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Learning and Leading through Conflicted Collaborations

by Roberta D. Kjesrud and Mary A. Wislocki

About the Authors

After beginning many years ago as a peer tutor, Roberta D. Kjesrud currently directs the Western Washington University Writing Center, now part of the Western Libraries’ Learning Commons. She has taught discipline-based composition courses as well as academic literacy for multilinguals. She has published in The Writing Center Journal, Writing Center Perspectives, and The OWL Construction and Maintenance Guide. She recently completed her term as President of the International Writing Centers Association and is now serving as its Past President.

Mary A. Wislocki was director of the Writing Center and Writing Tutorial at New York University and the Academic Resource Center at Seton Hall University. She has taught at the high school, community college, and university level and published in The Writing Lab Newsletter, The Writing Center Journal, and Composition Studies.

But theorizing also helps me break through frustration and inarticulateness and turn the chip on my shoulder into an instrument of analysis.

—Nancy Grimm, Good Intentions (x)

The question of whether a particular practice is enabling or oppressive, enlightening or limiting, is a situated question, one that we must enact rather than decide once and for all.

—Lisa Ede (126)

Despite our experience as writing center directors (WCDs) and our knowledge of the literature on writing center administration, the two of us wondered why our interactions with upper level administrators
Roberta D. Kjesrud and Mary A. Wislocki

(ULAs)\textsuperscript{1} so often left us feeling angered or mystified. The all-too-clear evidence of our ineffectual responses to their seemingly capricious and high-handed decisions led us to conclude that we lacked something—a skill, an attitude, a strategy—something. What? We weren’t sure. But after comparing notes, we began a journey of study and reflection as we came to terms with the lapses in our theory and praxis. We realized that we lacked a theoretical understanding of administrative conflict, so we relied on flawed instinct rather than sound theory to guide us through conflicted conversations. We were discouraged by the emotional distress conflict evoked in us and others. And in times of crisis, we were unable to generate a range of options to help us advocate for ourselves and our centers.

With so much to ponder, we put aside the hope there might be easy answers waiting to be discovered. Our level of turmoil forced us to acknowledge we were after something complex, so we didn’t post questions to the listserv WCenter seeking the best strategy for Crisis A or moral support for our distress with nasty Situation B. Instead, we accepted that no foolproof heuristic exists for persistent and ongoing institutional challenges, and most important, we acknowledged we were in charge of our development as leaders.

In this article we offer what we have learned together, including promising ideas for growing and leading through institutional conflict. However, because all of us must follow our own roads, we offer more of a travelogue than an argument. We ask our readers’ indulgence: we do not assert a destination in our introduction or even in our conclusion. It’s not that we lack opinions or courage to make claims; rather, firm directives contradict our own discoveries, especially the realization that effective leaders remain curious, always open to more learning. And so, rather than an end point, we feature our waysides for reconnoitering, reflecting, and framing new questions to ask of our colleagues and collaborators. Some of our observations come from elevation, viewpoints revealing perspective on what lies behind and ahead. Others come from ground level, where we’re still finding our way through thickets. Like many trails, ours begins with a warning and a promise: readers will find no treasure trove of surefire ideas at journey’s end; instead, we explain our new understandings in the hope they will enrich writing center
paradigms, both in theory and praxis.

And now to preview our journey: we begin by reviewing our profession's evolving, but limited, approaches to institutional collaborations. Because collaborations up the hierarchy are far messier than most writing center scholarship acknowledges, we turn to other disciplines to help us enrich our own disciplinary theory. We discuss a number of promising practices to enhance administrative collaborations: developing a rhetoric of inquiry, learning to reflect critically\(^2\) when emotions run high, balancing our advocacy with dialogue, and considering the writing center community's role in professional development.

### Evolving Perspectives on Collaboration

**Collaboration Mediates Conflict**

An early writing center approach to administrative problem-solving declares that to become more effective, directors need to understand local politics and collaborate strategically. Muriel Harris explains these ideas by identifying two principles of writing center praxis: individualization and collaboration (64). She invokes the principle of individualization to disabuse panic-stricken, inexperienced WCDs who want rigid absolutes for resolving complex issues (64); there are no hard-and-fast answers for even common administrative problems because every school, like every student we tutor, is unique. By becoming experts in "local knowledge" (Ianetta 54), directors develop a cool eye for sizing up the political gains and losses for potential actions. For Harris, the principle of collaboration functions primarily offsite; that is, collaboration takes place in the professionalizing conversations WCDs have with one another about local issues. Collaboration amongst ourselves is presented as a wholly positive process that provides mentoring, new ideas (if not surefire answers), and a built-in support group for "how to cope with the crisis management that is called 'writing lab administration'" (Harris 65). Harris models both individualization and collaboration for her readers by providing a range of options for dealing with typical problems and musing about their political repercussions.

