

1-1-2017

Looking Up: Mapping Writing Center Work through Institutional Ethnography

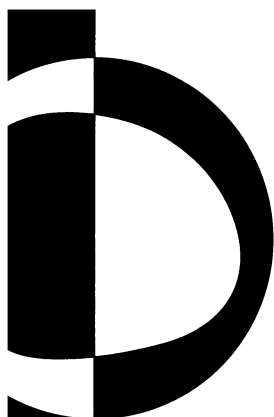
Michelle Miley

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

Recommended Citation

Miley, Michelle (2017) "Looking Up: Mapping Writing Center Work through Institutional Ethnography," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 36 : Iss. 1, Article 6.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1816>

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.



Michelle Miley

Looking Up: Mapping Writing Center Work through Institutional Ethnography

Abstract

Extending LaFrance & Nicolas's (2012) call for institutional ethnography, this essay argues that institutional ethnography widens the focus of writing center research, potentially bringing into focus the disconnect between writing center scholars' own understanding of writing center work and the understandings of others within the academy. Through the lens of institutional ethnography, we can map how writing center work coordinates with and affects the other work being done within the institution. Using interviews and textual analysis and working from the standpoint of a relatively new writing center director, the author offers her own local study as an example of an institutional ethnographic study and illustrates how the study helped her to better map her work within the institution. She argues that as a method of inquiry, institutional ethnography can help those of us in writing center work advocate for our visions of writing center work with a more complex understanding of writing centers in the institution writ large.

The Writing Center Journal 36.1 | 2017 103

Imagine focusing a camera on what is happening inside a writing center – that’s what most writing center research does. Now imagine pulling the lens back until the whole university is visible, and pulling it back even further until you have a view of the whole landscape of higher education – all the thousands of colleges and universities in the giant educational ecosystem.

— Lori Salem (2014), p. 16

Lori Salem’s (2014) imagining of the different perspectives one gets by zooming out a camera lens reminds those of us in writing center work that we are not isolated programs. Instead, Salem (2014) argues that zooming out is an essential shift of perspective to “understand how the writing center came into being” and to examine the broader forces at work “that influence the overall climate of colleges and universities, which in turn influences how and whether writing centers are created” (p. 16). I argue that Salem’s (2014) claim for the necessity of varied research perspectives to understand writing centers as a part of a much greater system than we might imagine echoes Michelle LaFrance & Melissa Nicolas’s (2012) call for institutional ethnographic research in writing studies. Understanding the layered landscape of writing studies, LaFrance & Nicolas (2012) ask us to consider how our work grows out of the complex web of relations that constitute institutions. Noting a gap in writing studies scholarship that examines “how our most common practices emerge in relationship to the institutional locations that situate, compel, and organize them” (p. 130), they argue that institutional ethnography (IE) “provides a framework within which individual experience, local practice, and institutional discourse are viewed as mutually constitutive” (p. 131). As a framework, IE “shift[s] the ethnographer’s gaze from the ‘site’ (the writing center, the classroom, the writing program) to the ways people in or at a site co-create the very space under investigation. . .” (p. 131). Unlike Salem’s (2014) view, however, which zooms down to take in the whole landscape, IE begins from the standpoint of those doing the work and zooms upward and outward. Through this focus, LaFrance & Nicolas (2012) argue institutional ethnography can potentially uncover how “our discourses actually mobilize the work of our programs” (p. 146).

By adding to the methods we use and the perspectives we take to map the work of writing centers, both Salem (2014) and LaFrance & Nicolas (2012) have given this writing center director a more complex and layered understanding of how our work shapes and is shaped by the

larger institutional ecosystem.¹ I add to their mapping of writing center work by answering LaFrance & Nicolas's (2012) call for institutional ethnographic research in writing studies.

In 2013, in my first semester as director of a newly envisioned Writing Center, I found myself needing to “shift [my] gaze” from where I stood and focus the lens outward in order to understand how the work of my University Writing Center was perceived by others. Through IE, I had a systematic framework for thinking about how to broaden my perspective to answer the questions: “What are the perceptions of others within my institution about what the work of the Writing Center is? How can I gain a better understanding of these perceptions in order to advocate for the Writing Center?” In the following essay, I describe how I came to IE as a way to better understand the coordination of my institution's Writing Center work with the work of the larger institution and how the perceptions of the Center's work have shaped how I advocate for the Writing Center at my institution. I argue that IE, with its roots in the social and in feminism, is particularly well suited for writing center research. I then describe my IRB-approved institutional ethnographic study,² a project that began from the standpoint of my relatively new status as a writing center director and that relied heavily on interviews and textual analysis. I offer three findings from my study that have shaped not only how I understand my work but how I advocate for the Writing Center. Finally, I argue that as a method of inquiry, institutional ethnography can help those of us in writing center work align our visions of our work with the understanding of writing centers in the institution writ large.

My study begins in the moment I “looked up” and realized that my vision of the work of the Writing Center I had recently been hired to direct was not necessarily in sync with others in the institution. I begin with that story.

Looking Up

As I was finishing my graduate work at my former institution and entering into the job market, I admit to being picky about the jobs for

1 Other recent scholars have also added dimensionality to our maps of writing center work. Some recent examples include Anne Ellen Geller & Harry Denny's (2013) interview study, Jackie Grutsch McKinney's (2013) narrative inquiry, and LaFrance & Nicolas's (2013) own institutional ethnographic study.

2 Although this article describes a local study, a research grant awarded by my institution provided the opportunity to expand my study to multiple institutions. The results of the larger multi-institutional IE are forthcoming.

which I would apply. I had a “good job”; I was the assistant director in a writing center, in charge of developing our writing in the disciplines partnerships. To move my family, I decided a new job would have to somehow be better, would have to push me further in my own growth and development, and would have to be at an institution that “matched” what I saw as the possibility for writing center work. My years in graduate school and writing center work had shaped my vision of what writing center work could be, a vision very much aligned with Emily Isaacs & Melinda Knight’s (2014) description of a center that “serve[s] as the focal point” for developing “a culture of writing on campus and in the larger community” (p. 37). I also knew, as Isaacs & Knight (2014) report, that many writing centers and writing center directors struggle to find the institutional support and acknowledgment of the work that they do. To apply for a new job, then, meant that I had to find an institution that had a vision of writing center work that matched my own. Sometimes, we hope for the impossible.

