

1-1-2016

Faces, Factories, and Warhols: A r(Evolutionary) Future for Writing Centers

Ben Rafoth

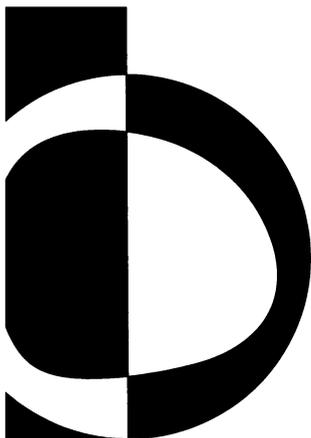
Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/wcj>

Recommended Citation

Rafoth, Ben (2016) "Faces, Factories, and Warhols: A r(Evolutionary) Future for Writing Centers," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 35 : Iss. 2, Article 3.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1796>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries.
Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.



Ben Rafoth

Faces, Factories, and Warhols: A r(Evolutionary) Future for Writing Centers

The combination of revolution and evolution—the theme of this conference¹—invites us to think expansively. The annual meeting of the International Writing Centers Association is a time to contemplate change, to imagine how writing center practices might be different from those we now regard as normal and necessary.

As the host city for this 2015 meeting, Pittsburgh is a good place to think about change. In the span of several decades, Pittsburgh evolved from a smoky mill town to one of the most livable, modern places in the U.S., transforming itself from Steel City to Robotics Incubator. Pittsburgh also lays claim to some of history's most transformative thinkers. This is where, in the 1950's, Dr. Jonas Salk led the first polio vaccine trial and began the worldwide campaign to end polio. In the early 1960's, Pittsburgher Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*, a title that asked the implicit question: Can you imagine springtime without the sounds of birds? And in educational television, this is where Mister Rogers, an unlikely revolutionary, taught adults to take children seriously.

1 This keynote was delivered at the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) Conference, in Pittsburgh, PA, on October 8, 2015.

These and many individuals like them brought about changes through acts of imagination that disrupted the status quo they were born into. Salk's vaccine was not the first—others had been tried and failed, and to many people, his attempt seemed like another waste of time and money. Rachel Carson linked declines in wildlife to air and water pollution, but who was this job-killing “lady scientist” fretting about birds and frogs? And before Mister Rogers came along, children's television was all cartoons and commercials. He proved the airwaves could be used to create the sense of love and security children craved.

A Theme for Imagination and Disruption

This year's conference theme—Writing Center (r)Evolution—also points to acts of imagination and disruption. Revolution can mean an armed uprising in the streets, but it can have other meanings as well. One sense of the term points toward imagination and possibility, and another toward action and execution. For example, philosopher and educator John Dewey sparked a revolution in education by imagining a radically different purpose for teaching and learning than the one that prevailed at the turn of the twentieth century. As a result of Dewey's ideas, educators organized curriculum and teacher education in ways that led eventually to student-centered teaching and learning. People like Ken Bruffee and Mickey Harris promoted peer tutoring and writing centers to advance this revolution, and today it is carried on by all of us here in this room, and now around the world.

For all of us in the writing center field, the question is, does the revolution of the last century, waged on theories of social construction and collaboration, still inspire? Is the old revolution enough to propel us into the next decade, as the ideas and practices we embrace today are dissolved by new waves of instructional delivery and evolving notions of authorship, production, and publication?

As we imagine different possibilities, we might debate the assumption that tutoring in the future will be much the same as it is now, just with more gear. Or the idea that the main mission of writing centers is tutoring. So much of what we think and do today is based on long-held assumptions that limit what we see as necessary and possible. These assumptions constitute our normal science, in the sense of Thomas Kuhn (1972), and they have given the field a generation's worth of exciting theories, practices, and puzzles to solve. The downside of this success is that we can become so accustomed to living within the walls of our built-house that we fail to see new roads and buildings coming

up around it. And so we come together for conferences and meetings to encounter differences that provoke revolutions of imagination.

