The Writing Center as Last Best Place: Six Easy Pieces on Montana, Bears, Love, and Writing Centers

Kevin Davis

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The Writing Center as Last Best Place: Six Easy Pieces on Montana, Bears, Love, and Writing Centers

by Kevin Davis

I. Summer Vacation

I use my August vacation for escape, getting away from the heat of the central plains, traveling to places that let me recharge my head for the upcoming semester, seeking to rediscover the Kevin that works loose during a year of dealing with warped expectations, broken perspectives, close attachments. On these journeys, I've mentally recomposed syllabi while hiking, redesigned the writing center while looking at a glacier, rediscovered a sense of rhythm and flow while cruising the inside passage. For me, August is rollover time, a chance to look back and forward, a chance to cool down (mentally and physically).

To these ends, Annie and I spent part of August in northwest Montana, where we lived 20 years ago, a place where I met my first writing center, my first grizzly bear, and, to a great extent, my first real sense of myself. I seem to be place-attached to the Flathead Valley, a location which speaks to me in a common language, which shares my nature if not my past, the mystery chemical to which my elements naturally bond. The first day I drove into the Valley, I felt it instantly: a sense of returning, a sense of belonging, a rootedness in my soul that attached me to a place I had never before seen, a place where no ancestor had previously set foot or wheel.

When we lived in Montana, I spent afternoons working in my first writing center, a place that immediately felt like my home, the place I belonged within this place I belonged. Evenings I spent teaching an odd combination of English and Music and Theatre.

About the Author

Kevin Davis rides bicycles, brews Russian stout, plays jazz cello, and plans trips to Montana from his home in Ada, Oklahoma, where he is professor of English and Director of the Writing Center at East Central University. A former NWCA and current SCWCA board member, Davis has been recognized three times with ECU's Teaching Excellence Award and, in 2001, received the Ron Maxwell Award from NCPTW. An earlier version of this essay was written for the North Texas Writing Center Association; the author would like to thank Steve Sherwood for his encouragement and assistance.
photography courses and, after class hours, drinking a beer with the other young teachers who followed similar schedules, Jack and Donna, Peter and 'Asta.

One February night in northwest Montana, the snow coming in like a movie fadeout, the cold so intense the gear shifter wouldn't, the clouds hanging so low the ski lights weren't visible on the mountain north of town, one February night I headed after class to the Stockman's Bar with Jack and Donna to share a pitcher of Black-and-Tan and to listen to a few of Jack's stories. That evening, as Jack's beer memories became more and more fantasy laced, his stories captured the attention of a woman—lanky, brown hair, cowboy boots, Camels—slouched over the long bar. With each of her attentions, Jack's stories became more fantastic; with each of Jack's stories, the woman's attentions became more fantastic. And soon the two of them were planning a winter camping trip into the Great Bear Wilderness. Eventually, though, Jack's stories moved from describing incredible adventures to warning of unspeakable dangers: butchering horses to stay alive from the heat of their carcasses, carving make-shift snow forts for blizzard shelter, accidentally waking car-sized grizzlies, hungry from sleep. Donna and I knew Jack well enough to laugh at the stories, but the brown-haired woman's breath came in shallow gulps, her eyes wincing anxiety with each new embellishment. Eventually, she asked, “Jack, what would you do if we came across a grizzly?”

“Why, I'd turn tail and run as fast as I could,” Jack replied.

“But,” she stammered, “I didn’t think people could out race a grizz.”

“I don’t have to outrun the bear,” Jack replied calmly. “I only have to outrun you.”

II. Outrunning Bears

Maybe it didn’t happen exactly like that, but Montana is a place where myth and reality come together and, whenever I visit, I’m always reminded of the apocryphal (if not the literal) value of this story. All of us in writing centers, it seems to me, spend a lot of time trying to outrun bears when we really don’t have to. For example, I recently did a little bear-racing myself when called upon to write a mission statement for the ECU Writing Center. After 21 years of existence (18 under my direction), we clearly had a mission, but no one had ever asked us to write it down before, and the task at first froze me, leaving me feeling stranded on a narrow trail with a grizzly sniffing down on me, appearing in the form of expectations I should meet.

What did the administration want to see? What is the “right” mission for a Writing Center to have? What have I done over the years and, more significantly,
which of those actions can I admit in a mission statement? What are we really talking about when we talk about the Writing Center? How can I rationalize this thing we have become against the backdrop of my comp/rhet studies? For days, I sat frozen, unable to start this mission statement, the grizzly growing larger and larger in my angst.