And sometimes we find out that the impossible may indeed be possible. When I first saw the following job ad, I experienced a sudden rush of endorphins and flutter of excitement:

*The Department of English . . . is pleased to announce a tenure-track position as Director of the Writing Center at the assistant or associate professor level. The Writing Center seeks an experienced and **visionary** director to lead the program into its next phase of growth and development. The Center has recently received substantial support from the provost and is **poised for greatly increased campus-wide impact**. We are looking for a writing center specialist who can help the Department of English and the university leadership plan and implement an **enhanced vision of service to students from all disciplines**. (Modern Language Association, 2012, p. 75. emphasis added)³*

This job ad suggested I had found my match. Here was an institution that saw writing center work through the same lens I did. At the MLA interview, I sat listening to those on the search committee describing the re-envisioning of their University Writing Center over the last few years, resulting in a newly renovated space and the opportunity to hire a full-time tenure-line director for the first time in over 20 years. They communicated their hopes that a new director would expand the Writing Center, bringing to it both theoretical breadth and width. And the department chair emphasized again that what they were

³ I discovered later that the hiring committee had consulted with Michele Eodice when writing the job description.

looking for in a director was someone who brought vision to the work. Yes, I thought, here was a place where others would understand.

During my campus interview, I was given another document to guide me, the document that actually put into motion the university's ability to hire a tenure-line director: The Strategic Investment Proposal. This internal grant proposal provided the funding for my line, the Writing Center staff and tutors, and the operational costs of running the Center. Again, I found certain phrases that both confirmed my sense of "good match" and helped guide my work:

- having a campus-wide impact
- serving students through a strong PEER tutor program
- serving students through a WAC program that helps faculty better understand and enhance the role of writing in teaching within their fields
- emphasizing the importance of research for tutors and for director, through a tenure-track line and strong tutor program

Six months later, I jumped right into my first year. Referring over and over again to the documents I had received during the interview and hiring process,⁴ I began coordinating my work with others. To develop "campus-wide impact," I started reaching out and building relationships across campus. "Faculty Development" also jumped out at me, so I made a point to contact our Center for Faculty Excellence and offer faculty workshops on writing. I knew that a major shift for the Writing Center was a transition from professional tutoring to a peer tutor program. The assistant director, tasked with tutor development, and I immediately began discussing our goals for a strong tutor development program and began implementing a new educational program. In my mind, we were moving forward with not only my vision of what I wanted the work of our Writing Center to be—a vision of a "dynamic, collaborative environment that fosters and maintains a vibrant community of writers across [our] campus" (Montana State University Writing Center, 2016)—but also the vision set out by the job ad and the Strategic Investment Proposal.

And things seemed to be going pretty well. Because I was working from my interpretation of the texts given me, I imagined that my

4 In referring to these documents, I was acting out the power such institutional texts have in defining our work. Dorothy Smith, founder of IE, notes the importance of texts in coordinating our work within our institutions. Smith & Susan Marie Turner (2014) argue that "the recognizable identity of a text from one site of activation to another is integral to the text's distinctive form of coordinating ruling relations" (p. 5). Texts like job ads, job descriptions, grants, etc., help us define our work through their ability to be replicated and therefore read by multiple people.

vision was shared by those around me. And the conversations I had with those in the social organization that included my colleagues and those to whom I reported suggested all was on track. But right before my first semester ended, it suddenly became clear that my vision for the Writing Center as a student-centered space, a space that worked with writers across the university with no preference given to any discipline, was not shared by all of my colleagues.

Our adjunct writing faculty who teach the majority of our first-year composition courses have a reading group. They meet once a month to discuss, over bottles of wine, readings within the discipline of composition. It is a self-created professionalizing and community-building activity, one that has the potential to add vitality and depth to our first-year writing program. In my first semester, the organizers of the group invited the director of composition and me to facilitate a conversation about our vision for collaboration between our Core (General Education) Writing Program and Writing Center. We came, expecting a collegial, invigorating discussion. Instead, we encountered a surprisingly hostile audience, specifically from a few instructors. They began asserting their dissatisfaction about the loss of professional tutors in the Writing Center, the ineffectiveness of peer tutors, and the loss of the vision of the Writing Center. Perhaps naturally, my first reaction was to become extremely defensive. Clearly, they had a limited—one might even say wrong—view of what writing centers do.

But when I left that evening and had some time to reflect on what happened, I realized that my view might also be limited. The reactions of those who had been at this institution far longer suggested I did not have a full understanding of how this particular Writing Center related to the rest of the university. In fact, I was assuming institutional support that may or may not exist within those faculty. Rather than ignoring the reactions of those at the meeting and continuing to assert my own vision as “right,” and by doing so causing permanent relational damage in my institution, I needed to widen my periphery. At this moment, I “looked up,” experiencing what LaFrance & Nicolas (2012) identify as an “aha” moment. As they describe their own move into their institutional ethnographic study, I began “to think more intentionally about the assumptions [I] . . . make about the interests, needs, and desires of those with whom [I] work” (p. 133). And like LaFrance & Nicolas (2012), I realized that IE, with its focus on mapping the complex web of institutional relationships that shape our work, was a methodology that would allow me to move past simply telling my story of being misunderstood and instead place my own vision of writing center work within the larger map of my local institution.

Methodology: Institutional Ethnography

LaFrance & Nicolas (2012) term IE a “critical ethnography,” one that “does not seek to generalize about or to understand the ‘structures’ commonly found at similar institutional locations. Rather IE asks ethnographers to focus on individuals and to understand their personal experience *as uniquely responsive* to the social organization of the institutions” (p. 134). Rather than beginning with a particular theory, institutional ethnography begins in the reality of work experience and begins analyzing how work is coordinated amongst those within an institution. For example, in my case, rather than beginning by theorizing writing center work to explain how the adjuncts’ understanding of my work is flawed, through institutional ethnography I ask how their understanding and experience of their own work coordinates with the work of the Writing Center and how the actuality of that work shapes our understanding.

IE, originating in the work of Canadian sociologist Dorothy E. Smith (Smith 2005), embodies the influence of both Marxist and feminist research methodologies (LaFrance & Nicolas, 2012, p. 134). Described as a “postpositivist” feminist methodology, IE understands the “social context of people’s lives as historically situated and constituted through people’s activities, and the research process itself as an integral aspect of the construction of knowledge about society” (DeVault & Gross, 2007, p. 176). IE emphasizes the social, which Smith (2005) defines as “people’s ongoing activities viewed under the aspect of their coordination with the activities of others” (p. 227).