Encountering differences and provoking imaginations is something artists excel at. In *Modern Art and the Border of Mind and Brain*, Jonathan Fineberg writes:

The complexity of our brain and the plenitude of the world introduce an unpredictability that perpetually compels us to adapt our patterns of thought: When a work of art surprises us, we have to accommodate. Encountering what is new in the world, the brain is forced to make something new in apprehending it. (p. 149)

Art that surprises us touches our souls. It affects us. How can it not have some relation to writing centers?

Lots of artists stimulate the imagination, of course, and readers are welcome to conjure their favorites, but we are in Pittsburgh, and a few blocks away is a trove of work by Andy Warhol. Warhol created drawings, silk screens, installations, films, and music that not only changed the way people thought about popular culture, Warhol also helped to create the very idea of popular culture. His art is representational, and one thing that makes it stand out is the juxtaposition of the familiar and the slightly strange. Few artists before or since are as adept at bringing these two together. Warhol does so in a way that casts doubt on some of the most ordinary, taken-for-granted things in life, and this helps explain why museum goers line up to see his paintings of soup cans or portraits of celebrities. Perhaps these images, realistic though they are on one level, call forth the mind's capacity to idealize ordinary things, and then lead us to question our relationship to them. Warhol enlarges them and uses bright primary colors so that our visual and cognitive processing yields something more and different than what is in front of us, something that hangs between what we experience as real and what we know to be possible.

Warhol's works are by now so well known that most readers can probably picture them with little effort, or with a few clicks in Google Images. The works I refer to below should be easy to recognize. They invite viewers to ask, what is my relationship to this picture? Is it what seems obvious, or is it more complicated? If you are a writing center person, Warhol's art creates an opportunity to reflect on the writing centers you know, and the ones you can imagine.

Which Side Up?

You enter the building and buy a ticket. A sign by the elevator suggests starting on the 7th floor and working your way down. You step out of the elevator and expect to see pictures of Marilyn Monroe or psychedelic dairy cows, but this is the Warhol Museum, and you never see what you expect. Your eyes fall on a piece of early work, which you could be forgiven for calling bland and boring. Stenciled over the entire print is the phrase, “This Side Up.”



© 2016 The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

“This Side Up” looks, at first, like an outbreak of needless repetition. Before long, though, a docent approaches, and this is when you get the first inkling that these walls may have something to say about revolutions and writing centers.

The docent, probably an MFA student at nearby Carnegie Mellon University, tells her group of visitors: When Andy was a young artist and long before he became famous or even well known, a revolution in the art world had been under way for quite a while. Like the artists who created it—Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning, and others—it was raw, bold, and emotional. If you had to ask what it meant, you didn’t understand it. You were supposed to feel something beyond words when you viewed an abstract expressionist painting.

Abstract expressionism got all the attention in the art world when Warhol was growing up. Paintings from Rothko’s later career feature large rectangles stacked on top of each other and saturated in hues of red, blue, orange, and yellow. They are intended to evoke an emotional response and place the viewer in communion with the artist. Some viewers reportedly wept when they saw them, but why, they couldn’t say. These were the images that dominated the art scene when Warhol was young. He wanted to be part of it but on his own terms. Warhol felt he could turn art’s status quo on its head. But how does a twenty-something from Pittsburgh pull off something like that in New York

City? As a young college graduate, Warhol was one of the most sought after graphic artists in the country, but breaking into the world of high art—museum art—was a whole different thing, yet that was Warhol's ambition. To do it, he would not only have to be different but also be noticed. His talent up to this point rested on his use of primary colors, realism, and iteration—not the mysterious, beguiling forms of the abstract expressionists. His art was provocatively different from the art everyone expected to see when they attended a new showing or visited a gallery.

Warhol understood that to get people's attention, he had to make them question their assumption that the paintings they had grown accustomed to, with shapes like de Kooning's jagged edges and incomplete forms, or Rothko's monoliths, were the epitome of great art. He knew that even though these paintings sold for outlandish sums of money, when they arrived in the back room, a gallery worker would remove them from the crate, turn them this way and that, and often ask, "How should I hang this thing? Which side is up?"

And so, Warhol made a decision to connect with the fellow artists and gallery workers he knew and worked closely with. With *This Side Up*, he created an inside joke in the art world. When it came on the scene, insiders got it and felt drawn together by it.