A more recent and increasingly influential approach
to administrative relationships affirms the need to study local politics but stresses that we must also undertake a broader study of administrative culture (George; Kinkead and Simpson; Simpson, “Managing”; Simpson, “Perceptions”; Simpson, Braye, and Boquet). Scholars in this camp argue that WCDs can mediate crisis-style management and cultivate harmony with ULAs by strategically adopting key values and rhetoric from administrative culture. In a shift towards instrumentalism and away from the principle of individualization, WCDs are urged to collaborate not only with supportive writing center peers but also with central administrators. Joyce Kinkead and Jeanne Simpson outline generic strategies WCDs can use with administrators, whom they characterize as a “rhetorical problem” (68). They advise us “to find the common ground [we] share with other administrators” (68) and learn enough about central administration to understand its values and wield its vocabulary. Kinkead and Simpson recommend that directors and staff learn insider rhetorical appeals to create solidarity with other administrators, a practice they call “admin-speak” (76). In a more current article, Simpson seeks to demystify ULAs so that working with them will be “more productive and less frightening” (“Managing” 200), and to that end she offers a primer of basic admin-speak terms and concepts.

Besides addressing WCD fears about working with superiors, Kinkead and Simpson also discuss our habit of vilifying and mocking them (68), a tendency Phillip Gardner and William Ramsey link to our history of valorizing institutional marginality. Gardner and Ramsey argue that this tradition promotes binary thinking, including the dubious claim that writing centers are liberatory and schools hegemonic (31), bifurcations positioning us as the long-suffering good guys and ULAs as schoolyard bullies. However, WCDs are far from alone in fearful and simplistic conceptions of academia. Gary A. Olson observes that although ULAs are usually credentialed faculty members themselves, faculty everywhere seem to harbor the belief that administrators actively conspire against them. Popular culture also reinforces these ideas. Kinkead and Simpson review common tropes in fictional portrayals of academics—university administrators as buffoons and connivers—and then poke fun of our profession’s
ULA-as-bully stereotypes (68). Because assumptions affect actions, Simpson cautions WCDs against the self-defeating belief that “Central Administration prefers to keep writing centers powerless and marginalized” (“Perceptions” 48). Gardner and Ramsey add that when we focus on our program’s marginality, we distance our centers from the mission (and resources) of our institutions (26).

Collaboration is a Fundamental Practice

While our early literature defines collaboration as a limited principle or strategic alliance, more recently it is described as a powerful, almost mystical practice animating all our professional and institutional relationships. Collaboration-is-fundamental scholars (Eodice; Fitzgerald and Stephenson; Gardner and Ramsey; Macauley and Mauriello) argue that WCDs must become proactive in campus collaborations. They refute notions that centers are institutionally marginal and suggest that when WCDs avoid focusing on differences and recognize the common values we share with colleagues and ULAs, directors can achieve satisfying collaborations—and further, become campus leaders in the process.

In an eloquent appeal casting directors as potential campus leaders, Michele Eodice argues that collaboration infuses all our administrative relationships, despite some WCDs’ assertions that “their peer relationships with their institutions . . . . are anything but collaborative” (115). She urges directors to take a strengths-based approach to collaboration and to trust that our disciplinary practice exerts a powerful “alchemy” (115), enabling us to transcend institutional boundaries and disseminate our pedagogical values across campus. Collaboration is so integral to Eodice’s practice that she compares it to breathing. Further, she believes effective partnerships emerge naturally with faculty and others when directors export strategies that are second nature to us at the conference table. Her often lyrical discussion concludes with a call for directors to leverage professional and social networks to affect institutional policies and mentor new leaders in the writing center community.

While they agree with Eodice regarding the significance of collaboration, Lauren Fitzgerald and Denise Stephenson warn that
campus collaborations may not emerge simply through reflexive professional habits. Even proactive efforts bring no guarantees: colleagues can avoid, neglect, or simply refute our overtures (121). Eodice and Fitzgerald and Stephenson offer few strategies for creating successful administrative collaborations, but they argue persuasively that directors are more prepared to work collaboratively up the hierarchy than previous scholarship has acknowledged.

**Collaboration is Complex and Unpredictable**

Despite notable differences in their approaches, writing center scholars hold valuable ideas in common: the need for active involvement in our schools, the benefits that come from collaboration, and the importance of addressing our fears and our disabling theories. The two of us affirm these contributions, but we also acknowledge their limitations. For instance, the collaboration-negotiates-conflict scholars argue that WCDs should master local politics and administrative culture to become more effective. Certainly, instrumental strategies will mediate some problems; for example, aligning ourselves with administrative values such as quantifying our success—bean counting—may get us a new computer lab. But these victories come at a cost. Adopting administrative rhetoric and values may co-opt our own values and undermine our potential as institutional change agents (Ilanetta qtd. in Geller et al. 117-18; Meyerson 149-50). In addition, our scholarship fails to recognize the extent to which all administrative collaborations, whether harmonious or conflicted, have the potential to change the hearts and minds of participants, including ourselves. Directors hold fast to this idea when it comes to students: every day, we bet our professional lives that students’ thoughts, assumptions, and practices will be changed through interactions with tutors. Don’t WCDs also learn and change when we enter into collaborative relationships with colleagues and administrators across campus?

Collaboration-is-fundamental literature promotes the idea that we can become institutional leaders by embodying and exporting our collaborative pedagogy. But while these metaphors and case studies are inspiring, our profession has yet to illuminate the
conflicted collaborations that directors are sure to encounter. The next step is to develop complex representations of collaboration that acknowledge the courage to address discord, the will to negotiate it, and the habits of mind to work with its transformative potential. In short, writing center theory needs to account for administrative collaborations whose outcomes are provisional or difficult to assess. Effective administrative collaborations, like leadership, depend on our willingness to risk intense, messy, and often conflict-ridden conversations with our ULA colleagues and on our ability to marshal critically reflective habits of mind through this highly charged process.

