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From the Editors

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From the Editors

Who doesn't love a good story? A tale of triumph or woe, of frustration or long-awaited success. Such classic narratives are familiar to us all, and versions of them occur in the writing center with relative frequency. These stories we tell—whether of current successes or challenges, passed from veteran tutors to newbies, from directors to faculty and back again—teach us about our work, helping us to reflect on it and improve it. These stories are filled with compelling characters and recurring plots: the frustrated first-year student; the instructor's cryptic comments; the first scientific paper written for a major professor; the challenging task of figuring out the genre of the dissertation. These stock scenarios are familiar to us because they have all taken place in the relatively patterned institutions that host our writing centers, and these persistent patterns represent a script of sorts, one we can easily follow, whether we're the actors themselves or the audience listening to someone else's writing center stories.

Patterns, of course, do get disrupted. In many ways, writing centers are in the business of disrupting patterns, working with writers to develop new approaches to writing tasks and changed relationships to their academic work. Those of us who work in writing centers must also be prepared to have our patterns disrupted, to hear how writers are really engaging with their texts: the English Language Learner who is not asking for proofreading assistance but who instead wants to know whether the evidence she presents in her argument is convincing; the chemistry student who comes in with a laboratory report, a genre often associated with arcane language and fill-in-the-blank templates, and turns the conversation quickly to her excitement over the research she is doing and the ways she might convey the essence of that research to a general reader; the returning student enrolled in an Introduction to Literary Analysis class, who speaks not of a back-to-school struggle but instead of her retirement from a career in law and her desire "to start from scratch" in a class that will give her a layer of comfort; after all, she's read all of the books several times!

Stories, then, offer a large degree of comfort and familiarity, but are seductive not only (or not even especially) because they offer a degree of comfort and familiarity but because they have the capacity to surprise and excite us and, in the process, to teach us about ourselves and others. Critically examining the stories and narratives that make up our writing center lives, then, is essential, and the contributors in this

issue of *Writing Center Journal* each offer a critical assessment of writing center narratives—their functions, uses, dangers, and possibilities. Nancy Grimm begins this issue with “Attending to the Conceptual Change Potential of Writing Center Narratives” and urges readers “to be aware of the ways moral frames function in narratives,” particularly the ways our pre-conceived notions often preclude a full understanding of the complexities students bring to their interactions with dominant literacy practices. Next, Rebecca Jackson in “Resisting Institutional Narratives: One Student’s Counterstories of Writing and Learning in the Academy” offers a narrative of her work with a student deemed a “failure” by her institution, and the ways that label masked the student’s complex literacy skills and needs. In our third article, “Identities in Dialogue: Patterns in the Chaos,” Meg Carroll details her tutoring staff’s use of journals, whether as ways of moving beyond rigid expectations for the format of academic narratives or as a historical narrative of practice within her writing center, one that offers both comfort and conflict as new situations and students go against expectations created by the past. Finally, Kathryn Valentine in “The Potential and Perils of Expanding the Space of the Writing Center: The Identity Work of Online Student Narratives” describes a project in which undergraduates created multi-media narratives to represent their experiences to the wider university audience, experiences that once again counter the easy conclusions that an audience might jump to based on the students’ race, class, or ethnicity. The questions Valentine offers to frame her article work well to frame this issue as a whole: “What are the potentials and perils of shaping and sharing narratives from the writing center? What do we learn not only about students but also about ourselves?”

Narratives of our writing center lives are constituted from more than experience, of course. Key sources are the publications in our field, and in this issue we offer two reviews of recent publications: *Marginal Words, Marginal Works? Tutoring the Academy in the Work of Writing Centers* (William J. Macauley, Jr. and Nicholas Mauriello, eds., Hampton Press, 2007) and *Writing at the Center: Proceedings of the 2004 Thomas R. Watson Conference* (Jo Ann Griffin, Carol Mattingly, and Michele Eodice, eds., IWCA Press, 2007). Both collections offer counter-narratives of sorts, the first to put to rest the long-held notion of writing center work as “marginal” and the second to explore the possibilities of writing centers as research sites (the theme of the 2004 Thomas R. Watson Conference).

In sum, we hope that the articles in this issue and the publications reviewed offer a sampling of the rich possibilities for writing center work, and we are certain you and members of your staffs will find them inviting and provocative.