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Reflections on Contemporary Currents in Writing Center Work

by Andrea A. Lunsford and Lisa Ede

About the Authors

Lisa Ede is Professor of English at Oregon State University and Andrea A. Lunsford is Professor of English at Stanford University. In thirty years of writing together, Ede and Lunsford have coauthored twenty-three articles and book chapters. "Audience Addressed/Audience Invoked: The Role of Audience in Composition Theory and Pedagogy" won the Conference on College Composition and Communication's Richard Braddock Award in 1985 and has since been reprinted in ten anthologies on rhetoric and writing. With Robert J. Connors, Ede and Lunsford coedited *Essays on Classical Rhetoric and Modern Discourse* (1984), which received the Modern Language Association's Mina P. Shaughnessy Award in 1985. Their first coauthored book, *Singular Texts/Plural Authors: Perspectives on Collaborative Writing*, appeared in 1990. Their forthcoming collection of previously published and new essays, *Writing Together: Collaboration in Theory and Practice*, will be published in late 2011.

Many thanks to John Nordlof, Barbara Lutz, and to Jon Olson and all the organizing committee for inviting Lisa and me to participate in the 2010 IWCA-NCPTW Conference here in Baltimore. Lisa was, unfortunately, unable to be with us today, but this talk is very much a collaborative effort, one that grows out of a larger project which we have just completed. This project, a collection of previously published and new essays titled *Writing Together: Collaboration in Theory and Practice*, represents our effort to reflect on scholarly projects that have been important to us—and also on our own experiences as friends and coauthors.

Working on this collection challenged us to consider our writing center work in the broader context of our scholarly and pedagogical projects. We quickly realized that our commitment to writing

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centers in many ways fits hand in glove with our abiding interests in collaboration, in audience, and in the relationship between feminism and rhetoric. After all, such centers serve as sites of collaboration that challenge hierarchies and traditional ways of producing knowledge, bringing student writers and peer tutors into conversations that can, and often do, change both them and their writing. (We are not so naïve as to believe that *all* centers enact this kind of collaboration, but this statement does represent an ideal that many writing centers strive to achieve.) They are also sites that allow writers and audiences to shift and merge roles and for the audience for a piece of writing to be a peer collaborator rather than an expert standing in judgment. Because they challenge institutional hierarchies and traditional ways of knowing and of producing knowledge, and because they work to enhance student agency, writing centers are also powerful sites in which to embody and explore both feminist and rhetorical theory and practice. We have come to think, then, of writing centers as an embodied space in which the differing strands of our work are woven into one. The decision to conclude our new collection of essays with a section on writing centers signals how very much we value writing centers as sites of collaboration in theory and practice.

This commitment to collaboration in general and to writing centers in particular makes this conference, and this opportunity to speak with you, especially meaningful, and in more ways than one. We are gathered here just four days after the 2010 midterm elections—and as is probably the case with many of you—we are still trying to wrap our minds around some of our fellow citizens' choices. In January, the House of Representatives will be inundated with Tea Partiers and other far right wingers determined to roll back health care reform and Wall Street/banking reform, to continue rewarding the richest while turning their backs on the poorest among us, and on enacting policies that will decidedly not be friendly to higher education. If these legislators have their way, we will eliminate Social Security, cut Medicare, abolish the departments of Energy and Education (What global warming? What brain drain?)—and all in the name of what they deceptively refer to as “fiscal responsibility” and “core values.” Meanwhile, our leaders on the left have been too timid and too beholden to lobbyists to make the bold moves that

would address the current economic nightmares. It's enough to make grown women weep.

Thus the planners of our conference were certainly prescient in setting the theme of "Safe Harbors or Open Seas?" The seas are rough and few safe harbors beckon: in fact, we meet at a time of urgency—on the national, state, local, and institutional levels. It is clear that support for higher education in America is shifting away from state governments, and that shift alone brings a potentially unsettling sea change. In many states, it is now more accurate to refer to "state-located" institutions of higher education than to "state-supported" institutions. The reduction in state support of higher education has been that significant.

Within the academy, the humanities continue under siege: just last week a colleague from a large, top-level Research I state university told Andrea that her Dean had met with the English and History departments recently and said to them flatly, "In every conceivable way, you are declining." We will speak more specifically to writing centers in a moment, but it's clear that the waters are going to be rough ones for all of higher education, as we see what emerges, or what remains, after the hard turn to the right that the country seems determined to take and the ongoing corporatization of the university.