The problem, of course, is that what started out as a theoretically valid writing center model has over the years become diluted by an often a-theoretical reality. I took this job ABD, fresh out of classes with Don McAndrew and Patrick Hartwell, two of the original writing center gurus, and I designed our center to be faithful to all of the best theory and research into composing practices. For example, we profess that we do not proofread; and we don’t. But then some desperate student, smacked down by repeated encounters with intolerant professors, distressed and desperate, searching for help, comes to us, at which time we dispense with pure philosophy and do what needs to be done. I have strived to create a theoretically perfect, practically flexible Writing Center, simultaneously particle and field. How could I admit that on a mission statement?

Or how could I admit in a mission statement that our actions frequently serve to undermine the professor's authority? Or that we sometimes walk a thin line on textual ownership? Or that our writing “center” really functions on the writing “fringe”? Or that the true mission of our center is to comfort the afflicted while afflicting the comfortable?

In Montana last August, six miles out the Highline Trail, not a bear in sight, I realized, finally, that my own anxiety made the task much more difficult than it needed to be, that I only needed to outrun the academic VP who had made the request, that those bears in my head were critters I didn’t need to outrun, outsmart, or outmaneuver. We don’t really ever have to outrun our bears; we only have to learn how to redefine our races.

III. The Last Best Place

Montana likes to call itself “The Last Best Place,” a moniker which first gained fame from a 1988 anthology of Montana writing (and a title which has recently come under conflict, as a real estate developer copyrighted the pilfered phrase right from under Montana’s collective nose and at least two writers, William Kittredge and Douglas Chadwick, now claiming to have been the inventors of the nickname). For me, however, Montana—and the writing center world I discovered while there—exists as not only the Last Best Place but also the First Best Place.
As we drove into Montana that first time, late July of 1983, we were struck first by the openness, the great uninhabited spaces that suggested opportunity within isolation, the sky as big as advertised, more expansive than any we’d ever seen, the Sweet Grass Hills visible on the horizon for hours and hours of scanning the local radio along US 2. It seemed to be a place of unrealized promises, of dreams we did not even know we had dreamed, all embedded in Montana’s rugged rawness, the breezed grasslands extending like waves into the horizon, the mountains rising jagged and daunting, the locals leather-skinned from hours beneath the incredible canopy of the sky, every town with a Do-Drop or Come-On or Stagger Inn. And always, always the sky.

To outsiders, Montana is a different kind of civilization, a place where individuality is extolled and nurtured by community. The natives prize their independence, their ruggedness, their staying power, and, incongruously, their simultaneous devotion to their mismatched community of isolationists. (Anyone who has spent time in Montana would not have been surprised to learn that Unabomber Ted Kaczynski lived an isolated life there nor that the local citizenry found him to be an ideal neighbor.) This world view, once common in America, I think, and still seen in some of the older dirt farmers and small-time cattle ranchers of Oklahoma and the surrounding mid-south region, has grown rare in the currently homogenized American society, a guild which emphasizes a commonness of countenance and an isolation of spirit. But most of Montana still operates the old way, emphasizing an individual warrant that is meant to mask a spirit of community, a reclusiveness that misrepresents the underlying fellowship of citizenry.

A part of the greater whole, yet somehow different from it, Montana is that rarest of entities in America: a place with personality, a place with independence, a place that functions in relative isolation, a place which somehow embodies the misplaced character of the larger nation, a place where independence is complemented by community but never, ever consumed by it.

**IV. Outrunning More Bears**

Grizzlies, I have learned, are likely to appear when you least expect them. My first sighting came while watching a grazing big horn sheep through my zoom lens: a grizzly appeared from the corner of the viewfinder and stilled the sheep with a single blow. Another time, we found one sprawled, belly down in fresh mud, halfway up the Avalanche Trail. My friend ‘Asta once looked up from picking huckleberries to find that a grizzly had joined her in the huck patch, picking and munching great bunches of berries. I wasn’t too surprised, then, to find recently that
another grizzly had taken up residence in the dark caves of my head in the form of the writing center consultant training classes I teach each semester.

Planning a tutor training class implicitly suggests several important questions, it seems to me. How do we teach students to be peer writing consultants? How do we balance theory with practice? Do tutors’ actions need to be theoretically valid? Do they need to read and understand the theory they are performing? Will a theoretical basis lead to an effective performance? Can an effective performance be coached in a vacuum without teaching the underlying theory? What is expedient? What is practical? What will help the consultants help the writers? Do theory or practice either one have anything to do with what makes a writing center different, with what sets us apart from the rest of the university? Should a training class teach ways of being rather than ways of behaving? Can I teach the tutors how to use their own good hearts?