IE’s focus on understanding the coordination of activity within a particular system and its roots in feminist activism make it particularly suited for my own understanding of writing center work. My theorizing of writing center work is strongly influenced by Lev Vygotsky (1980; 1986) and by feminist rhetorical practices (Jones Royster & Kirsch, 2012). From Vygotsky (1980; 1986), I understand the development of language and of writing to be both individually and socially constructed, a dynamic and dialogic process that cannot be completely “captured.” However, although each lived experience (both as we work with students and as we direct writing centers) is unique and therefore is not generalizable to all situations, there are learned “truths” from each experience that can shape new ones. By analyzing those experiences in process, we can develop “theories” to guide us (Vygotsky, 1980; Zebroski, 1994). Because of my commitment to feminist rhetorical methods, I also believe that writing center research methods should include the reflective and reflexive inquiry practices central to feminist rhetorical

practices. Anchored in a feminist, Marxist perspective, with an insistence on looking outward, IE is a particularly well-suited methodology for writing centers. Writing centers are, by nature, relational spaces. When explored with the multiple perspectives of those who participate in the complex web of our activity, writing centers provide a rich and layered landscape for analysis.

Widening the focus: “Studying up.” Because institutional ethnography begins in the “everyday work experience and knowledge,” extending outwards to “make observable social relations beyond and within [our everyday experiences] in which we and multiple others participate” (Smith, 2006, p. 43), this method has the potential to bring into our focus the understanding others have of our work. Smith (2005) notes that unlike other “ethnographic strategies such as grounded theory,” institutional ethnography does not seek to find a “monologic interpretive scheme,” or come to a universal theory (p. 160). Rather, institutional ethnography embraces the dialogic, the multiple experiences and knowledges that may exist within an organization.

IE’s focus on standpoint⁵ recognizes and honors the unique experiences we all may have within our working relations. LaFrance & Nicolas (2012) provide a useful definition of standpoint as “materially situa[ting] participants and researchers in the narratives that are generated. The uniqueness of individual experience—the researcher’s personal experience or knowledge of a site and what has been gleaned from interviewing and observing—provides the guiding perspective for the research narrative that may be produced” (p. 136). Smith (2005) explains that the standpoint, which she terms “women’s standpoint,” draws from feminist theory but differs from a “feminist standpoint [. . .] in that it does not identify a socially determined position or category of position in society” (p. 10). Rather, “women’s standpoint,” as Smith (2005) defines it, “establish[es] a subject position for institutional ethnography as a method of inquiry, a site for the knower that is open to anyone” (p. 10). Smith’s (2005) explanation of “women’s standpoint” echoes Sandra Harding’s (2007) description of the feminist standpoint

5 Although my particular study begins from my standpoint and therefore expands my role as researcher to researcher/ participant, not all institutional ethnographic studies begin with the standpoint of the researcher. For example, Marie Campbell (2014), a Canadian professor of Human and Social Development, studied “how ideas that are promoted by organizations such as the World Bank and OECD and by countries donating development assistance make the crucial move from particular discourses into people’s local development action” (p. 59). Her study begins with the standpoint of women grassroots activists in Kyrgyzstan who were expressing mixed feelings about the Paris Declaration.

as beginning “not from the dominant conceptual frameworks of their disciplines and institutions, but rather from [. . .] everyday lives” (p. 48). Those working from a feminist standpoint do not stay only within that narrative. Instead, they “‘study up,’ to critically reveal the principles and practices of dominant institutions” (p. 48). In the same way, the standpoint in an institutional ethnographic study “enlarge[s] the scope of what becomes visible from [the subject’s standpoint], mapping the relations that connect one local site to others” (Smith, 2005, p. 29).

Resisting the blind man’s view: Reflexive practice. Widening our focus does not mean losing the focus of our own vision for our work. Rather, I believe that by engaging in rhetorical listening, defined by Krista Ratcliffe (2005) as “a trope for interpretive invention and more particularly as a code of cross-cultural conduct” (p. 17), we move towards a more conscious understanding of our own identification. This conscious identification is necessary, Ratcliffe (2005) argues, for “revising identifications troubled by history, uneven power dynamics, and ignorance” (p. 19). To listen as well as to speak is to engage in “dialectical and reciprocal” relationships that Jacqueline Jones Royster & Gesa E. Kirsch (2012) advocate for in their theorizing of feminist rhetorical practices (p. 14).

Donna J. Qualley’s (1997) metaphor for reflexive inquiry has often provided a guiding principle for me as I think about what feminist rhetorical practices might look like. Qualley (1997) uses John Godfrey Saxe’s poem about the six blind men of Indostan to illustrate the importance of reflexive inquiry. Six blind men encounter an elephant. Each reaches out where they are and begins to define what an elephant is to one another. One describes the trunk; another the leg. Yet another describes an elephant by its ear. But no blind man listens to the others, each insisting on their own experience as “right” and thereby limiting their knowledge of the elephant. Qualley (1997), applying the poem to the teaching of writing, notes that our educational systems often keep us limited as the blind men are:

Rarely are we ever positioned to see the elephant in its entirety or complexity during our first isolated encounter with it, but rarely are we taught to acknowledge the limits of our initial perspectives. Nor are our courses set up to allow students or teachers time to linger, chat or return later for another look. Our schools are designed for covering the elephant, not uncovering it. The rush to closure abbreviates thinking and curtails further inquiry. (p. 23)

A holistic vision of our work can only exist if we participate not only in reflective work but also reflexive work. In the recognition of the possible tension between what those outside of our centers perceive

to be our work and our own idealization of our potential, we have the possibility for new understandings. It is imperative, therefore, for us to discover the methods of inquiry that allow us to explore our relationship experiences and narratives in such a way that we can, as Debra Journet (2012) states, “decide if this account is worth building on, worth incorporating within what counts as disciplinary knowledge” (p. 20). IE, by looking out from the narratives of our own everyday experiences to understand how those experiences coordinate with the work within the wider institution, requires us to “articulate what qualities of observations, analysis, or representation we require if we are to accept any particular narrative account as a persuasive instance of research” (Journet, 2012, p. 17).

