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The Idea of a Writing Center Community

by Lauren Fitzgerald

Like Melissa Ianetta, I was struck by the sense of community offered by the IWCA/NCPTW conference. However, I soon realized that this idea of community was fairly complicated once I began to write this report, and particularly as I struggled to find the right collective noun to describe the conference goers. The options available—"writing center professionals," "writing center workers," "writing center people"—are all unsatisfying, each either too specific or too general. (Does "professional" include undergraduate student tutors? Does "workers" exclude directors-as-managers? Could "people" refer to the writers who use our centers but aren't employed by them?) Using the vaguely personified "writing centers" (e.g., "writing centers face challenges") only sidesteps the problem: writing centers don't attend conferences; tutors, directors, professionals, workers, and people do. This struggle isn't merely semantic. Instead, it points up something deeper about the writing center community. This conference in particular made visible for me the way that this community is actually not one but many, made up of different individuals with different identities, interests, and agendas, in different kinds of positions at different kinds of institutions in different parts of the country—and the world. These differences reminded me that over fifteen years ago, Joseph Harris famously argued in "The Idea of Community in the Study of Writing" that rather than try to conceive of "community" as totalizing—and therefore "sweeping and vague" and potentially "empty and sentimental"—we should use it to describe "specific and local groups" and allow "for both consensus and conflict" (12, 13, 20). Failing to find a satisfying term to cover everyone who attended the conference made me see that I needed to revise my idea of "the" writing center community, too.

About the Author

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One segment of the writing center community that made a remarkably strong showing in Minneapolis was students—though of course they themselves represented so many different groups. In the conference program's "Welcome from the Conference Chair," Frankie Condon notes that students made up half of the 500 presenters. Because NCPTW is a forum for peer tutors, this figure is not surprising. But in other ways it is remarkable; writing centers provide one of the few academic arenas in which students can present shoulder to shoulder with well-known scholars, theorists, and practitioners. This inclusiveness pays off. Some of the best presentations I saw were given by student tutors (most undergraduate). One example that stands out for me was the Rhode Island College tutors' presentation, "Color Me Writing: Tutoring with Crayons and Paint." Perhaps because it promised to give the audience hands-on practice, this presentation was packed, but Nicole Colasanti, Kristin Cook, Amanda DiSanto, Melissa Kusinitz, and Monika Messore also offered useful overviews of theory and research on writing and the visual arts and compelling anecdotes about using drawing in their tutoring. These tutors gave the audience a lot to ponder; for instance, they made me think about how the visual is usually deprivileged as a way of knowing and helped me understand why tutors in my center are often skeptical about its value in their work with writers. Like other student-led presentations (many I couldn't attend because they were just too numerous), this presentation was further evidence of how important writing centers are not just for the student writers they serve but for the student tutors they employ. I hope that the home institutions of all the peer tutors who presented realize how valuable their contributions were to the conference.

As Melissa noted, the conference took up issues of community through its focus on identity politics—including issues of race, religion, sexual orientation, and gender. As a result, many presentations addressed different kinds of identities within writing centers. For instance, in another very strong largely student-led workshop (the irresistibly titled "Sex and the Writing Center: Exploring Gender Dynamics in Tutorials"), tutors from the University of Maine, and their director, Harvey Kail, had the audience consider our own centers as "sexualized" spaces and whether we feel more comfortable tutoring men or women. Though I initially expressed doubts about what could be revealed in a small-scale study such as the one the tutors outlined, I was soon convinced otherwise: what the tutors themselves learned simply by planning and reflecting on the study was well worth the effort. Their insights in turn led me to notice something else about the writing center community, at least as it was represented in Minneapolis: as I wrote in my reporter's notebook, *This presentation made me see (again) how many women are at this conference.*

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As a writing center director at a religiously affiliated institution, I was especially intrigued by the panel on politics and religion in the writing center. Karen Peterson Welch and Miriam Pollock considered (in separate presentations) those difficult moments when a writer's use of religious beliefs in his/her writing comes into conflict with either normative academic discourse or writing center practice or both. Peggy Johnson explored the relevance of a social justice mission (itself religiously based) for writing centers. For me, the most complicated (and most interesting) moment of the panel occurred when two members of the audience self-identified as evangelical Christians. I was reassured that they felt included enough to speak from a perspective that is not often represented in academic forums but wondered if others felt, as I did, that the boundary between religious and academic discourse was suddenly—and usefully—complicated when they spoke.

Even if you did not attend the conference, you might have guessed from the intense discussion on the WCenter listserv in October and November that, as Melissa pointed out, the galvanizing talk was Victor Villanueva's keynote, "Blind: Talking of the New Racism." He pushed the audience to confront our inability and perhaps even refusal to engage with some of the most problematic aspects of community identity. He called on us to engage in questions of race and racism, not only in our one-with-one work with individuals, but even at the conference itself, as he asked us to look around the room and notice which races were represented. I am glad that, as at the previous IWCA/NCPTW conference, the organizers invited speakers from outside writing centers (another was Chris Anson, Past President of the Council of Writing Program Administrators), not only so that we can learn from them, but so that they can see some of the complexity of what we do. At least since Steven North laid down the gauntlet to English Departments—and anyone else who didn't understand what we do—the writing center community has seemed to define itself against other communities, some of whom might be useful partners and allies.

