the case of a roundtable in which Linda
Bergmann, Rebecca Fraser, Lauren Fitzgerald, Lisa Lebduska, Carol Peterson Haviland, Jennifer Ritter and I talked about the degree to which we identify with/as writing program administrators (WPAs), and what such identification means for our professional self-definition. As one who directs both a writing program and a writing center, I identify with both designations, and so was surprised and intrigued by individuals who reject the WPA designation, seeing it as a constricting identity for the writing center director. Kelley Anthony, Gail Mercer and Margaret Weaver explored a far more fraught area of dissensus in “Identity Theft of a Writing Center Director,” a provocative panel which explored the notion of what “makes” a writing center director. That is, given that many writing center directors serve in their administrative function at the pleasure of a dean, chair or provost, do we lose our identification as writing center professionals when we are asked to step down or to hand “our” center over to someone else? How does it challenge our sense of self and our community when an external force pushes us away from our chosen work? Anthony, Mercer, and Weaver offered no easy answers, but that Weaver’s excellent essay “Censoring What Tutors’ Clothing ‘Says’: First Amendment Rights/Writes within Tutorial Space” won the 2004 IWCA Outstanding Scholarship Award made me think that, whatever our local conditions and crises of identification may be, one of the best things about the IWCA/NCPTW conference is that, even as it gives us a chance to renew our chosen identities, it also allows us to identify excellence in others.

As Chris Anson and Paula Gillespie noted in, “Writing Across Borders: What Future for Globalization?” writing center professionals do not only identify in and across institutions; our drive for communion can even push beyond national borders. Since 2001 the “I” in IWCA has been one of our organization’s defining features. As demonstrated by the organization’s name change, the founding of the European regional organization in 1998, and the international participation in the 2002 writing center conference in Greece, IWCA has developed a distinctive international element that distinguishes our organization from other scholarly groups. However, as Gillespie argued, our expanding international presence is a cause for careful consideration as well as celebration. In a presentation that combined rueful humor with a high level of analytical insight about her own successes and failures, she described the allure and pitfalls of cross-cultural communication between the American tutors at her home institution, Marquette University, and German tutors from the University of Freiburg. By describing a project that originally started in anticipatory optimism and ended with disappointed silence, this presentation made me think about the things we simply cannot know when we first attempt to identi-
fy internationally, be it as an organization expanding its horizons or as individuals working to build cross-culture coalition. Such stories as Gillespie’s teach us that mis-identifications in the form of miscommunications and misunderstanding are an inevitable part of the learning curve as IWCA deepens and complicates its commitment to its “I.”

The discussion of international writers was not narrowly focused on writers in other countries, however. The relationship of the ESL writer to the university where English is the language of instruction provides a constant challenge to the writing center, and presentations such as Keith Reins and Catherine Schaff-Stumps’ “Beyond Dead Reckoning: Navigating Departmental/Program Boundaries to Best Serve Second-Language Students” helped conference goers think about ways to work with other constituencies on campus to serve the needs of ESL students. In a similar vein—albeit a different medium—Wayne Robertson stunned his audience with Writing Across Borders: International Students, Writing Centers and the American Academy. This video project not only gave to a diverse group of multilingual student writers a forum to discuss the unique challenges they face in the American academy but also showed these students composing in their native languages. Robertson thus used video to create an implicit yet persuasive argument that the student who is identified as a struggling ESL student in our center may well be an expert writer in another context. Such work as Robertson’s film offers us compelling material testimony that the politics of identification are tricky indeed.

The Burkean subtext present throughout the conference became overt in Victor Villanueva’s keynote address, “Blind: Talking of the New Racism,” which appears in this issue of WCJ. Villanueva invoked Burke’s discussion of tropes to help the audience understand the ways in which contemporary rhetorics of difference can actually enable racism rather than undermine it. Replacing overtly prejudiced raced rhetorics with ambiguous discourses of “culture” ignores the realities of social injustice. For example, the postmodern notion that we “choose” our identity, Villanueva observed, obscures the fact that we each have a limited number of options, a finite range of identities we can assume. Such identifications are fraught with issues of power and equity, for the disempowered are in danger of being (mis)identified by the dominant as inferior or senselessly dangerous. As Mary Louise Pratt has argued, identification thus takes place in the contact zone “where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (34). As Villanueva described, such “grapplings” over identity are not merely esoteric but have material, and potentially disastrous consequences, as in the case of Jean Charles de Menezes, the 27-year old Brazilian who...
was killed by British police officers when they misidentified him as a terror-
ist. As Villanueva rightfully argued, identification is not only about com-
munion but also conflict, suppression and inequity.

While the critique embodied by Villaneuva's words may be sobering, their effect on his audience was electrifying. Indeed, they have been a galva-
nizing force on the writing center community as was evident in the activity on WCENTER, the community list-
serv. In the following weeks, discussants reflected upon the role of race and the writing center at the local and national level, talking about this nexus of issues in ways that are new yet which nevertheless remain true to the field's democratic ideals. As a result of IWCA/ NCPTW, then, Wendy Bishop's idea of a conference as a place where "concerns are translated into conversations of sud-
den community" (32) intersects with Burke's notion of community as the interplay of similarity and difference, for in Minneapolis we met to talk, to celebrate our shared understandings and challenge ourselves to confront our dif-
f erences in new and productive ways.

WORKS CITED