Everybody feeling really good now? Sorry for painting such a bleak scene! As this scene demands, we are deeply concerned, but we are also holding on to some hopes and dreams, particularly where writing centers are concerned—and we will return to these hopes and dreams later in this talk. But we would first like to take a little time to look at several contemporary currents affecting writing center work today. The first current has to do with where our centers are located on campus. And, yes, we're talking about location, location, location. For where we are housed carries both material and symbolic importance. Indeed, recent work in cultural geography has shown us that we need to pay much closer attention to physical space and what that physical space contains. In Vorriss Nunley's investigations of hush harbors—those places where African Americans can meet to escape the white gaze and to engage each other—he argues that scholars of writing and rhetoric have for too long neglected a deep understanding of spatiality, which Nunley says is the "distinctive

fourth term of the rhetorical situation” (222).

Over the last few years, we have been paying attention to the space writing centers inhabit, and we have been delighted to find some writing centers housed in or near the campus library and thus right in the main stream, the high rent district of the campus. But it is also often the case that centers are on the margins, or in the eddies of the stream—in temporary housing, in basements, even in large closets in out of the way buildings. It’s amazing what our colleagues have been able to do from such marginalized locations: as a result, we often think of writing center advocates as the ultimate tricksters or *bricoleurs*, able to effect change on campus against formidable odds. In that regard, we think of Nancy Grimm, who in *Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times* describes the peripatetic march her center has taken over the years, as its reporting line moved from “the Humanities Department to Dean of the College of Sciences and Arts, to the Director of Special Academic Programs, back to the Dean’s office, next to the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Faculty development, and now to the Associate Provost’s office” (6).

This head-spinning movement calls to mind the experiences of others who have seen their centers “streamlined” and merged with other student support units. In some cases, such mergers can strengthen the writing center’s position on campus. But in too many cases, such mergers threaten the autonomy of the original writing center by removing it from the academic core, by putting it in competition with that core for resources, or by linking it with units that challenge or even contradict the foundational philosophy and mission of the center. We are thinking, for instance, of a freestanding writing center that was located within the Faculty of Humanities and Sciences—until it was merged with three other “support” units—one for engineers, one for athletes, and one for students with disabilities. Now think for a moment of the competing needs here, not to mention the potentially competing philosophies. In this scene, the writing center director may need not only to be able to negotiate rough currents but to practically walk on water: it could take years of patient and very wise work to unpack conflicting assumptions and to find compromises that will allow such a merged unit to work effectively for the good of *all* students.

Across the country, central administrators seem to view mergers as the solution to all problems, just as some Tea Partiers see lessening the deficit as a similar panacea. We hope that where possible those committed to writing center work will try to resist these pressures—even knowing that resistance is not always successful. (Lisa’s writing center, for instance, was recently merged into another unit, and she lost her position.) Rather than merge with other units, we would much prefer to see centers create their own affiliations while holding on to their autonomy. At Stanford, for example, the writing center has a strong relationship with the Center for Studies of Race and Ethnicity, with the Black Arts House, with the LGBT Center, as well as with the Office of Accessible Education and the Undergraduate Advising and Research office. We believe we can do much better work, especially with the latter two groups, by developing and sustaining those relationships rather than being merged into a larger unit.

In speaking of the location of writing centers as a potential locus of concern, we’ve been focusing on physical space. But as we all know, virtual spaces are also important in this digital age and, in fact, present us with a second set of currents we need to navigate skillfully. Writing centers, of course, have been quite adept at increasing their presence in virtual space, creating vigorous and productive online writing centers without giving up the immediacy of face-to-face contact with students. Well-known online centers, such as the one at Purdue, provide copious resources for students and offer OWL Mail Tutors, who will respond to students who send them a brief writing-related question, while still maintaining a bustling “live” writing lab on the West Lafayette campus. Other centers offer both synchronous and asynchronous online conferencing for students. In recent years, for instance, responses to online submissions have comprised roughly twenty percent of all contacts at Oregon State University’s writing center.

In an educational climate where distance education and hybrid courses play increasingly important roles on our campuses, the move to supplement face-to-face conferences with online services is certainly necessary and can be very effective. But we hope and pray that virtual writing centers will not replace real-life centers entirely: for us, there is something about sitting face to face with

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a student, talking out ideas, raising key questions, engaging in rich dialogic interaction that is difficult to duplicate online, even in video conferencing or Skyping. No doubt everyone here has experienced something like what happened to Andrea recently: she was tutoring in the center, and for several weeks she had been working with a new first-year student. He is doing a lot of writing this term—taking his required writing course and an introduction to humanities course as well as a frosh seminar in history. (He’s also taking chemistry—and a class on ballroom dancing.)