Maybe this is how change happens. It starts inside the tent, by winning the hearts and minds of one's natural allies. Worry about the naysayers later. Whether in a writing center or anywhere, change agents channel much of their energy into building relationships with real and potential allies. They volunteer to serve on committees and seek out people who have influence. They look for opportunities and create them where there are none. (This is not so different from the alliances tutors and students form hundreds of times a day when they sit down together with a paper to commiserate over a difficult class or assignment.) Directors need allies, so that when change that began inside the tent pushes outward, into forbidden territory, they will not be alone. This is when allies are really valuable. But do directors know who their new allies might be, and what the writing center has to offer them?

For now, there's more to see. You turn around, and on the longest wall of the 7th floor gallery is a triptych of Elvis in a cowboy outfit, looking straight at you, legs spread apart, pistol drawn. This is not the way most people remember Elvis, but here it is. A similar one sold last year at auction for \$73 million. It is riveting to look at as you think about what a huge, original talent Elvis was in his time, the way he revolutionized music and musical performance. This work asks a question, too: Is this the Elvis whose musical talent launched rock-n-roll? Or, is

this the Elvis whose manager, Colonel Parker, forced him to star in silly westerns to make himself rich? The face is instantly familiar, but who is this, really?

Other galleries and more portraits lie ahead. You walk down the stairway to a lower floor and find walls filled with Marilyns, smiling radiantly. Her portraits are hung throughout the gallery, rendered in flat, two dimensions. The date on the museum label indicates it was created not long after her suicide.



© 2016 The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Warhol's portraits use bright, innocent colors and haunting negative spaces. Sometimes the question his art poses is: Why does it feel familiar and strange at the same time? What am I seeing?

Linda Shamoon & Deborah Burns asked questions that are not so different in "A Critique of Pure Tutoring," and they are asked again by each generation. Who, or what, is a tutor? And who are our clients? Reflecting on answers to these questions is important, but they do not tell directors what their writing center's responsibility is to tutors and students. That calls for a different sort of question: Who do we not see, even when they are present? In other words, drawing out the human potential in a writing center requires social understanding to bring about agency. In a writing center, students should be able to develop their talents by being players and participants in knowledge-making (Geller, Eodice, Condon, Carroll, & Boquet, 2007), instead of losing them to institutional agendas.

Warhol was endlessly fascinated by human faces, producing assembly-line style hundreds of screen prints of celebrities, world leaders, acquaintances, animals, and of course, himself.

Writing centers are not factories, like steel mills and assembly lines. But they have great potential for tapping into the broad range of student talent and encouraging creative productions. Neal Lerner tells

us writing centers began as laboratories. Many of us work in writing centers that produce research and scholarship, not to mention courses, credits, videos, and podcasts. We say we make better writers, but the claim is hard to prove without a clear and agreed-upon point of reference. The output of a factory or laboratory, on the other hand, is its own validation. Research, for example, is assessed the moment it is published and cited. Disciplines as diverse as psychology, education, and agriculture create value by providing materials and services to their communities. They organize teaching and learning through hands-on, clinical experiences, and what these experiences produce is assessed by the demand for it.

Imagine if writing centers created works for which there is a demand among teachers, learners, the institution, and the community. Enlisting all available tutors and a broad and diverse pool of creative talent, writing centers could finally become *writing* centers. Today, in Silicon Valley, Seattle, Boston, and yes Pittsburgh, there are thousands of new software engineering labs, design studios, and research centers that debate, create, write, and illustrate ideas. These are the factories of the 21st century. Their creative, collaborative, and productive ethos has a lot in common with writing centers. We need to develop writing centers that have more in common with them.

You turn around, and now you are watching a video, one of Warhol's famous 'motion portraits' from The Factory, where he would place a video camera (no audio) in front of someone and ask them to look straight into the camera for as long as they could. Warhol was one of the first artists to use home video, and the first to create selfies. At the time, critics called them narcissistic and ridiculous, but today in the Warhol museum, visitors' eyes are glued to these silent motion portraits. You can create one yourself and archive it there.