From the standpoint of the actuality of people’s work, the ethnographer begins a systematic exploration of the issues that are relevant to the concerns that come up. The study begins with a question or a “problematic,” which “sets out a project of research and discovery that organizes the direction of investigation from the standpoint of those whose experience is its starting point” (Smith, 2005, p. 227). This problematic is often grounded in the individual experience, but the focus is not simply on the individual. Rather, the focus is always on the coordination of activity within the institution. By enlarging the scope and focusing on the relationships within the system, making sense of our work as it coordinates or collides with the work of others, the researcher can be both reflexive and reflective, mapping a wider “lay of the land.” Institutional ethnography allows us to systematize embodied experience and, through that systemization, to provide maps for understanding work. These maps can help us to act rather than react in aligning our vision of writing center work with the vision of those within the institutions we serve. Institutional ethnography allows us to “see” more of the elephant.

Methods: Data collection and analysis. The design of an institutional ethnographic study varies according to the resources available to the researcher, but the tools for investigating (or the methods) the researcher relies on are typically the same as other ethnographic methodologies: interviews, surveys, observations, focus groups, and textual analysis. Smith (2005) describes the goal of institutional ethnography as “explicat[ing] what is discovered in the process of assembling work knowledges and finding out how they articulate to and coordinate with one another” (p. 160). Because the goal of mapping individuals’ experiences and work as they coordinate with others within the larger institution is crucial to institutional ethnography, Smith (2006) particularly notes the essential nature of textual analysis in institutional ethnog-

raphy. Texts, Smith (2006) argues, have the “magical character” of being replicable, which means that they are “read, seen, heard, watched, and so on in particular local and observable settings” (p. 66). And because the texts are static, they also can become translocal, allowing interpretation of the work to be done by individuals both within and outside of the work. For example, at the local level, LaFrance & Nicolas (2012) note how the job descriptions provided by human resources shape our work. Those same job descriptions, when read outside our institution, give others a map for the work that we do. These texts, when read alongside the narratives of those doing the work, provide maps of how our work interacts with the work of others.

My own experience with my job ad and Strategic Investment Proposal exemplify how texts make visible our understanding of our work. My relationship with my institution, and my understanding of what work was expected of me, began with these documents. It was when my interpretation of the text visibly conflicted with the understanding of others that I had to “look up” and question. The questioning provided the problematic for my study, giving me my research question: What is the perception of the Writing Center work in my institution?

To begin mapping work knowledge of the Writing Center at my institution, I gathered the “work texts” available to me. I first analyzed my job ad, my contract, and the Strategic Investment Proposal, which included my job description not simply for the explicit job duties included but also for the underlying assumptions about the work of the Writing Center that I had drawn from these documents. For example, the Strategic Investment Proposal states:

A thriving peer-tutoring program helps students become active citizens and leaders and fosters a multicultural and global perspective. Peer tutors will receive extensive training, both before and during their work in the Writing Center. Much of that training will be run by other peer tutors. This offers complex professional and academic experience for other students and trainers of other tutors, a natural opportunity for students to develop leadership skills.

Explained in this document, the work of the Writing Center includes an educational environment for peer tutors. My understanding of my work, then, includes creating an environment where undergraduate peer tutors are engaged in learning as much as the student writers who come through our doors.

After analyzing current work documents and talking to others within my department, I realized that I needed to understand how the work of our Writing Center had shifted from past incarnations. Along-

side current documents, I analyzed work documents that existed before the renovation of our center. These included external reviews and an academic article describing our center written by the original Writing Center directors at my institution. When read alongside the current documents, these documents began to reveal the shift in the work of the Writing Center at my institution. For example, the article describes the Writing Center growing out of an experiment for “a more efficient system for teaching freshman writing” (Bean & Ramage, 1983, p. 15). It then describes the past Writing Center in these terms:

The hub of the program is the university’s new Writing Center, where both course tutors and instructors hold their office hours. Because writing assignments are relatively uniform across all sections, students can receive help on drafts from any instructor or tutor in the program, making it possible for the department to offer individual or small group assistance in the writing center during all hours that it is open. (Bean & Ramage, 1983, p. 16–17)

Comparing the current work documents against the past work documents, I began to see a distinct difference in the perception of the work of the Writing Center tutor and in the focus on whom the Writing Center served.

After analyzing the texts, I then conducted interviews with former department chairs, writing program administrators, writing center professionals, and adjunct instructors who had been involved either in the re-envisioning of the Writing Center or who had worked in the Writing Center as a tutor or as an administrator as it existed pre- and post-Strategic Proposal. I began each interview with the question (or a variation of the question), “What do you perceive as the work of the Writing Center?” I recorded the interviews and then transcribed them. From the transcriptions, I began to look for themes that mapped to what I had discovered either explicitly or implicitly stated in the work documents and for themes that may not have revealed themselves in the analyzed texts. These interviews gave voice to the materiality of the work experience. In addition to the voices of those I interviewed, because I am both researcher and participant in this study, my own reflections and experiences also provided data for my conclusions.

From these sources of data and the subsequent data analysis, I began mapping what others perceive the work of the Writing Center to be at my institution against my own perceptions. The following section describes findings that have added dimensionality to my mapping of the work of my local Writing Center. Although the findings in this essay are specific to my local study, because I have continued to widen my study to include other institutions, I believe that, added to the larger

maps of our work, these findings provide a more complex and dynamic understanding of writing center work.

Findings

Finding 1: Seeing the elephant. Because writing center work is inextricably bound with the work of others—both individuals and programs—within the institution, when we expand or re-envision the understanding of our work, that new vision necessarily affects the work of others within the institution.