When I first started the course, I kept trying to outrun the composition/rhetoric grizzly. Those first years, I had my 19-year-old charges reading Stephen North and Mickey Harris, Kenneth Bruffee and Linda Flower. Because my composition studies had greatly affected my own practice, I reasoned that these youngsters needed to have the same theoretical grounding that I had. But my minions struggled and balked, weighed down by the vapor of theory. Alas, the consultants, strangled by abstract confusions, fell to channeling their high school teachers in their tutoring sessions, becoming in the process teacher-centered, proofreading tyrants.

Clearly, that approach wasn’t working; so after a couple of struggling years, I managed to elude the theory-based grizzly, only to replace it with pragmatics. Instead of asking the tutors to digest and apply the theories I held dear, I started to teach the tutors how to apply the conceptual models they were never to actually read. We spent a lot of time talking about how to sit, how to read, what to say. We modeled tutoring and role-played the problematic client. In this era, I refocused the tutors’ task from finding their way out of a foggy haze to following a set of rigid instructions, turning them into rubric robots in the process. Under this model, the consultants again struggled, becoming the followers of rule, adopting the aura of unfeeling automatons.

More recently, I’ve figured out, once again, that the bears are of my own creation, more critters of imagination than of consequence. Neither I nor the tutors need to outrun either theory or practice. My only necessary task, I have come to believe, is to teach the new tutors how to negotiate the writers they will be helping. Tutoring isn’t about theory or practice; it’s about two humans sitting down together and mak-
ing the world between them a better place. To that end, I am now working to create a more affective-based training model.

My acceptance of this affective model came from my rediscovery that most writers come to the center not as much for improving their writing as for validating themselves: their abilities, their thoughts, their values. Now, instead of reading theory in the class, we take personality tests. Instead of discussing pragmatics, we talk about compassion. Instead of role playing, we just play. Instead of reading old student essays, we seek to read ourselves. In a great sense, I discovered myself in a writing center in Montana, and my only goal now is to facilitate a training seminar and a writing center where someone else might find herself, where someone else—both consultants and writers—can consider himself to have finally come home.

What is important, after all? Should students leave the writing center having had a theoretically beautiful experience? Should struggling writers come to the writing center only to discover a slightly different incarnation of their high school language arts teachers? Yes, we hope students leave our center with improved papers; yes, we try to model how students can become better writers. But mostly, I think, students should leave the writing center a little lighter than when they came in: load lifted, priorities shifted, heads re-centered, confidence restored. They should leave with a very clear sense that the bear is no longer a problem.

V. Love Theory

We all assume many roles in our writing centers: tutors, mentors, counselors, coaches, bosses, educators—the list goes on and on—parents, priests, philosophers.

I was in this last role, philosopher, the day that one of my current tutors, Amanda, announced to me that she didn’t want to graduate because she loved just being in the writing center. Amanda, 25 and a single mom, continued, “I don’t think I’ve ever been in love before. I’ve never loved a man, not even my ex-husband. I’ve never felt this way about any one, but I feel this way about this place.” She paused for a while, looked up at me, and asked “How can that be?”

“Let me tell you my theory of love,” I replied. I have written about the importance of love to education before, but it’s something I’ve come to think is very misunderstood in education, something very underappreciated.

The older I get, the surer I am that we can never know enough to truly love another. Annie and I have been together since 1971, and every day I realize just how little she knows about me, how little I understand her. This woman I have known for two-thirds of my life is a forever mystery to me, as I imagine I am to her.
What, then, do we mean when we say we love? I think we mean “I love the person I am when I am in this place or with this person; I love the me I become when I am under the influence of this person or place.” When Amanda says “I love the writing center,” she is suggesting that she loves the person the center turns her into, she loves this person she’s never before had a chance to be.

“I love it here, too,” I confessed. Annie and I have reached the point in our careers where she has begun to talk about retirement, but I, to be honest, I cannot imagine leaving behind the me that the writing center makes possible. Love, I think, is being happy with who we are, and I am never happier with myself than on a day when I get to spend about six hours hanging out in the writing center, just being there. For many of us—and I hope for many more, both workers and clients—the writing center established the mythical truth of possibility: be someone more; be someone you never expected to be.

**VI. The Writing Center as Last Best Place**

The writing center, like Montana, is certainly not a perfect place; both are populated with the occasionally disturbing grizzly bear (though, of course, some grizzly bears are more metaphorical than others.) A couple of years ago, Annie and I took our friends Josh and Brenda to Montana with us. It was their first trip west, and Brenda, who does a lot of reading before she actually experiences anything, had pretty much driven herself into a bear-fearing frenzy long before we even left Oklahoma. I have a tendency to be like Brenda, to make my bears scarier than they actually need to be, to blow them out of proportion. More importantly, I tend to try to outrun my bears, rather than redefining the opposition, and that usually gets me into trouble. To make our writing centers the Last Best Place, we need our grizzlies, but we also need to recognize them for what they are: more myth than reality, more avoidable than defeatable, more creatures of our own worst imaginations than beasts of reality.