When we read a draft written by a multilingual writer for whom English is a second (or third or fourth) language, it can sometimes feel as though we are watching their motion portrait unfold before our eyes as they silently project their identities on paper. Sometimes they refuse to read their writing aloud in order to maintain their anonymity. Meanwhile, their tutor cannot help but pair the accented writing with an accented voice and facial image. Writing is powerfully imagistic, but for many non-native English speakers, it draws them into a close-cropped frame: *They are ESL*. As Michelle Cox (2016) and Ilona Leki (1992; 2009) have observed, these writers' many identities—as mothers, professionals, intellectuals, and more—are often ignored. Cox writes, "Students who use English as a second language (L2) have as many

identities as any other student. But they are often identified only by their language status, as if they part of a monolithic group” (p. 54).

Warhol’s motion portraits ask implicitly, who is the artist and who is the subject? Who created it? In the writing center, we ask, who wrote it—but we do so with a sense of approbation, not with the artist’s imagination and playfulness. Imagine if tutors were encouraged to demonstrate how they would write their student’s paper. Instead of holding back ideas and reciting prompts like, “Can you think of another example?” the tutor would share all the examples, words, phrases and ideas that come to mind, stoking the writer’s intellect in the way thoughtful and exciting conversations do in real life. They would feed each other, in the way the best tutoring sessions sometimes (but not often enough) unfold. The answer to the question of who wrote the piece of writing a student submitted to their instructor will always be elusive. Multiple authors, including tutors, lend their voices to any piece of writing. This does not mean that the student didn’t write it, or that the consultant or the internet did. In many quarters where people work and play, authorship, and particularly single authorship, matters little. What counts is the product itself along with what it says and does and how it connects with readers. It is assumed that credit for creating the product flows to many people.

In any case, when learning how to write well, or how to do any complex activity, it is tremendously helpful to observe, in real time, how someone else accomplishes this complex and difficult task, and then try to imitate them. We don’t just learn by imitation—we enjoy it, just as we enjoy repetition and rhythm and primary colors.

We should worry less that writers care only to have someone else write their papers for them, and think more about the collaborative conditions that motivate them to develop their talents and excel. When I interviewed writers and tutors for *Multilingual Writers and Writing Centers*, I heard almost nothing from them about taking the easy way, and plenty about the hard work and sacrifice they had made and were willing to make to learn to write in English.

At Nova Southeastern University, I spoke to an undergraduate named Ariana who had a bright, inquisitive face. She grew up speaking Spanish in the Dominican Republic and moved to Florida with her family to attend college. She wanted to tell tutors:

Don’t be afraid to say what is wrong in my essay. Don’t be afraid to tell me. Is it the proper way, or is it just acceptance? I cannot accept that. They should say, write this way, it sounds more English. I can write something and they say, “Yeah, okay, I understand.” But no.

I need to start writing properly. They should not be ashamed to telling the true things.

Ariana does not lack for a voice and will never be someone who passively accepts what others tell her. Instead, she wants to be challenged intellectually and work hard. She yearns to confront her status quo. You could say, she comes to her campus writing center not to eliminate disorganization but to find it.

At an academic conference such as this annual meeting of the IWCA, in panels, poster sessions, and workshops, we examine ways to bring about change in our writing centers, which is another way of saying, we look for ways to dis-organize them.

Change begins with an idea, and the most productive ideas are often the most disorganizing ones.

More than four decades ago, peer tutoring was an idea that disorganized the teaching of writing when our forebears challenged the idea that only teachers could teach. Now, writing centers themselves are being challenged. It is not hard to imagine a time when the work we cherish today will be performed by artificial intelligence. Sitting down with a tutor? Eclipsed by intelligent systems with vast computing power. Editing and proofreading included? No problem. Plus translation into standard written English, and twenty minutes before the paper is due? No appointment needed.

The idea of a writing center, in the future, could well depend on our idea of it today and the steps we take to bring about change. Do we reproduce the status quo? Or do we disorganize it enough to spawn something new and lasting? Do we keep our heads down, or adapt and innovate?

Flexibility, adaptability, innovation, and risk-taking are human qualities that disorganize the status quo and will give rise to writing centers of one sort or another in the next decade.

While working on my book, I met a student who came to her campus writing center and sat down with a complete piece of writing that was not her own but had her name on it. She had a very productive conference with an excellent tutor.