When I came to my institution, I had been told that the original vision of the Writing Center had been disastrous for both the Writing Center and the first-year writing program. In fact, the re-envisioning of the Writing Center that was currently taking place was due to the demise of the Center. In 1981, in order to appease the mostly literature tenure-track faculty threatening to leave the university because of their workload including first-year composition, two writing faculty wrote a FIPSE grant for “efficient” teaching of first-year composition. In this program, first-year composition classes had an increased enrollment to 60 students per class. Faculty spent the time in the classroom lecturing to the students. The students would then meet individually with a tutor in the writing center to discuss their writing and would receive feedback and grades on their essays from “graders,” often the same individuals tutoring. Many of the instructors teaching as adjuncts at our institution today were undergraduate tutors who began their work as Writing Center tutors/graders working for this program. Catherine, the adjunct instructor who had been in charge of coordinating the Writing Center prior to the Strategic Investment Proposal, was an undergraduate tutor during that first incarnation of the Writing Center. She described the Writing Center as “the comp program”:

It was really about making sure that [the institution] could cover that many students taking [first-year composition], so there were the sixty student sections with the support of the Writing Center. So the idea was that this one-on-one work that would happen with your teacher [. . .] would happen in the Writing Center. So people held their office hours there. Writing Center visits were required. It was composition. *It was the Center for Composition.* (personal communication, January 22, 2015, emphasis added)

Although I do not have access to the original FIPSE grant, I do have an article written by the instigators of that Writing Center/Writing Program, describing the efficiency model they established (Bean & Ramage, 1983), which they wrote at the insistence of two outside

reviewers, Andrea Lunsford and Harvey Wiener. Lunsford and Wiener requested the article stress the “inadvisability of imposing this design on programs at other universities and cautioning against an oversimplified or overly optimistic view of what such a course can practically achieve” (Bean & Ramage, 1983, p. 15). From the perspective of a writing center scholar today, I can understand why Lunsford and Wiener might have been worried about the “efficiency model” of freshman composition. Several aspects describing the work of the Writing Center conflict with my vision of what a writing center can be. For example, from the article, I understand the work of the Writing Center to include the following:

- the support of a first-year composition model described as an “efficiency” model that raised class size from 25 students to 60 without increasing the workload of faculty⁶
- the instructing of students on their assignments as well as grading of those assignments
- the decrease in workload of tenure-track faculty by increasing the workload of adjunct faculty

Explicating this text helps me understand how and why the program had been described as “disastrous” by my tenure-track colleagues concerned not only with best practices in teaching writing but also with exploitation of adjunct faculty. Specifically, the article describes a writing center that serves *faculty* under the guise of serving students. But simply relying on this text and interpreting it from the view of a writing center scholar gives me a singular understanding. When I began to map it with the stories of those who experienced the work during that time, my vision necessarily had to widen. Despite the seemingly problematic nature of the efficiency model for writing center work described, the adjunct faculty who had been a part of the original Writing Center as tutors experienced something different. One former tutor, Catherine, describes the community built within the Writing Center at the time of the FIPSE grant as vibrant and dynamic. She describes the Writing Center director as “really brilliant, and a wonderful manager” and experienced the demise of the Writing Center not as a result of the problems with the program itself, but rather as a result of lack of institutional support and the leaving of the visionaries of the program. Catherine’s experience of the work of the Writing Center, then, is in sharp contrast to the narrative I heard at my interview and the one that I surmised from reading the article about that time period.

6 Once the FIPSE grant funding was eliminated, class sizes were reduced to 33. Thanks largely to the work of Kirk Branch, the class sizes for the first semester of our first-year composition sequence have since been reduced to 25.

And the experiences of those adjunct faculty who had been a part of that first Writing Center community would necessarily conflict with the new vision of the Writing Center. First, the first-year composition instructors who had first encountered writing center work as a tutor in the FIPSE era understood the purpose of the Writing Center as primarily supporting first-year composition and by supporting first-year composition, supporting faculty. Both the texts and the vision of writing center work they knew communicated that the primary work of the Writing Center was to relieve faculty workload. Writing centers for them were an extension of the classroom, not a separate learning environment.

Second, because of what is valued in the work of an adjunct, the likelihood that they would encounter the texts questioning the effectiveness of the FIPSE model or providing a different narrative of writing center work was low. They would not have been rewarded for seeking out the article describing the “efficiency model.” Nor would they have encountered the description of the old Writing Center as a “bastardization” of Bruffee’s collaborative model (Bean & Ramage, 1983, p. 26). They would not have been rewarded for engaging in writing center scholarship that provided different narratives of writing center work. Instead, they would only have the local narratives to shape their perception of the work of the Writing Center, a narrative that is in sharp contrast to the narratives those reading writing center scholarship encounter.

And third, the implementation of the peer tutor program and the phasing out of professional tutors suddenly affected their job security. The structure of the former Writing Center provided additional employment security for the adjunct instructor. The professional tutors were often the adjunct faculty who did not have a full load teaching. The Writing Center would hire them for the given number of hours they needed to “round out” their workload. In a sense, the Writing Center had been their back-up. By implementing a peer tutor program, the “new” Writing Center was taking that security away. And as the new director, I embodied the changes occurring. I embodied the new vision of the Writing Center, the one at odds with the vision they had known, despite the fact that the changes had been happening since the early 1990s. In their minds, I was the cause of the shift in the institutional relationship the Writing Center had with them and with the University.

Finding 2: New visions. As we envision our work, our discourse surrounding that work does change the perceptions of how others perceive “writing center work.” This finding corroborates Jackie Grutsch McKinney’s (2013) assertion that

the stories we tell “shape others’ views about what is writing center work” (p. 5).⁷ With such an ingrained narrative of what writing centers should be, a narrative entrenched in the local texts and experiences, how did the opportunity to re-envision the work of the Writing Center come about? Although the adjunct faculty and the literature faculty had no narratives of how a writing center could function within an institution beyond the local narratives and perceptions at our institution, the writing faculty who joined the department in the late 1990s and early 2000s brought with them new perceptions of writing center work. Although these faculty had not necessarily been immersed in the scholarship of writing centers, identifying as literacy and writing studies scholars rather than writing center scholars, they brought with them experiences and narratives of writing centers that were in sharp contrast to what they saw in the local institutional structures. The current director of composition, Doug Downs,⁸ described it this way: “My mantra is ‘I’m not a writing center guy’ . . . But] at [my former institution], the Writing Center rocked” (personal communication, January 22, 2015). He went on to describe how he learned from the peer tutors at his previous university, tutors who were also his students, about the work of their Writing Center and about how much they gained from working in the Writing Center. Coming to our institution, then, he had an idea of what a professional writing center might look like; ours was not it.

Another individual who knew that the current structure for the Writing Center left much to be desired was Kirk Branch, the writing faculty member directing both first-year composition and the Writing Center prior to my hire. Kirk described the paralysis he felt in entering the particular institutional structures and narrative that had created the Writing Center of the past:

When I got here, especially when I took over the program and was nominally the director of the Writing Center, it was not a position I felt I could enact . . .] How do you work with non-ten-

7 Grutsch McKinney (2013) specifically notes how the telling of the writing center grand narrative influences others’ perceptions of writing center work. My findings suggest that alternative stories also influence others’ perceptions, thus validating Grutsch McKinney’s (2013) argument that we need to be aware of the doors our narratives both open and close.