Both Montana and the writing center represent home to me. Less than people or locale, home is a sense of well being, a connection between ourselves and our surroundings, a place that we can love because it brings out the best in us. Building a writing center that brought out the best in me was a little tricky; at the time I was building, I don’t know that I could have told you what the best of me was. But building a writing center that brings out the best in a wide variety of individuals, workers and clients alike, is trickier still, and I’m not sure that I can even suggest where to start. But at ECU, it’s a feeling we’re after in our writing center, a place of friendliness and caring, of helpfulness, of personal support and mental challenges.
example, a non-traditional student whom none of us recognized brought in a big box of cookies last December to thank us for having encouraged her one dark day in late September when she was ready to throw in the towel and go back to her laundry and cooking. “This is the best place,” she told me; “I just come here when I feel like I need someone to believe in me.” Me, too, I thought; me, too.

Part of the reason the writing center can provide this belief in the individual, I think, is that we maintain an existence on the edge of the university. We’re different; we should be doing everything we can to emphasize and capitalize on that difference. For example, most university classes seem to revolve around the magical thinking that students (who know little) should absorb what professors (who know much) teach. Writing centers, however, do not traditionally emphasize this type of top-down learning; we need to be sure that we continue to focus on the kinds of learning we do best: developmental, experiential, collaborative, individual. Our work should emphasize the learning human more than the learned subject, the integration more than the regurgitation. I have tried to bring that into the training we do, attending to the affective dimension which must precede any intellectual work we do. For example, I’ve noticed that new tutors always want to get right down to work, to begin a session with the paper that’s in front of them; like the rest of the university, they see the goal of learning as manifest in the artifacts of learning. But as the tutors gain experience, they spend more and more time with the writer, less and less time with the text; they move to the edge of the university, the place where people are more important than lessons, where contact is greater than concept. Now, I’m trying to develop this sensibility in the training seminar, trying to facilitate the affective development in the newer consultants.

Through this affection, the consultants become perhaps the only human connection for some writers. When students look at their instructors, they see professors eager to do their own research; they see graduate assistants more worried about the classes they take than the classes they teach; they see adjuncts packing up hurriedly for their next adjunct appointment, 10 or 20 or 50 miles on down the road; or, increasingly, they see a television or a computer monitor. When students look at our writing centers, they should see consultants, unhurried and undistracted, who will learn their names and their fears, who will come to know them as something more than a chair and a paper. When students look at our writing centers, they should see a different kind of world view—a Montana view—one which values the individual within the community. They should see a state on the edge of the union, a place that’s a little odd, a little unsettled, a little unrefined; they should see the last, best place.
We must remember that this place, this independent center I advocate, can appear a little uncivilized, but that, too, can be a good thing. Our writing center moved a couple of years ago to a main floor, center-of-campus location that is directly beneath the president's office. The muckmuck come and go at all hours of the day, passing in front of our glass-walled center. When we first moved into this location, I dreaded the intrusions that were bound to come and, at first, the administrators would walk by, peering at us in our fish bowl. But then some interesting changes occurred. First, we started getting more respect as the administrators finally saw the physical manifestation of the numbers we serve, numbers I'd been feeding them for years, numbers which remained shapeless abstractions until they watched us on a daily basis. Second, the administrators stopped watching. Now, two years later, they never look in, strolling past with their faces straight ahead or locked on their own shoes. To be honest, I think we scare them. I think we're a little too uncivilized for them with our food, our table lamps, our rock and roll; with our affective learning, our irreverence for the traditional, our willingness to flop belly down in the mud of learning. I think, in fact, that when they look at us they see...grizzly bears.

We should cultivate all of this, I think. As administrators, we should work harder to distinguish the literal bears from the imaginary ones so that we know when we really do need to run, conserving our energies for those moments. As tutor trainers, we should infuse our workers with an understanding and appreciation of the affective dimension, the one which will make our centers into homes, not just for the workers but for the clients as well. As humans, we should learn to love the selves our places make possible. As revolutionaries, we should make the most of our different world view, the one which supports the traditional institution even as we undermine it. We should keep our centers a little uncivilized, and we should always, always maintain our locations on the fringe, a place where individuality is extolled and nurtured by the community, the Last Best Place in the university.