Her tutor told me: “The abstract will inform her about what to write, guide her, do all it’s supposed to do.”

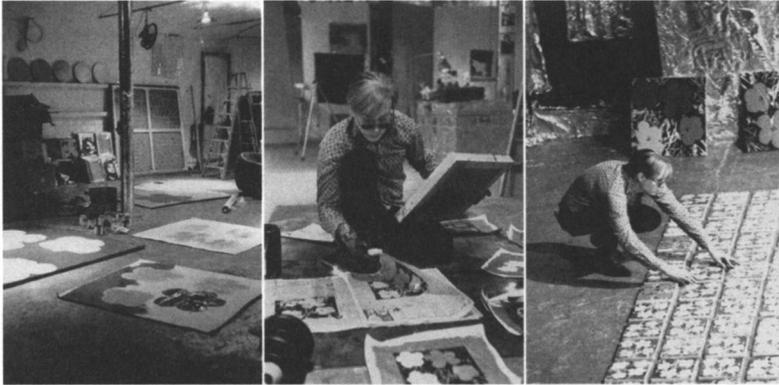
Does it matter that the student’s advisor *wrote the abstract for her*? The student was embarking on an important investigation in her field of environmental science. This is research the world needs and can benefit from, and those who conduct it require multi-level support in the form of funding, laboratories, tests, and consultants. Foundations

and universities strive to provide researchers like this with the tools they need to do important scientific work.

However, if a researcher were to visit the campus writing center looking for support in the form of, say, someone to edit a grant proposal or write a news release, they might discover that they would first have to commit to becoming a better writer. They would be told, “*You have to write it. We won’t do the work for you, but we’ll try to help.*”

Instead of rebuffing students for expecting tutors to edit their papers, we should listen to them. Most places dedicated to helping make, create, or improve are more forthcoming and less DIY than writing centers tend to be. To the extent our policies insist each student sit down at the table ready to prove their mettle, they can appear to have more in common with study rooms or homework helpers than with today’s leading labs and studios, which are energized by innovation, accuracy, and production. For example, when students visit their university’s statistics lab, consultants there (usually graduate students) do not necessarily expect them to become better statisticians or to do the work themselves. The field of applied statistics is too vast and each user’s needs are too specific for that. And yet critical thinking is as important in statistics as it is in writing. Consultants recommend designs, statistical tests, and measurement methods. They enlist their supervisors and co-workers and tell clients how to fix mistakes. What they don’t do, on a routine basis, is withhold information and ideas that would improve the project. Stat labs add value to students’ work because they help clients conduct better research and report their results in ways that are clearer, better organized, more precise, and therefore of greater potential value to the student and society.

This may be a glimpse into the future of writing centers: production spaces that function more as laboratories and studios than the proving grounds they are today, where virtual and physical collaborative networks build multimedia projects, less for teachers to grade and more for real audiences to use. The question of who wrote this will likely be neither as important nor as interesting as what the work does and who it reaches for its audience.



© 2016 The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

The Challenge of Acceptance

Warhol named his New York studio The Factory. An artist's studio is, conventionally, a solitary place, the antithesis of a factory. But Warhol was never about conformity, and The Factory was not a typical artist's studio: It produced portraits, installations, prints, album covers, photographs, drawings, videos, and music. (And also bad trips and violence, but that is another story.) It was a productive place that was also a personal and intimate place to teach, learn, and hang out. Creative geniuses wanted to see and be seen in The Factory—Lou Reed, Bob Dylan, Mick Jagger, Truman Capote, John Lennon, Brian Jones, Salvador Dali, Allen Ginsberg, Madonna—they were all there.

Art studios, design labs, statistics labs, writing centers—these will likely be even more productive places in the future. Consultation and collaboration will remain a key part of writing centers because these qualities are in our human DNA; in the future they will take forms that may seem a little strange now. For example, it is not hard to imagine writing centers that will:

- Create stories, graphics, and playlists to enhance online courses and instructional performances, as multimedia labs are doing at Carnegie Mellon University, the Art Institute of Chicago, and UC San Diego.
- Produce podcasts that publish work from writing classes, as writing centers are doing at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, West Virginia University, Texas A&M, and DePaul.
- Edit papers, proposals, theses, and dissertations, as writing centers are doing at Syracuse University, the University

at Buffalo, and my own university, Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

- Use smart phones to provide electrical stimulation to the brain to enhance creativity, lower anxiety, and boost confidence. I know of no writing center doing this.