8 The three department administrators I interviewed (Kirk Branch, Doug Downs, and Linda Karell) all expressed the desire to have their real names included in the text. In following with Amy E. Robillard’s (2006) argument of “the exchange value that accompanies citation” (p. 163), I have honored their request and kept their real names.

ure track faculty [who are not rewarded for engaging with disciplinary research]? How do you encourage them to change what they're doing or develop what they're doing in new ways and in what ways does that seem a sort of threat to them?" (personal communication, January 12, 2015)

Like Doug, Kirk knew writing center work could be vastly different than what he was seeing in our institution. Before coming to our university, Kirk had been at Kansas State University (KU) where he had heard a far different narrative of writing center work from writing center scholar Michele Eodice. From Eodice, he had learned "about the professionalization of the field [. . .] about the scholarship, about the ways that someone trained in the discipline could really affect an interesting place, really create an interesting space that was dynamic and exciting" (personal communication, January 12, 2015). Kirk talked about how formative watching Eodice build the Writing Center at KU had been for him. Through her, he was able to see how space and relationships affect the work that can be done. And there was "nothing remotely similar" to what Eodice envisioned at KU within the institutional structures at our university.

Kirk began speaking a new vision for the Writing Center and pointing out how the current institutional structures limited what the Writing Center would be able to do, believing that if he "just [kept] saying something and repeat[ing] it in several different contexts, that has its own power" (personal communication, January 12, 2015). Attempting to at least create a more inviting space in what was a dark, unfriendly environment, Kirk began asking for a window to make the space more inviting. As he said, the "window question was the one that really opened up the whole thing . [. . .] When we began talking about the window to the [Dean] and up the ladder, the vision grew beyond us" (personal communication, January 12, 2015).

The new narrative Kirk began telling to the current chair, Linda, was in sharp contrast to the one she knew. A literature faculty member who joined our department in the 1990s, Linda Karell described her perception of teaching writing, and by connection the Writing Center, as "the scut work that you did so that you could do your real work, which was teaching literature" (personal communication, January 19, 2015). She noted, "I wasn't even aware that there was a Writing Center. It was not that talked about . [. . .] It was ancillary to what we were doing" (personal communication, January 19, 2015). By the time Linda became the chair of the English Department, Catherine was coordinating the Writing Center for a one-course release. The majority of the tutors were professional tutors and graduate students assigned to three

hours a week of tutoring. As Linda stated, “The less it took of my time, the happier I was. There was no emphasis at all on what the students were learning, how they were being tutored. From my perspective, I didn’t care” (personal communication, January 19, 2015).

For Linda to listen to the new narrative of writing center work meant that she needed to trust Kirk. Linda noted that Kirk was not one who simply asked: he also listened. He was a faculty member whom Linda knew thought about what would be best both for the institution and the department. Linda’s description of Kirk is one of a person engaged in Ratcliffe’s (2005) rhetorical listening. Because of Kirk’s willingness to listen, she was more willing to hear what he had to say about the Writing Center. Kirk brought to Linda a new narrative, a new understanding of what writing center work could be:

[Kirk] said, “This isn’t a writing center . . .] We need a real writing center.” And because it was Kirk, I was willing to listen. He would tell me what a writing center could be. He would bring me materials and would talk to me and would tell me what a writing center could be . . .] and at some point I got it and saw that we were decades behind. (Linda Karell, personal communication, January 19, 2015)

About this time, Doug was hired, and suddenly two faculty were telling alternative narratives of the work of writing centers. Linda began asking for information from Kirk to take to the Dean and to the President. In addition, the English Department happened to have its external review, and so Linda and Kirk asked the reviewers to pay particular attention to the Writing Center and the structures that guided its work. In 2010, the external reviewers wrote the following to the Provost, Assistant Provost, and the Dean:

[W]e see the need for immediate attention to the Writing Center. . .] First, the facilities of the Writing Center are woefully inadequate. . .] This is the ugliest writing center we have seen. This matters because if spaces are uninviting and crowded, students will not seek their services . . .] As we suggested earlier, we believe that the Writing Center should be directed by a faculty member with specific preparation, experience, and research interest in writing center pedagogy and writing across the curriculum. . .] We believe that the addition of this faculty member will have a number of benefits: it will improve the services the writing center tutors can provide; it will enable the Writing Center to be locus of writing across and through the curriculum, as it is at many other universities. (S. Maher & I. Weiser, memorandum to J. Fedock, J. Adams, & P. Lutz, March 22, 2010)

With this text in hand, material that Kirk brought her, and alternative narratives of writing centers from Kirk and Doug, Linda began asking for institutional support to re-envision the Writing Center. As Linda described, by helping the President, Dean, and others see the limitations of how the current writing center work was defined, upper administration got on board: “We really told the narrative of here’s how we make the university better. [We told them] you get to be the people to [make it better]—we’ll do the work” (personal communication, January 19, 2015).

As they continued to tell a new narrative of what the work of the Writing Center could be, Linda, Kirk, and Doug also began to take advantage of institutional opportunities available to them. While Kirk was on a fellowship and Doug was acting as interim director, the Writing Center suddenly received additional funding. Linda and Doug immediately began hiring peer tutors, following what Kirk had been advocating for years and acting off of Doug’s experience from his previous institution. They also brought in Eodice for consultation. When Kirk returned from his fellowship, the peer tutors were in place and more professional development for them was taking place. His perception of writing center work widened again when he saw the embodied work that he had read about and heard in Eodice’s vision:

I [asked the peer tutors] what do you know about writing that you didn’t know before you started tutoring in the Writing Center? [. . .] I was floored by that conversation . [. . .] For me, there was a piece of the Writing Center work that I hadn’t seen as directly from Michele maybe because I hadn’t been as firsthand involved in it, but when I heard those students speaking about what they knew about writing [. . .] and I mean they were sophisticated viewpoints that reflected our disciplinary knowledge about writing and composition but didn’t come from that. It came from the tutoring and interaction with students. [. . .] They were saying things about writing—and this is no surprise to you, but it was to me—that were far more sophisticated and interesting than just about any faculty member on campus that talks about writing on campus period. It was deeper, it was fuller, it was more nuanced, it was more compassionate, I would say, and more kind to students, and it was smart. And it was also clear from the conversation that that was translated into their own practice as writers, that they were learning things about writing that were improving their own writing, and improving the experience that the student writers were having on campus. [. . .] That was a game changer for me. [. . .] The Writing Center isn’t just about the students that

come in there. It's about the students who we have in there. (personal communication, January 12, 2015)