Writing center scholars often point out that our history of portraying academia in reductive, binary categories is a serious impediment to complex theorizing. Despite warnings about “the too-familiar binaries of good guys/bad guys and insiders/outsiders” (Grimm, “Rearticulating” 527), dichotomous ideas persist in our scholarship and lore. Clearly, directors find it difficult to resist these constructions, not only because they circulate in our profession and culture, but also because binary thinking happens almost reflexively, especially when WCDs are under pressure. To be honest, don’t most of us think of ourselves as good guys at work or harbor doubts about the intentions of a superior when money is tight? Why wouldn’t directors feel marginalized when central administration pays lip service but provides no real support, either financially or administratively? While it is self-evident that binaries are reductive, it is time to admit they are nearly impossible to root out, even by scholars who make a concerted effort to do so. For instance, Fitzgerald and Stephenson resist binary categories when they acknowledge that “institutional relationships [are] confusing” and that “perfect” solutions to administrative problems are simply not possible (121). Immediately preceding these statements, however, they present dichotomous case studies: one is the epitome of harmony and success, the other, of conflict and untenable failure. The studies are meant to illustrate the collaborative practices that support or undermine institutional relationships, but they also exemplify the complex reality of our minds and profession: stories of unequivocal success—and heartbreaking failure—coexist uneasily
next to the realization that we can’t always tell when collaborations are succeeding or failing.

Since dichotomies are difficult to remove from our own knee-jerk responses and our scholarship, instead of fighting them, it seems wiser to face them squarely and recognize they can help us illuminate more of our theory and practice. From this perspective, collaborative relationships are continually negotiated along a complex continuum. They are works in progress, relationships with narrative arcs we can’t begin to predict: successful collaborations don’t always happen naturally. When collaborations are as riddled with conflict as the ones recounted in Fitzgerald and Stephenson, we should have options less drastic than looking elsewhere for another position. If we anchor the success end of the continuum in metaphors of breathing and the failure end in the necessary severing of toxic ties, the full range of our messy, confusing collaborations comes into view. From this overlook, we resolve to explore the full range of collaborative outcomes by considering how collaborative learning theory accounts for conflict.

**Conflict is Intellectually Interesting**

This section focuses on the more diffuse disciplinary scholarship that, taken together, constructs conflicted collaborations as intellectually engaging learning opportunities that invite us to inquiry, dialogue, and discovery. In an appeal to see conflict as “intellectually interesting,” Nancy Grimm (“Rearticulating” 527) advises us to avoid turning to managerial practices to minimize discord, instead using it to rouse both scholarly curiosity and self-reflexivity. Grimm argues that WCDs are uniquely positioned to capitalize on our institutional location and become scholars who study, theorize, and negotiate differences. To this end, we must abandon our romanticized, people-pleasing idea of community and recognize that “the conflict-ridden position of the writing center [is] an intellectually interesting place to live” (527). But Grimm does more than upend our assumptions about community and the intellectual value of administrative conflict: she takes the radical position that the inner life of WCDs is also the stuff of scholarship. Using a high-low mixture of academic theory and self-help concepts she acknowledges some will “disdain” (526), Grimm
argues that we can transform ourselves and our centers through reflecting on unexamined professional assumptions. Doing so, she believes, will improve our collaborations, academic relationships, and the institutional status of writing centers. Grimm’s advice for writing center leaders is rigorous and provocative, but it has not been taken up to any real extent in subsequent writing center scholarship.

While Grimm considers individual and professional assumptions about academic conflict, collaborative learning theorists (Holt; Trimbur) use classroom interactions to illuminate the role of conflict in learning; their observations can be applied to administrative interactions as well. John Trimbur, for instance, considers how groups come to consensus despite differences and asserts that the “learning” in collaborative learning is not about becoming adept at suppressing differences or aligning ourselves with the powers that be. Instead, he argues that we can use consensus building “to generate differences, to identify the systems of authority that organize these differences, and to transform the relations of power that determine who may speak and what counts as a meaningful statement” (603, emphasis added). In vivid reflections about the importance of conflict in Kenneth Bruffee’s collaborative learning course for teachers, Mara Holt states that conflicted collaborations become instructive when dissent becomes food for inquiry rather than a threat to be managed or suppressed. Under these conditions, struggle leads to learning as well as community.

Despite the promise of the conflict-is-generative theories offered by Grimm, Trimbur, and Holt, this scholarship has gained little traction in our administrative research or practice. Outside our profession, however, we find a great deal more interest in these ideas, including an extension of Grimm’s assertion: not only is conflict intellectually interesting and productive, so too are some of the negative emotions conflict engenders. We will return to the idea that conflict is emotionally interesting later. But first we explore scholarship that helps WCDs approach conflict in ways that ameliorate some self-defeating emotions: taking a big-picture perspective on campus and using rhetorical strategies that position us as assertive, collaborative learners in conflicted conversations.
Learning to adopt a big-picture habit of mind helps us distance ourselves from knee-jerk reactions to conflict—blaming ourselves or scapegoating others—so we can understand institutional dynamics more keenly and dispassionately. In his books on “learning organizations,” organizational theorist Peter Senge says conflict is unavoidable in all “systems” or organizations for a far-from-sinister reason: constituents make decisions based on differing organizational values and pressures. From a systems perspective, the impulse to vilify ULAs who underfund our programs is shortsighted and counterproductive; instead, we need to step back and study how systemic forces explain (and constrain) individual behavior (40). The ULAs who cut our budgets have to deal with pressures that are institutional (the dean, president, and parents) and societal (the legislature, economy, and community). Learning more about the network of forces affecting our superiors provides us with fuller explanations for their sometimes disappointing decisions.