Two weeks ago, Andrea and this student sat together for an hour as he talked and wrote his way through a paper for his humanities seminar: he was to choose three brief passages from *Othello* and write a three-page essay that showed why the passages spoke to one another and why they were significant in establishing some major point about the play. He had a draft but said he felt dissatisfied with it. Andrea suggested that they set the draft aside and just talk. As he read the passages aloud a few times and then started reflecting on them, he slowly began to see a pattern: each passage had a *paradox* at its heart, one he had not noticed before. We won’t go on with this story because you know it—you have lived it: as Andrea and the student sat there, he literally talked and wrote his way through his problem to a thesis—a powerful one that was quite different from anything in his current draft. This is what we mean when we say that talking is important to writing and that writing, at its best, is “epistemic”—it *creates* knowledge rather than simply recording it. Now maybe this goal could have been accomplished in an online setting, but in our experience it is much less likely to do so. It’s in those face-to-face encounters that we are much more likely to engage in what Paul Rogers, Andrea’s collaborator on the Stanford longitudinal study of writing project, calls “dialogic interaction,” the one trait that students in our study identified as being most important in their development as writers.

So we continue to be strong advocates for “real life” writing centers even as those centers make use of new media and technologies to make our work more and more effective. As we were working on the new essay on writing centers that concludes *Writing Together*, we often found ourselves talking about these issues in light of current worries

about what's happening on the Web and Net—and particularly those of Lawrence Lessig and Jonathan Zittrain, who are concerned that the tension between openness and freedom on the one hand and regulation and security on the other has tipped precipitously toward regulation and what they call a “locked down” system in which users have less and less control and big corporations like Apple or Google decide what will and will not be possible on their platforms. In a recent issue of *Wired* magazine, Chris Anderson says that while users have loved the wide-open spaces of the Web and Net, they are now “abandoning them for simpler, sleeker services that just work” (123), particularly mobile devices. What worries Anderson is that devices that “just work” will carry a high but largely invisible cost as we lose the ability to alter or tweak their platforms in creative and innovative ways. In short, he fears that we will choose efficiency over creativity.

As we talked, we began to wonder about the consequences for writing centers. What if our students, for example, whose iPhones and other such devices are almost literally glued to them all the time, were presented with the opportunity of using a writing center app? We worriedly Googled “writing center app” and were relieved not to find a link. But then it occurred to us to Google “writing center *apps*,” and that little “s” took us to the Achievers Writing Center, available at the iPhone Store. We didn't have time to buy this service and thus to investigate its underlying assumptions and ideologies, but reading its home page showed us that what the Achievers Writing Center calls its “revolutionary” service allows students to use a series of templates and guides that will walk them through the process of writing and give them “everything you need to develop, organize, and write an excellent essay” (Niles Technology Group). As part of its service, students are assigned a personal writing assistant. According to the Achievers Writing Center website, this writing assistant “provides unlimited support as you write your essay. If you are stuck, have a question about how best to organize something, or are experiencing serious writer's block, simply email your personal writing assistant with your issue and they help you” (Niles Technology Group).

This “complete essay writing solution for the Apple student community” may have some helpful features, but it also potentially undercuts the collaborative learning philosophy that is at the heart

of writing center work. Where writing centers see students as co-learners, the Achievers Writing Center sees them as clients who can get “everything at one affordable price” (Niles Technology Group). Where writing centers focus on process, the Achievers center seems focused primarily on product. We could point out other fundamental differences too—but we want instead simply to note that while writing centers have in general embraced opportunities offered by the Internet and Web, we now need to attend quite critically to heavily commercialized and promoted apps like this one. What are the consequences of these apps for the work we do and for the work we want to do? Indeed, how we position ourselves in and respond to virtual spaces now seems at least as important as how we position ourselves in the physical space of our campuses.

Thinking about how we may continue to protect and propagate the fundamental values of writing centers (collaboration; deep mutual respect; enhanced agency for both students and tutors; time for talk, experimentation, and reflection; attention to process) leads us to a third contemporary current surrounding writing center work, one that sometimes threatens to overwhelm us. During the 1992 presidential campaign, we got used to hearing the mantra “It’s the economy, stupid.” If we had only known! Nearly two decades later and over two years into the Great Recession, with foreclosures continuing apace and unemployment figures stubbornly hovering near ten percent, we all feel what “it’s the economy” means for us and, our families, friends, and students – and our colleges and universities. Many of our budgets have been cut to—and into—the bone.