Though the conference offered an opportunity to articulate difference, as Melissa indicated, it also recognized the need for continuity and connection. The central image of the conference title—"Navigating the Boundary Waters"—invited many presenters to articulate a desire to cross/push/traverse/bridge/blur/rupture/challenge/negotiate/break down boundaries between different communities. For instance, like Melissa, I saw a real effort to cross the line between tutor and writing center director. For me, the most intriguing aspect of "Origami Anyone?: Tutors as Learners" was that by positioning directors as members of the writing center's "learning community," Beth Boquet, the Rhode Island College tutors, Michele Eodice, and Anne Ellen Geller offered a compelling alternative to the instrumental, top-down version of tutor "training." I saw a similar impulse in "Writing Centers in Bloom I: Belletristic Writing and the Writing Center Professional" (the first of two related panels organized by Greg Dyer); following up on Lynn Z. Bloom's call for writing teachers to write with their students, these sessions provided a showcase for faculty writing.

These efforts to cross boundaries were often accompanied by critical reflection. For instance, Eliana Schonberg unpacked assumptions about how collaboration in our centers should be represented: using "we" as the dominant pronoun in session reports to faculty might be a less honest representation of collaborative writing center work than simply describing the tutor's and writer's individual actions. In a similar vein, several presenters addressed, sometimes skeptically, the promises that new technologies seem to offer for community building. Jay Sloan reported on linking different writing centers within the Kent State system via the Web and, more complicated, teaching an online version of his tutor training course for the tutors at other campuses. He noted that much of what he had taken for granted as a teacher of these courses—including group work and notions of ownership ("my writing center, my class, my students, my tutors")—were seriously challenged. In yet another very strong student presentation, "Trust & Turnitin.com: Plagiarism Detection Software & Students' Relationships with Teachers & Tutors," undergraduate tutors from the Indiana University of Pennsylvania and their Director, Ben Rafoth, addressed more serious technological costs to writing center communities. The IUP tutors maintained that the introduction of this widely-used plagiarism detection service on their campus negatively affected writers' attitudes towards both writing and tutoring. In the feature session "Writing Across Borders: What Future for Globalization?," Chris Anson and Paula Gillespie took up the possibilities and pitfalls of attempting to forge such technological links internationally. Though granting that we ignore international issues "at our peril," Anson urged us to ask "Who gains from an international online exchange?" and "What's the cost of the dominance of English?" Following almost seamlessly from Anson's warnings, Gillespie offered her own cautionary tale (which Melissa describes).

Writing center people aren't known for their heated debates, but a potential flashpoint seems to be the professional identity of writing center directors (including the director's position within the institution and whether he/she needs disciplinary training and a writing center-based research agenda). As a recently tenured faculty member, I have a vested interest in arguing for one side of this debate (as, in fact, I did at the roundtable that I was on with Melissa). And perhaps because I was

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thinking about these issues, they began and ended the conference for me. The first panel I went to, "Pushing Boundaries: Composing and Analyzing the WCRP Survey," stressed how important it is for writing center administrators to report on their centers to the Writing Centers Research Project. Though Christopher Ervin, Daniel Keller, and Carolyn Skinner admitted that the three surveys conducted so far have yet to produce a picture of the "average" writing center (which perhaps might never emerge), they made clear that continued participation would provide not only reliable data for dealing with the sorts of crises that are described again and again on WCenter but also to produce other kinds of knowledge about writing centers across the country.

Towards the end of the last day, when I was probably tired and cranky, I continued to mull over Ervin's and Keller's remarks about our loyalty to the local and wrote, *I'm sometimes frustrated by the level of professionalism in wc discussions. I understand the commitment to peer tutors and practice, but I also feel like we are not making a step forward in terms of constructing or amassing knowledge.* Something I kept hearing at the conference, usually in more off-the-cuff comments from the audience, was that *Professionalism somehow means getting away from the student, the writer.* In other words, writing center directors who spend time on career advancement or on the administrative politics of their institutions risk neglecting the individuals whom our centers are supposed to serve. I know that there are good reasons for taking this position, many offered by people I respect. But I also know that both writers and tutors can benefit, sometimes in very material ways, when the director ventures beyond the center.

I continued to think about the disagreement over the status of the writing center director during the last feature session, "The Cultural Work of Writing Centers: Contesting Boundaries and the Importance of Local Resistance," with Lil Brannon, Derek Owens, and Daniel Mahala. When Brannon asked the audience to write about what we saw as the future of writing centers, I wrote, *We need to professionalize! To look out for ourselves. To be more aggressive. I'm not sure that this means disciplinarity, but I do think it means participating in the high profile forums that have the ears of people in higher education who can impact the future of our centers.* These thoughts lingered as Owens contrasted writing centers that serve as the centerpiece of the institution with those off the grid and as Mahala warned that it is a mistake to see the legacy of writing centers as entirely of our own making. One message I took from these presentations is that we're never quite the independent operators we want to be; we always belong to multiple, sometimes conflicting communities, each with its own demands.

I don't want to end my report on a negative note. In fact, I still feel a sense of community with the other conference goers—sentimental and utopian as it might be—even if I don't agree with all of them about everything. After all, as Joseph Harris says, "One does not need to have consensus to have community" (20). I want to end, instead, with another important way the conference began and ended for me—with fun, fellowship, and good feeling. The very first sentence I wrote in my reporter's notebook is this: *One of the best things about conferences is (re)connecting with friends and colleagues.* After I'd attended a few panels, seen more familiar faces and names, and was in the conference-going groove, I wrote, *Conferences help to reestablish the personal networks; walking through the halls feels like a relay; a place to connects names/texts to live people.* These gatherings give us opportunities to make live connections that generate new ideas, friendships, and, yes, communities. Maybe you go to two sessions back to back on apparently disparate topics but then somehow you see an unexpected correspondence. Or you have lunch with someone who's facing the same problem, but from a different angle, which helps you to see your situation more productively. Or perhaps on the plane ride home, you sit next to another writing center director from the very city in which you live and talk and laugh the whole way. Good conferences like this one help us to forge the communities that can sustain us through the year.

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