As a case in point, the current economy powerfully buffets our schools, creating a cascade of influences, including an emphasis on accountability, student success, and academic best practices. In _Student Success in College: Creating Conditions that Matter_, George Kuh et al. identify and study a range of educationally effective schools. While the good news for WCDs is that the authors confirm the value of peer tutoring through their own and prior research (195-97), they also conclude that successful academic programs do not coast along on past achievements or practices. They recommend that administrators interested in student success should “steer the organization toward continuous improvement” (304, emphasis in original) by constantly reviewing priorities, using data to inform decisions, eliminating less effective programs, and appointing strong leaders to coordinate and monitor campus initiatives (303-06). In other words, a history of peer tutoring research and achievement will not safeguard directors from pressure to implement new and “successful” ideas for their centers. A perceived attack by central administration may, in fact, be tied to current ideas about the efficacy of constant innovation and the principle of academic Darwinism. WCDs must learn about and respond appropriately to forces driving
the academy. Writing center historian Neal Lerner reminds us that writing centers (or laboratories) have been part of higher education for many decades; taking this long view, we see that our programs have evolved over time and that these evolutions, largely positive, have emerged in response to seemingly disastrous cultural and institutional pressures.

Using a Rhetoric of Inquiry to Explore Conflict

While systems theory encourages us to investigate the perspectives of institutional stakeholders for our own benefit, Senge’s work also demonstrates that the most vibrant, innovative enterprises are the ones in which stakeholders listen and learn from one another, across difference, across hierarchy. Significantly, learning organizations affirm the idea that conflict among members is a generative and creative process (249). Rather than glossing over conflict in the push for quick decisions, members in learning organizations focus on divergence and explore conflict, even at the risk of deeper division. The goal is always to create an open and creative problem-solving space so that conflict fuels new understandings and deeper learning. Ironically, higher education is not usually identified with the dialogic habits of a learning organization. Instead, academics are likely to respond to differences with “discussion,” which David Bohm characterizes as verbal ping-pong: opponents lob arguments back and forth seeking victory “to have one’s views . . . prevail” (qtd. in Senge 240). While both Senge and Bohm agree that discussion has its place in a learning organization, over-reliance on agonistic rhetoric can be toxic, leading to alienation, ineffective problem solving, and, most importantly, failure to carry out the organization’s central mission. Even in a scientific enterprise like NASA, an exemplary culture of inquiry atrophied to disastrous results: managers suppressed dissenting voices about o-ring safety and began problem solving only after the tragic Challenger loss. In public education, politicians and school officials deal with systems failure by closing or dismantling schools, occurrences that are now shockingly commonplace.

Most of us work in schools that are neither complete failures nor models of success. If we want to make our schools more effective,
Kuh et al. recommend that academics become more collaborative and learning centered; in this dynamic, good ideas travel up the hierarchy and across the institution (311). To this end, Senge asks us to balance advocacy with inquiry in our workplace interactions (198). WCDs are, of course, expert in promoting collaboration and a rhetoric of inquiry when we work with students; the same cannot be said when we encounter the oppositional rhetoric of colleagues and superiors outside the safety of our centers. Faced with administrative conflict, WCDs may too quickly discard collaboration and inquiry for political gaming, “admin-speak,” debate, or silence. In cases like this, neither side views conflict as an intellectually interesting process of discovery. Advocacy takes over and winning (or not losing) becomes the goal.

Enacting an inquiry-centered theory of conflict means using difference to prompt our curiosity, a stance often thwarted by fears and reductive thinking. Senge believes we can replace defensive habits of challenge and critique if we learn Bohm’s rigorous protocol for inquiry and dialogue: identify and suspend our assumptions, separate our position from our ego, and begin a dialogue about our differences (Senge 243). Putting aside our assumptions and ego is challenging, to say the least, especially when we are certain we are right and everyone else is wrong. When we face budget cuts, center relocations, directives to teach grammar skills or the five paragraph essay, our self-righteous convictions can escalate quickly into moral outrage and forceful opposition. But changing an agonistic dynamic begins with us. Senge and Bohm say that when we learn to stand back from our positions, think hard about what we believe and why, and genuinely inquire into the ideas of our colleagues, we will learn to frame institutional conflicts not as calamities to avoid, but as opportunities to educate ourselves about other perspectives and create shared understandings.