For Kirk, the actuality of the work made possible by the narratives he had heard opened the door to a bigger mission for the writing center:

When the Writing Center turned into an educational space for everyone who was in it, for me mentally, I realized that this was one of the primary arguments that Michele Eodice had made about Writing Centers: It was the tutors, the students, the director who inhabited this as an educational space . [. . .] It was a place where learning was going in all sorts of directions. (personal communication, January 12, 2015)

When the institution put out a call for an internal grant to jumpstart new initiatives on campus, Kirk wrote and was awarded the Strategic Investment Proposal that ultimately re-envisioned the work of the Writing Center as an educational space for all, a hub for writing at the university. As he wrote the proposal and the subsequent texts that led to my hire, he did not do it alone. Rather, he, Linda, Doug, and the others involved continued to consult with those outside of the institution but within writing center work, particularly Michele Eodice. They allowed the translocal texts to guide their shaping of their local texts. The result has been a widening of the periphery of writing center work at our institution. And we have beautiful windows.

Finding 3: Afterimages. New visions, new narratives of our work can never be completely new. We can widen the periphery, both of our own vision and others, but the original perceptions of our work will remain in sight. As my encounter at First Friday made visible, simply having new institutional texts defining work does not necessarily change how those within the institution perceive the work of a writing center. Many still either have not seen the new vision, or have not fully internalized a new narrative of what writing centers can be. Again I am reminded of Smith's (2005) description of the feminist movement. Afterimages, images of our old understandings, still shape our work. And it is not simply the afterimages of the adjunct instructors that affect how the work of the Writing Center coordinates within the institution. When I brought Doug back to the original topic we were supposed to discuss at First Friday, the question of how the Writing Center and Core Writing Program work together, his response was honest:

I'm supposed to have an answer for that? Ok . [. . .] I still think of the Writing Center as for the struggling student [and . . .] for the writer who it just isn't working for them to write alone . [. . .] That's totally wrong—I get that intellectually—but it is how my

brain works in the writing classroom. (personal communication, January 22, 2015)

Linda describes how difficult it is to change the perception of the work in the institution:

I can remember sort of beginning to talk about these ideas at the department chair level, and people like Math, who had the Math Learning Center, really thought that it should be in English, I mean English does writing. [. . .] So there was this big perceptual leap that had to be made that writing doesn't take place in English alone. (personal communication, January 19, 2015)

We are still working to change that perception. What I have learned from my institutional ethnographic inquiry is that both in the listening to others and in the telling of our experiences we can begin to remap those perceptions of our work within the institution.

And I have had more than my share of comments from those both within the administration of the institution and those outside who affect our work. The current Associate Provost, who is a supporter of the Writing Center, was surprised last summer when I mentioned that we served more than simply English students. In a meeting with one of our state legislators, I heard the same surprise. She was encouraged by the fact that we served more than the English Department, but did not understand why a research faculty member was necessary to direct the Center. The President, who is a great supporter of our new vision, continues to advocate for more and more tutoring; for her, the work of the Writing Center is in the support we give to students that will boost retention rates.

Being conscious, however, that these afterimages exist, knowing the power of telling new visions, and knowing that I must also keep in mind how writing center work is interdependent with the work of others, I am better able to advocate for a writing center that does more than just boost retention rates for struggling students. I keep in my narrative the vision of the Writing Center as a place that can help those struggling writers. Being able to help “struggling writers” after all, affects the President’s relationship with our state board calling for higher retention rates. But while keeping that work in mind, I widen that narrative to include so much more—the work of education and professionalization of tutors, the support of students and faculty in the teaching and learning of writing, and the list goes on.

Conclusion

What do these findings mean as we move forward? How does widening our periphery to include the coordination of our work with others in the institution help us understand writing center work and advocate for our writing centers? Examining the work of our Writing Center and my place as the Director of the Writing Center through the lens of institutional ethnography has provided a map of how the Writing Center at my institution coordinates with and affects the work being done within the institution. By working from my standpoint and “studying up,” engaging with the texts that coordinate our work and the experience of that work through the perceptions of others, I have a more accurate map, a map that spans a much wider territory and offers a more layered landscape. I have a more holistic view of the “elephant.” I better understand how my work coordinates with the adjunct faculty in our department, and with the English Department, the writing program, and the campus writ large. I now understand why faculty might stumble when I resist a move that I see as serving faculty rather than students, and I have a way to explain my resistance. I also understand that the benefits of a peer tutor program are not self-evident. I need to explain to those around me why a peer tutor program enables us to enact the vision of the Writing Center as learning environment and to acknowledge and understand the multidimensional concerns of those who ask for the return of professional tutors. Because of the map provided through IE, I also know better how to respond to other interpretations of what those in the institution expect of me, how to include their line of vision in my periphery so as to better focus toward aligning our goals. Having the maps, I can better articulate my own understanding of writing center work and its coordination with the work of my institution. As Tiffany Rousculp (2014) describes, I know better when to pivot, when to think and to act strategically, when to think and act tactically, when to give, and when to push.

In addition, this study has revealed areas where I need additional focus. Despite its inclusion in the Strategic Investment Proposal, we do not have a formalized writing across the curriculum program (WAC) at my institution, nor have I found a strong desire for or understanding of what such a program would include at my institution. Because of IE, I am less likely to force a program into existence and am more likely to think about how that program would coordinate with the work of other programs on campus. My realization of the coordination of the Center’s work with our first-year writing program has helped me to ask how the work of the Writing Center coordinates with other writing programs

on campus like a strong WAC program. As I have expanded my study to include other institutions, questions like these inform both my data collection and analysis.