In such a climate, writing center faculty and staff find ourselves challenged more than ever simply to keep our doors open, much less to mount innovative new projects. It is not just lore that many centers in 2010 are struggling to survive and must constantly provide evidence of the need for and value of their services. (Sometimes we get good news—as we did from a European colleague a week or so ago who sent out a message asking for data and arguments she could use to challenge a recent decision to close the writing center at her university and then reported that the governing board had reversed its decision and would continue funding.) But such good news is always countered by news of additional cuts and especially of the

potential vulnerability of writing centers as they must compete with FTE- or credit-granting units like departments, which continue to enjoy some degree of protection, even as they face budgetary challenges of their own. While the economic downturn that began in 2008 has respected no one, campus units that provide “support services” have been particularly hard hit.

What worries us most is that such budgetary crises can be particularly perilous when they serve as a smokescreen for central administrators who alter bottom lines in ways that keep a center open (though possibly merged) but run counter to that center’s long-term goals. We know of at least one center that has had to cut back staff to the point where it cannot possibly serve its students; we know of another center that has been reduced by half: from two tables to one table with one (occasional) tutor. This center can’t possibly achieve its goals, yet when Andrea visited there a year ago she met tutors who wanted to volunteer their time for free—and students who were eager to take a seat at even the one table. One young man told Andrea that he had arrived at the university while still learning English and that he had worked full time to pay his way while taking a full load of courses. This student had discovered the tiny writing center in his first year on campus and had been visiting it ever since—when he could find anyone there to talk to. Now a senior, he was once again looking for a tutor to help him, this time with his law school admissions statement. Andrea was so impressed with the initiative this young man had taken and so outraged at the situation that she marched directly to the office of the Provost (someone she had once met) and pitched a bit of a fit: how dare this state university pride itself on its very diverse student body and then fail to provide even minimal support? How many thousands of students like the one she had met was the university willing to admit and then abandon? The center later doubled its space—back to two tables: so much for Andrea’s fit. We’re not sure we can put such an event in the win column, but at least it shows that writing centers can survive even in shifting and tumultuous circumstances, even as it shows how much writing centers are desperately needed.

As the struggle for adequate funding goes on and on, writing center administrators must be vigilant in holding to our deepest

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principles and commitments; and we must resist budgetary exigencies that threaten them. This may mean agreeing to offer fewer services or shorter hours—but NOT, for example, to using untrained staff. As many of you here can attest, a writing center can operate with integrity on a shoestring if it has to.

Of course, some lucky writing centers are able to raise private or public funding for their work and thus to push the envelope of what writing centers can be. Such good luck befell the Stanford Writing Center, as it has at Michigan's Sweetland Writing Center and Miami of Ohio's Center for Writing Excellence. Last year right before CCCC, Andrea was thrilled to be able to take an early tour of Eastern Kentucky's new Noel Studio for Academic Creativity with Rusty Carpenter. At this mid-sized regional campus, the gods and goddesses, along with the Noel family, smiled on Eastern Kentucky, allowing them to create an expansive vision for their center, which opened with aplomb just a month or so ago. Located in prime property in the library, the Noel Studio houses a center for invention, which struck Andrea pretty much like a fabulous writing center, along with a presentation center with media-enhanced rehearsal and presentation spaces, a research center, and a discovery seminar room. This is a center with big ambitions, and it has been fortunate to gain funding from a donor interested in supporting writing and related communicative arts.

At Ohio State University, what started out in the 1980s as a writing center housed in a closet big enough only for a file cabinet full of mimeographed handouts has grown slowly over the years into a vibrant Center for the Study and Teaching of Writing, a unit that, now under the direction of Dickie Selfe, offers an undergraduate minor in writing as well as tutorials, workshops, faculty development, and outreach across campus as well as to the larger Ohio community. While the Eastern Kentucky center attracted a major donor, the Ohio State center has been built up a bit at a time, through funding secured within the university and through some very creative grantsmanship. And while some of the newer and better-funded centers may boast beautiful spaces, high-tech equipment, and luxurious furniture, as we have seen, such amenities are not absolutely necessary to the centers' functioning. Indeed, many exciting elements cost little if

anything. At Miami University's Center for Excellence in Writing, for instance, multilingual students are invited every week to join a "conversation corner" where they talk with undergraduate writing center consultants for extra practice with English; at other universities, including Stanford, writing-center-sponsored dissertation "boot camps" draw flocks of eager graduate students to sessions run on a tiny budget. Writing centers may be short on money, but they are long on imagination and vision.