Dialogue and inquiry can be especially difficult to achieve in academic institutions where rigid hierarchies often subvert democratic exchange. Nevertheless, teaching and learning specialist Stephen Brookfield believes that academics can achieve a more collegial, democratic dialogue if we are willing to negotiate our conversational framework: negotiating the negotiations, if you will.
One tactic for developing critically reflective conversations is to try on new conversational roles, such as devil’s advocate and detective (153). Directors expect ULAs will play devil’s advocate when we pitch new ideas to them, but why not adopt this role for ourselves when they are the ones with new ideas and plans? When colleagues and superiors mull over program initiatives, we can encourage thoughtful discussion through a detective role, asking such questions as, How do other schools in our area achieve X? or, What is our bias in this proposal? The goal of adopting different conversational roles is to deliberately shift perspectives and create an egalitarian, reflective frame for negotiating differences. Role playing has the potential to produce playful conversational spaces in which difference prompts change, growth, and learning, not only for WCDs but also for our institutions. In moments like these, colleagues effectively become what Senge, Bohm, and others recommend: a learning organization.

While initiating a rhetoric of inquiry may help flatten institutional hierarchies, we cannot foolishly ignore titles and reporting lines when we work with others. More often, though, directors may be too exquisitely sensitive to peril in our conflicted collaborations. Geller et al. conclude that WCD apprehensions constitute “a culture of fear: status anxiety, certification anxiety, performance anxiety” (123). To enact a more generative, writing-centered theory of conflict and to work against the culture of fear that keeps us from engaging with others requires more than our intellectual assent; it also requires that we take heart. Assuming we gather courage to initiate dialogic inquiry in power-infused contexts, how exactly are these conversations started and maintained? One possibility is to lay the groundwork by using meta-talk about the process of negotiating differences. For example, in a time of consensus, we could simply say that conflicts are inevitable and ask our ULA’s preferences for working through them. In response, we could bring up our own perspectives: differences represent a learning opportunity, dialogue leads to shared learning, and collegiality across hierarchy is a powerful way to reach consensus and innovation. Yes, ULAs may be skeptical about the process of inquiry, but on the other hand, given the prevalence of relentless haggling by campus constituents, they may welcome reasoned exchange.
It bears repeating that we can never be sure that using systems theory or a rhetoric of inquiry will yield either collegiality or collaborative learning. Conflict may remain more off-putting than interesting to many WCDs, and if so, what does this alternate theory of collaboration have to offer? For the two of us, we like ourselves better when we adopt an ethic of interest and curiosity rather than skepticism and blame. People are flawed but mostly try to do their best; we all face myriad internal and external pressures. It is good to remind ourselves of these truths, especially when ULAs make unfavorable decisions or reveal their all-too-human frailties. As scholars, we know that intellectual passion and inquiry connect us to students and drives our research. Both our humanity and scholarly habits encourage us to be curious about and collaborate with our superiors in good times and bad. In addition, WCDs who are open to hearing the perspectives of others may receive the same consideration when we ourselves propose new ideas. And if harmony and agreement are not the outcome of our work, at least reflection will deepen our own professional understanding and growth. Finally, while there is no guarantee that this “if-we-build-it-they-will-come” approach will appeal to ULAs, failing to extend the invitation makes inevitable the endless replication of politically charged, zero-sum conversations.

**Conflict is Emotionally Interesting**

Even though conflict is a part of our everyday working lives and has the potential to be intellectually generative, most of us not only try to avoid conflicted collaborations, we also try to downplay the emotions they often provoke. The limited and often patronizing literature on WCD emotions supports these inclinations. In this section, we highlight how the academy’s traditional epistemologies have led to an assumption that emotions are the enemy of knowledge. And we assert that academics, while accustomed to dealing with intellectual differences—which we call *dissent*—are far less adept at dealing with emotion-laden differences—which we call *conflict*.

As Alison Jaggar notes, the widely held idea that emotion and knowledge are mutually exclusive has roots in early Western
philosophy. She says that most academics associate emotion with urges that are nonrational, variable, and untrustworthy. Knowledge, on the other hand, is associated with logic, the scientific method, and empiricism. In short, emotion is something an academic “suffer[s] rather than something she [does]” (146). Academics thrive on differences in ideas, because intellectual dissent forwards knowledge. What Jaggar misses is that academic dissent rarely exhibits the dangerous specter of emotion because it is typically enacted in the comfortably displaced realm of academic publications. However, dissent enacted face-to-face in our campus collaborations carries unmistakable emotional charges, and the resulting conflicts make us uncomfortable and skeptical about the possibility of productive intellectual inquiry. Jaggar’s unsurprising conclusion is that academics believe emotions are “potentially or actually subversive of knowledge” (145). Denying emotion leaves researchers more, not less, open to bias, because academics who bracket emotion underestimate the extent to which emotions are socially inculcated and manipulated: we are taught what and how to feel by parents, culture, and powers that be. Failing to recognize and study emotion as a social construct may lead to unwitting participation in the hegemony of dominant values (159).

