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## Multiliteracies, Social Futures, and Writing Centers

by John Trimbur

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You can tell quite a bit from the names writing centers give themselves – “lab,” “clinic,” “center,” “place,” “studio,” “workshop.” Of course, there’s the old debate *WCJ* readers are likely to remember (and perhaps have taken part in) about whether the names “lab” and “clinic” carry pathologizing overtones. For as important as that debate was to the formation of writing center identities, I’m interested here in something else: namely, that the term “writing” seems to be taken for granted in all the names we’ve been using. At any rate, this came to mind recently when at Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI) we renamed the Writing Center (itself a renaming of the original Writing Resource Center – whatever a writing “resource” might be) the Center for Communication Across the Curriculum.<sup>1</sup> The new name we came up with, after considerable and sometimes heated discussion, is meant to signify the Center’s commitment not just to writing but to multiliteracies, as an umbrella term under which appear three “workshops” – the Writing Workshop, the Oral Presentation Workshop, and (in planning) a Visual Design Workshop.

I mention our own experience at WPI because I think it’s fairly indicative of recent trends in writing center theory and practice to see literacy as a multimodal activity in which oral, written, and visual communication intertwine and interact. This notion of multiliteracies<sup>2</sup> has to do in part with new text forms and new means of communication associated with the information age and knowledge economies of the globalized markets and societies of late capitalism. Now I’m not one who wanted to follow Bill Clinton

across the bridge to the twenty-first century, but I am aware that these changes in how we read and write, do business, and participate in civic life have some pretty serious implications for our work in writing centers. Just as important, the notion of multiliteracies also signals that writing itself has always amounted to the production of visible language and isn't just the invisible composing process we sometimes imagine it to be. For these reasons, at least for our purposes at WPI, where there's no required first-year course and we tutor lots of project work, the notion of multiliteracies offers a way to think about working on everything from essays and project reports to PowerPoint™ presentations to web page and poster design.

My guess is that writing centers will more and more define themselves as multiliteracy centers. Many are already doing so—tutoring oral presentations, adding online tutorials, offering workshops in evaluating web sources, being more conscious of document design. To my mind, the new digital literacies will increasingly be incorporated into writing centers not just as sources of information or delivery systems for tutoring but as productive arts in their own right, and writing center work will, if anything, become more rhetorical in paying attention to the practices and effects of design in written and visual communication—more product oriented and perhaps less like the composing conferences of the process movement.

Linked to the notion of multiliteracies is the challenge to develop more equitable social futures by redistributing the means of communication. In a sense, of course, social justice and the democratization of higher education have always been parts of the mission of writing centers, from the GI Bill of the postwar period to open admissions in the 1970s to the latest struggles to defend access in the CUNY schools and elsewhere. At present, there are important initiatives going on to keep education available and to extend the writing center's reach into the community. As work at Michigan State University shows, the notion of community service is an important legacy of the land-grant universities that imagines a continuity between the academy and civic life (Stock)—and implicitly raises questions for many writing centers whose primary constituency is students in a required first-year course. My feeling is that writing

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centers have a lot to gain by expanding their work beyond campus but, at the same time, need to expand it on campus as well, so that centers are not just support services to one required English course. In my view, one of the most glaring oversights in writing center practice—and more generally in writing program design—is the neglect of writing in languages other than English. There is important work to be done correcting this First Worldist deviation by making alliances with modern language teachers, promoting bilingualism in writing, and transforming writing centers from English Only to multilingual ones.

Finally, I want to mention, at least briefly, the issue of professional status and writing center administration. I worry that at too many colleges and universities, WPI included, the person who directs the writing center is still non-tenure track staff (and that writing center work is thereby regarded as akin to other types of “support services”), or a recent tenure track hire who directs the writing center for a few years (before, presumably, getting on with the “real” work). Two recent counterexamples, which I point to based on anecdotal evidence, suggest that things could be otherwise—that we could regard writing center work as more than an entry level position and early stage in a professional career. At the University of Maine, after two terms as English department chair, Harvey Kail returned to his former position as writing center director, and at the University of New Hampshire, Robert J. Connors, award-winning historian of composition and rhetoric (and former writing center director at LSU), became the first director of a new writing center. These moves indicate, I think, how writing center work can figure not as a peripheral, passing involvement but a professional activity central to the study and teaching of writing.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The “we” here refers largely to me and Lisa Lebduska, director of the Center for Communication Across the Curriculum.

<sup>2</sup> I take the terms “multiliteracies” and “social futures” from the New London Group’s report/manifesto “A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures,” *Harvard Educational Review* 66.1 (1996): 60- 92; and Gunther Kress’s *Writing the Future: English and the Making of a Culture of Innovation*, Urbana: NCTE, 1997.

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