Venturing into new territories sends out shoots on the family tree and expands its crown. It makes us more diverse and ultimately more adaptable because it engages new talents and tools to create things of value. To explore such possibilities, we should immerse ourselves in creative works and let them provoke our imaginations.

One more stop before we head to the gift shop and return to the conference.

Warhol died in 1987, but if you had asked him why he painted the Campbell's Soup can, he probably would have said, "Because I like it." The truth is maybe more complicated. Warhol grew up poor and his mother served a lot of soup. He loved Campbell's Soup. Long after he became rich and famous, he took his mother to mass every Sunday, even while, back at The Factory, they were making motion portraits and shooting drugs. If it was a Sunday night, Andy would be at mass, with his mother. His brother, who lives in Pittsburgh, believes Andy painted the Soup Can as a tribute to his childhood.

Still, there can be multiple interpretations. When people first saw Warhol's soup can, they scoffed: "That's art? It's ridiculous. He's a copy-cat who couldn't think of anything original." The first soup can canvas sold for \$100. But soon, everyone wanted to see it, and then it appeared everywhere—photographed, imitated, satirized, and celebrated. Today, Warhol's Soup Can paintings are among the most instantly recognizable pieces of art in the world. In 2006, one sold at auction for \$11 million. The Soup Can doesn't seem at all shocking to us now, but at the time, it was highly dis-organizing. It provoked the question: "Can I accept this?" "Is it okay to say I like it?"

That is often how we feel when our expectations are upended. We feel anxious and we wonder, "Can I accept it?"

Creative works in all their forms—art, music, and of course writing—open minds to radical change and to the question, "Is it okay to like it?" Creative works give inspiration for writing centers to disorganize by experimenting and diversifying, keeping some traditions and transforming others. And they give inspiration to keep looking ahead to a better world where writing and imagination make a difference.

References

- Cox, M. (2016). Identity construction, second language writers, and the writing center. In S. Bruce & B. Rafoth (Eds.), *Tutoring second language writers* (pp. 53–77). Logan: Utah State University Press.
- Fineberg, J. (2015). *Modern art at the border of mind and brain*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Geller, A. E., Eodice, M., Condon, F., Carroll, M., & Boquet, E. H. (2007). *The everyday writing center: A community of practice*. Logan: Utah State University Press.
- Greenfield, L., & Rowan, K. (2011). Beyond the “Week Twelve Approach.” In L. Greenfield & K. Rowan (Eds.), *Writing centers and the new racism* (pp. 124–149). Logan: Utah State University Press.
- Kuhn, T. (1970). *The structure of scientific revolutions* (2nd ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Leki, Ilona. (1992). *Understanding ESL writers: A guide for teachers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Leki, I. (2009). Before the conversation: A sketch of some possible backgrounds, experiences, and attitudes among ESL students visiting a writing center. In S. Bruce & B. Rafoth (Eds.), *ESL writers: A guide for writing center tutors* (2nd ed.) (pp. 1–17). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Shamoon, L. K., & D. H. Burns. (1995). A critique of pure tutoring. *Writing Center Journal*, 15(2), 134–152.

About the Author

Ben Rafoth is Distinguished University Professor and director of the Kathleen Jones White Writing Center at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, where he also teaches graduate courses in the Composition and TESOL Program. Ben is the author of *Multilingual Writers and Writing Centers* (Utah) and editor of *A Tutor's Guide: Helping Writers One to One* (2nd ed., Utah). He co-edited, with Shanti Bruce, *Tutoring Second Language Writers* (Utah) and *ESL Writers* (2nd ed., Heinemann Boynton/Cook). He served as an executive officer for the International Writing Centers Association and is a recipient of the Ron Maxwell Award from the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing. Ben has chaired or co-chaired IWCA Summer Institutes and both IWCA and NCPTW national conferences.