Academics are beginning to acknowledge that emotion is a powerful motivator of scholarship and institutional activism. Not only is dispassionate inquiry a myth, Jaggar says it is emotion—our intellectual passion—that inspires and fuels our research. She believes women are uniquely positioned to discuss the place of emotion in the academy, and indeed female-dominated disciplines like composition and writing program administration are starting to analyze how emotion affects our work. Former President of the Council of Writing Program Administrators Linda Adler-Kassner reviews the bias against emotion in composition scholarship and, like Jaggar, argues against it. She emphasizes that our theoretical work is “always rooted in our emotions, our ambitions, our goals” (22, emphasis in original). Adler-Kassner reflects on how her personal life has affected her professional activities, asserting that her principles, passions, and experiences explain her dedication to institutional activism.
In addition to harnessing emotion as an impetus for research and activism, other scholars foreground emotion as an object of inquiry. For instance, Holt, Anderson, and Rouzie investigate writing program administrators’ “emotion work” (147), a sociological concept referring to the construction and management of workplace emotions. They find that despite its centrality to our profession, emotion work is institutionally invisible and unrewarded, particularly for women (153). “Unrewarded” aptly describes WCDs’ emotion work in the context of writing centers, which win the trifecta of nurturing stigma: a predominantly female profession, a feminized pedagogy (Woolbright), and a service role in the academy (Eodice; Fitzgerald and Stephenson). Simply put, emotion work includes most of what WCDs do to create a successful writing center culture: designing welcoming and vibrant spaces filled with empathetic, friendly tutors who are comfortable working with diverse and anxious students. Our professional community, too, features emotion work, often occurring backchannel; as directors freely vent, empathize and advise each other, we solidify connections and standards. Yet despite its continuing centrality to our profession, we are still underequipped to explain in scholarly terms why emotion work should be valued in all educational settings. Until we do, both our external emotion work and our internal strong feelings in the workplace will remain subject to manipulation and denigration, even as we struggle to keep our public face cheerful.

That public face is carefully schooled not only by our institutions but also by our own professional community. Anger and other strong emotions are shaped, managed, or suppressed through “feeling rules” that govern what we should or should not feel (Hochschild qtd. in Holt, Anderson, and Rouzie 149). The informal construction of feeling rules happens frequently on the WCenter listserv as directors calibrate their responses to difficult situations. When is it okay to laugh at students? Talk back to faculty? The usual practice among directors dealing with an upsetting situation is to talk each other down from extreme reactions and soothe feelings through empathy and advice. In one thread, “Contemplating Bad Behavior,” WCDs mulled over the “asshole” behavior of a faculty colleague. As the community debated whether administrators or faculty make
bigger bullies, many admitted to fear and a lack of confidence in standing up to bad behavior.

This swirl of emotion is understandable when we consider the intense personal and institutional pressures to be “professional” enough to manage what Jaggar calls “outlaw emotions” (160), outbreaks of feeling markedly different from those conventionally permitted. In the writing center world, we don’t welcome angry outbursts in public forums. But instead of suppressing these outbreaks, Jaggar urges us to become scholars of our outlaw emotions—including anger, laughter, and discomfort—because as we learn to acknowledge what we are feeling, we can use emotion as a signal for inquiry and research. Why are we feeling this way? What values are on the line? What new perspectives do we need to investigate? Learning to use emotion as a signal to pose questions like these functions not only to defuse our discomfort but also to awaken our intellectual curiosity.

Praxis for Conflicted Collaborations

A multifaceted theory of conflicted collaborations requires an enriched, layered praxis to help us achieve what is for most of us a daunting task: embracing administrative conflict both intellectually and emotionally. The literature on organizational behavior and rhetoric offers practical ideas about how to address our fears and bad habits, bolster our courage to stay in conflicted collaborations, and establish the safety necessary for dialogue to flourish.

Offering theoretical understandings around difference and conflict in business organizations, Debra E. Meyerson argues that to become “everyday leaders” (17), we must begin by identifying our own and others’ fears and examining our perspectives. Trusted friends or colleagues are invaluable for helping us make sense of difficult experiences, constructing a bigger picture of the conflict, and clarifying our goals. Organizational scholars Patterson et al. also urge us to become aware of our patterned reactions to conflict, which often take the form of vacillating between silence (biting our tongues) and what they call “violence” (striking back, either through aggressive or passive-aggressive behaviors) (Confrontations 61-62). They argue that we need to externalize the stories we tell ourselves
about discord because “stories create feelings” (Conversations 98). In other words, if our interior monologues about work habitually include victims, villains, or other stock characters, our feelings and actions will line up accordingly. Meyerson adds that thinking of our problems as stories makes it more possible to revise the dynamic: we can revise our habitual, unproductive roles (silent bystander, sworn enemy, etc.) and cast ourselves as agents with a constructive part to play. This mental shift is necessary if we want to change old behaviors and search for new ones that promote dialogue that is both bold and safe for all.

Besides methods to heighten critical self-awareness, WCDs also need strategies to help us advocate for ourselves and our centers. Meyerson provides an impressive heuristic that quickly generates many options (see Table 1). She advises us to evaluate the costs and benefits of each level of response, so that we are comfortable with our choices and knowledgeable about their function. She does not deny that conflict can be threatening or that nonconforming perspectives may be marginalized. However, Meyerson stresses the importance of small gestures: even small actions create a sense of efficacy and open

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<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Representative Issue: Advocating for Research and Writing Assigned Time</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Resist Quietly</td>
<td>Make time on the job to develop and write up research; undertake research projects with tutors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create Learning Opportunities</td>
<td>Share research projects with ULAs; in reports, tie center program decisions to research.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implement Doable Acts</td>
<td>Collaborate on research projects with colleagues; negotiate on an ad hoc basis for release time for research and writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiate For System Changes</td>
<td>Discuss the importance for research and writing time with ULA and ask for advice on how to make it happen; include research and release time in WCD job description.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organize Collective Action</td>
<td>Propose that IWCA endorse research release time in WCD job descriptions; contact WCDs in peer institutions and discuss how to work together to ensure that WCs are considered sites for research and knowledge-making.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Meyerson’s Heuristic for Generating Advocacy Strategies—Applied to Writing Center Administration (adapted from Meyerson 8).
the possibility of more action over time. Her heuristic is a powerful tool for directors to reassess past actions and generate meaningful, everyday strategies that work together to heighten our effectiveness as change agents.