Reconfiguring landscapes takes time, and I can neither assume that my vision of writing centers is shared by all, nor can I assume that I can follow a straight route to fulfilling this vision. Instead, the reflective/reflexive activity of institutional ethnography will always be necessary. Future institutional ethnographies of multiple institutions can only add to the maps that guide our work. James Thomas Zebroski (1994) argues against thinking of theory as universally applicable. Rather, he discusses theory as a “‘thinking device’ that takes the form of a certain kind of language and that is used to mediate our worldview and our practices. [. . .] It is a heuristic” (p. 7). Like Zebroski’s (1994) understanding of theory, I understand the maps created through institutional ethnography as a heuristic, a “backdrop” to administrating, to practicing writing center work. Against this backdrop, through the reflective/reflexive inquiry that institutional ethnography provides, we can position ourselves to actively shape our work rather than to react to the institutional pressures surrounding us.

I believe, like LaFrance & Nicolas (2012), that further IE studies can widen the periphery of writing center scholarship, helping us think strategically and tactically about aligning our vision of the potential of writing center work with the understanding of our work in the academy. As Smith (2005) argues, “As institutional ethnographic research builds up, it begins to be possible to reach beyond specific research into expanded dimensions of the social, informed by the research and discoveries of other institutional ethnographies” (p. 44). I would add to her claim that what we begin to understand from institutional ethnographic studies can inform (and are informed) by other studies using diverse methodologies, like Grutsch McKinney’s (2013), Geller & Denny’s (2013), Isaacs & Knight’s (2014), or Salem’s (2014). Our maps become more and more layered as we zoom our lens in and out from various positionings. I offer my local study as a preliminary example of how IE helped me to better map my work in coordination with others in the institution. Like Smith (2005) advocates within the women’s movement, we take the image of our work the institution gives us, and we keep that image in focus as we widen our periphery and advocate for the possibilities we see.

Acknowledgment

I would like to thank Montana State University for providing grant funding for this project. I would also like to thank my colleagues Kirk Branch, Doug Downs, and Linda Karell for their enthusiasm, participation, and support of this project, of me, and of the Writing Center. Finally, I thank the editors of the WCJ and my reviewers for their generous feedback and support.

References

- Bean, J. C., & Ramage, J. D. (1983). An experimental program to increase the efficiency of freshman composition at Montana State University: An initial report. *Writing Program Administration*, 7(1/2), 15–31. Retrieved from <http://wpacouncil.org/archives/07n1-2/07n1-2bean.pdf>
- Campbell, M. (2014). Learning global governance: OECD's aid effectiveness and "results" management in a Kyrgyzstani Development Project. In A. L. Griffith & D. E. Smith (Eds.), *Under new public management: Institutional ethnographies of changing front-line work* (pp. 58–80). University of Toronto Press.
- DeVault, M. L. & Gross, G. (2007). Feminist interviewing: Experience, talk, and knowledge. In S. N. Hesse-Biber (Ed.), *Handbook of feminist research: Theory and praxis* (pp. 173–197). SAGE.
- Geller, A. E., & Denny, H. (2013). Of ladybugs, low status, and loving the job: Writing center professionals navigating their careers. *Writing Center Journal*, 33(1), 96–129.
- Grutsch McKinney, J. (2013). *Peripheral visions for writing centers*. Utah State University Press.
- Harding, S. (2007). Feminist standpoints. In S. N. Hesse-Biber (Ed.), *Handbook of feminist research: Theory and praxis* (pp. 45–69). SAGE.
- Isaacs, E., & Knight, M. (2014). A bird's eye view of writing centers: Institutional infrastructure, scope and programmatic issues, reported practices. *Writing Program Administration*, 37(2), 36–67.
- Jones Royster, J., & Kirsch, G. E. (2012). *Feminist rhetorical practices: New horizons for rhetoric, composition, and literacy studies*. Southern Illinois University Press.
- Journet, D. (2012). Narrative turns in writing studies research. In L. Nickoson & M. P. Sheridan (Eds.), *Writing studies research in practice: Methods and methodologies* (pp. 13–24). Southern Illinois University Press.

- LaFrance, M., & Nicolas, M. (2012). Institutional ethnography as materialist framework for writing program research and the Faculty–Staff Work Standpoints project. *College Composition and Communication*, 64(1), 130–150. Retrieved from <http://www.ncte.org/cccc/cc/ccc/issues/v64-1>
- LaFrance, M., & Nicolas, M. (2013). What’s your frequency?: Preliminary results of a survey on faculty and staff perspectives on writing center work. *Writing Lab Newsletter*, 37(5/6), 10–13.
- Modern Language Association. (October 2012). Montana SU, Bozeman. *MLA Job Information List*, 75. Retrieved from <https://www.mla.org/content/download/10816/236105>
- Montana State University Writing Center. (2016, Spring). Welcome to the MSU Writing Center. Retrieved from <http://www.montana.edu/writingcenter>
- Qualley, D. J. (1997). *Turns of thought: Teaching composition as reflexive inquiry*. Heinemann.
- Ratcliffe, K. (2005). *Rhetorical listening: Identification, gender, whiteness*. Southern Illinois University Press.
- Robillard, A. E. (2006). “Young scholars” affecting composition: A challenge to disciplinary citation practices. *College English*, 68(3), 253–270.
- Rousculp, T. (2014). *Rhetoric of respect: Recognizing change at a community writing center*. National Council of Teachers of English.
- Salem, L. (2014). Opportunity and transformation: How writing centers are positioned in the political landscape of higher education in the United States. *Writing Center Journal*, 34(1), 15–43.
- Smith, D. E. (2005). *Institutional ethnography: A sociology for people*. Rowman AltaMira Press.
- Smith, D. E. (2006). Incorporating texts into ethnographic practice. In D. E. Smith (Ed.), *Institutional ethnography as practice* (pp. 65–88). Rowman and Littlefield.

Smith, D. E., & Turner, S. M. (2014) Introduction. In D. E. Smith & S. M. Turner (Eds.), *Incorporating texts into institutional ethnographies* (pp. 3-14). University of Toronto Press.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1980). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes* (M. Cole, Ed.). Harvard University Press.

Vygotsky, L. (1986). *Thought and language* (A. Kozulin, Ed.). MIT Press.

Zebroski, J. T. (1994). *Thinking through theory: Vygotskian perspectives on the teaching of writing*. Boynton/Cook.

About the Author

Michelle Miley is Director of the Writing Center and Assistant Professor of English at Montana State University. She currently serves as secretary on the Rocky Mountain Writing Center Association executive board and has begun an institutional ethnography of writing center work from the standpoint of students.