As we look to the future, then, we want to do so with clear eyes and heads: we don't want to ignore the stormy seas that threaten to run us aground. But we continue to believe that writing centers are more than capable of navigating these seas and even achieving safe harbors from time to time. But resting in safe harbors isn't in the nature of writing centers, which continue to look for ways to expand on our effectiveness. The growing importance of visual, oral, and performative rhetorics, not to mention of the digital revolution, has challenged us to extend our borders and expand our mission whenever humanly possible. Eastern Kentucky's Noel Studio embraces all elements of communication; Texas Christian has a New Media Writing Studio to complement its writing center; Iowa State's Writing and Media Help Center works with their Written, Oral, Visual, and Electronic Communication Program (WOVE); Michigan State's writing center advertises services including one-to-one consulting, creative writing consulting, digital media consulting, workshops, writing groups, and multimedia productions; Agnes Scott's center focuses on speaking as well as writing, as does the outstanding center at Mount Holyoke; and Clemson not only has a writing center housed in the English Department but the very successful Pearce Center for Professional Communication and its associated Class of 1941 Studio for Student Communication. These centers—and their new ways of naming themselves and identifying the work they do—mark a key moment in writing center history, as writing becomes multimodal, multimedia, multilingual, and multivocal and as writing centers move to adapt to students' shifting communicative needs.

Reflecting on these new centers and the ways they are expanding and enriching traditional center work is very exciting, as is the growth in writing centers internationally. These expansions will need, of

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course, to stay grounded in the best writing center practices we have enumerated today: commitment to collaboration and dialogic interaction, to understanding of and respect for diversity, to embodied learning, to open and ongoing exploration of ideas, and to ethical communicative practices. These principles, so deeply embedded in writing center work, are what make our centers worth all the effort not just to keep them going but to expand and enrich them.

Several years ago during a convocation for new students at Stanford, the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education asked a panel of three senior students to tell the incoming class “what you most want new students to know about our campus.” One student leapt to her feet and fairly shouted, “The writing center!” She went on to say that she started going to the center because she didn’t have a computer and knew she could always use one there, but that she soon found herself scheduling weekly tutorials and attending workshops and other center events. “I practically lived there for the last four years,” she said, “and I am DOWN with the writing center.” You can imagine that Andrea’s heart did a little dance of its own when she heard what this student had to say, and so during the cuts Stanford has suffered in the last two years, Andrea has thought of this student, who reminds both of us over and over that what we do matters, and matters a lot.

Well, we promised to return to our hopes and dreams for writing centers, so we would like to close these remarks with part of a new video about Stanford’s Hume Writing Center. The video aims to introduce—and promote—what we do, and we plan to use it with groups of faculty members, with new students, and (we can always hope!) with potential donors.

At the close of this talk at the IWCA-NCPTW Conference in Baltimore, we watched the last three minutes of this video. Since we can’t include the video clip here (though you can find it on YouTube [Hume Writing Center]) let us explain what’s on the clip and why we wanted to show it. The video concludes with several of Stanford’s writing center team talking about hopes for the future. Marvin Diogenes says, for instance, that “there really is no ceiling” for writing centers that continue to reach for the stars. Andrea says she is convinced writing centers will continue to flourish and, she

says, eventually “take over the world,” referring to an ongoing inside joke at Stanford that what we seek is nothing short of worldwide domination. Resistance is futile, as they say.

Best of all, Wendy Goldberg and John Tinker, the founding co-assistant directors of the Stanford Center, appear together, and John speaks with his usual eloquence about the goals of writing centers. Showing this footage was especially important to us, because it is the last footage we have of John, who left the world peacefully after a long struggle with colon cancer early on the morning the conference began. He knew Andrea would be there and that she would be showing this video, and that fact pleased him deeply.

To our minds, John embodied the very best hopes and dreams of writing centers everywhere; he truly lived the principles we have enumerated here. In addition, he was a perfect colleague and friend as well as a passionate advocate for students and for learning and for writing centers everywhere. We close this talk, then, with thoughts of John and of his many contributions to writing center work, and with the dedication that closes the new video. It says, simply, “This film is dedicated to John Tinker, with gratitude, admiration, and love.” John, this one’s for you.

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