But even measured advocacy must be balanced with inquiry, especially when our goal is mutual understanding, divergence rather than convergence. Patterson et al. (Confrontations) reiterate that conflicts are occasions for us to enlarge our knowledge of ideas and people. The challenge for WCDs is both professional and personal: we must acknowledge that writing centers don’t own the only enlightened approach to teaching and learning. For instance, on many campuses, composition program administrators and first year deans are developing cutting edge programs for students that WCDs should not ignore.

WCDs must also become more aware of deeply enculturated habits of argument and reductive victim-loser/villain-winner schema we carry around in our heads. Both sides of this schema undermine our ability to adopt new ideas or initiate exploratory dialogue around points of conflict. Shifting away from an adversarial default attitude toward ULAs also helps us avoid making fundamental attribution errors. Patterson et al. suggest that attribution errors typically render us “clinically stupid” because, when we characterize our “adversaries” as cretins, bullies or both, adrenaline surges short-circuit our ability to reason (Confrontations 63-64). When ULAs make unfavorable decisions about our centers, unexamined fears will lead us to ask all the wrong questions: What is wrong with them? What is wrong with me? It takes a paradigm shift to discount the conventional wisdom that workplace conflicts require political conniving and chess-like strategizing. When we learn to become curious, we will begin asking questions that are more emotionally and intellectually rewarding, including: What do I make of my emotional response to this situation? How do system pressures constrain participants? How might we work together to identify creative changes that will yield mutually satisfying outcomes? How can I learn and change in this situation?

Note how these questions suggest we always bear responsibility to educate ourselves and work towards mutuality and problem
solving. Self-defeating internal monologues about conflict elide this dynamic, as do our profession’s sometimes counter-productive stories and metaphors about administrative interactions. One current metaphor in our literature compares collaborating across campus to missionary work for writing center collaborative practice (Eodice 115). While a sense of mission is common in our profession and conviction is necessary in advocating for ourselves and our centers, we should be wary of this concept. If our primary goal is not to collaborate but to convert, no matter how stealthy we are, others will read our intentions as patronizing and resist.

If WCDs invite collaboration, some ULAs will join us in genuine dialogue. But almost certainly some will not. When this is the case, we need to act strategically and take the long view. We need to study our options and do what we can do to scaffold what Patterson et al. call “crucial confrontations.” If we enter difficult conversations in good faith, cultivate honest respect between conversants, and establish a viable mutual purpose, Patterson et al. claim it is possible to strengthen relationships even while confronting violated expectations or bad behavior. If others resist, we can focus on our own responsibilities and consider how to scaffold institutional learning. In this process, we must be sensitive enough to perceive subtle shifts and patient enough to realize conflicts aren’t resolved in a day. Institutional change is often incremental, and when resolution doesn’t happen on our timetable, we can use the time to reflect on our own practice and identify what we need to learn.

Our Profession’s Conflicted Ethos

The two of us believe that the pervasive fear and insecurity Geller et al. note in our literature (123-24) undermine WCDs’ ability to engage in conflicted collaborations. Our community of practice proudly celebrates successful collaborations as victories for writing center pedagogy and for us all. But rather than celebrate tension-filled collaborations for their potential to transform us and others, our profession is more likely to see them as embarrassments or warnings. Fear of failure also inhibits too much of our theory. We argue that the call to adopt administrative rhetoric and values reveals
not only a belief that ULAs focus more on the fiscal bottom line than on learning outcomes but also an unspoken fear about our professional competence. If we as WCDs were more confident in our agency as scholars and leaders, our literature would advise us to study administrative culture and appraise it against our own values so we become full participants in a collaborative dialogue. The two of us admire collaboration-is-fundamental scholars who inspire us to forge partnerships with colleagues and superiors. But since this scholarship often omits theorizing conflict as an inevitable part of these partnerships, we infer an unspoken fear that to acknowledge conflict somehow undermines confidence and begets defeat.

Unexpressed fear can create an ethos of victimization that powerfully affects individual perceptions and reinforces any predispositions to react defensively or retreat in silence. Despite calls to abandon talk that Carol Haviland refers to as “PMU (poor marginalized us)” (79), our victim ethos persists through professional conversations featuring a number of distortions cognitive psychologists say affect behavior. Psychiatrist David D. Burns explains that distorted self-talk is characterized by all or nothing thinking (“Because my ULA plans to do X, he obviously doesn’t value our program”), over-generalizing (“My ULA never Xs”), labeling (“My ULA is a jerk”), magnifying (“Not getting X spells doom”), or self-flagellating (“If I had only Xed, this bad thing wouldn’t have happened”). WCDs need to become more aware of the subtle ways collective and individual distortions rationalize our disengagement and provide false comfort.

In other words, these kinds of distortions provide us with a cover story for why we keep a low profile in our schools, why we are cynical, why we prefer to be observers rather than leaders. Typically, we say we avoid conflicted collaborations because we are too busy serving students to take time establishing dialogue with difficult colleagues. Or we may tell ourselves that we should rely on the self-effacing, power-sharing strategies we use with writers and tutors because we are secretly convinced we will never prevail in any honest disagreement. Those of us on administrative rather than faculty lines may reject a ULA identity and distance ourselves from the “real” administrators, including deans and provosts. By constructing ULAs
as Others, we retain deniability (we are not them) and undermine both our authority and our spirit of inquiry, a pre-emptive defense against failure or losing face. Industry and modesty may seem like noble qualities in our profession, but when they are exposed for the defensive and defeatist distortions they truly are, we see how they undermine our collective and individual agency. Asserting our agency and expertise as scholars and leaders makes us take more responsibility for ourselves, our centers, our institutions.

While abandoning a rhetoric of PMU seems wise, silencing or shaming individual WCDs for expressing professional distress does not. WCDs usually lack campus colleagues who understand our unique pressures, so when we are presented with opportunities to air problems with other apparently sympathetic WCDs, stories and complaints inevitably surface. Yet our profession’s response to so-called whining is to circulate feeling rules that shut it down. For example, Linda Adler-Kassner informed a group of writing center professionals that the Council of Writing Program Administrators is a “no whining zone” (Adler-Kassner and Janetta). Similarly, after a stop/start/continue exercise at the 2009 IWCA Summer Institute, one participant wrote of a determination to “stop complaining” (Munday). Writing center scholars tend to promote goals that are for many directors an unrealistic dream: short reporting lines, tenure track appointments, tutor education courses, adequate release time, assistant directors, and the like. Just as we argue that directors can benefit from the idea that administrative conflict is intellectually interesting, we also argue that our profession can benefit from honoring complaints and fears, especially those expressed by WCDs whose centers are woefully underfunded and whose problems are underrepresented in our scholarship.

Rather than shame distressed directors, let’s listen to them with the same consideration we routinely grant students and provide them with strategies for turning complaints into productive inquiry. Meyerson says that venting emotions and sharing stories are necessary precursors to individual problem solving and, importantly, they can also prompt collective curiosity and action. The prevalence of PMU reveals a systemic professional problem: yes, the need for a richer praxis in administrative problem solving, but also the need
for writing center theory that accounts for diverse writing center realities. Our profession’s efforts to establish scholarly credibility in the academy ought not to be driven by an ethos of fear, because if fear drives us, some will establish themselves by silencing members of our community that the academy considers inferior. Only through talking and working together, what Meyerson calls “organizing collective action” (121), can we develop a new ethos, one driven by theories robust enough to flourish through conflict and expansive enough to include all writing center contexts.

Inconclusive Conclusions

Our layered theory of conflict helped change the way the two of us think about and approach conflicted collaborations. This change took time, study, mutual aid, and practice. When we began, we possessed many of the habits we argue against in this article: we were defensive and intellectually incurious around our ULAs; we swallowed negative feelings about conflicts and put on a happy face; we strategized ways to work around people who challenged us. Over time, we took halting steps to become reflective researchers and practitioners of administrative conflict and developed a welcome openness to ideas that changed our limited perceptions, behavior, and theory. We relied on what we do as writing center practitioners and scholars: we worked collaboratively, wrote about and reflected on our experiences, compiled an impossibly long list of theories to research, and read widely. But the real transformation for both of us began in the recursive process of implementing small, doable strategies and reflecting on their outcomes. We reconnoitered often to share readings and decide what strategy to pilot next, perhaps talking in a new way with a colleague down the hall or inviting a ULA to share her perspective on institutional issues. Working together not only kept us accountable but also inspired and motivated us. Sharing our reflections helped us mentor each other and made us aware of the feeling rules in professional interactions. Our research journey became a methods course on negotiating up the hierarchy. Although we have done much for each other, we also need the rest of our writing center community to join us in theorizing and critiquing and these ideas. And, as Geller et al. suggest, we do not
lead alone (129-32). Through professional and scholarly relationships that encourage inquiry and reflection, WCDs will individually and collectively develop the kind of boldness that challenges and changes both others and ourselves.
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NOTES

1. We use upper level administrator (ULA) rather than the more common term central administration because it encompasses all administrators who wield authority over a WCD, including provosts, deans, department chairs, writing program administrators, and learning center directors.

2. Critical reflection in this article refers to the challenging process by which we identify, question, and reconsider professional assumptions, practices, and experiences, both on our own and with our WCD and ULA colleagues, who are invited—and expected—to do the same. The goal is to promote inquiry and learning and create a free and open climate for problem solving.

3. See Peter Elbow for an example of scholarly reflection and two feeling rules: “good writing teachers like student writing (and like students)” (200, emphasis in original).


5. For a schematic on how individual perceptions, conclusions, and actions can be shaped by beliefs about the world, see Chris Argyris’ “Ladder of Inference” in Senge et al. (242-46).

6. See Patterson et al. Crucial Confrontations (Part Two, 81-106) for suggestions about handling confrontations in ways that build relationship.
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