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Theory and Reality: The Ideal Writing Center(s)

Muriel Harris

In this less-than-perfect world, pessimists insist that there is no “ideal” anything. Nothing is perfect, no one walks on water, and the best we can do is tread furiously to stay afloat. But writing center people are, if anything, eternal optimists. We always believe that somehow we’ll manage—that the dark old closet offered to us will blossom into a marvelous writing center, that the budget of \$45 allotted to us for materials will be adequate, that the student who was dragged into the center by her teacher as a “basket case” will, with our help, become an excellent writer, and that the computer science major who prefers Fortran to English will discover through our tutorials the power and beauty of good writing.

So, as optimists, we attempt, in departmental planning committees, in conference presentations, and in journal articles, to define the “ideal writing center,” the place that we strive to create. But does it follow that we are therefore able to envision such a place? The answer to that is a definitive YES—and a definitive NO. Yes, it follows that we may be able to characterize ideals, and no, we may not be able to delineate what the perfect center is.

To explore that paradox, we can start with the negative side. There clearly can be no one ideal center defined in terms of its physical set-up, kinds of services, or even type of organization. The small writing center closely intertwined with one division of a university and serving as an extension of classrooms in a particular program (Chase) can work as effectively as the huge center which helps students learn the ground rules of academic discourse used throughout the university (Hawkins). If both achieve somewhat different purposes, can we call either one less effective than the other or somehow farther from the ideal?

Articles in *The Writing Lab Newsletter* and *The Writing Center Journal* and entries in *The 1984 Writing Lab Directory* (Harris) indicate that some writing centers offer primarily tutorial help while other centers include self-instructional formats to teach editing skills. Some centers are a student service, housed in the dean’s office; others are an arm of the English department’s instructional offerings. The people that the center serves may be basic writers drafting papers in various content courses, foreign students, business writers, or students in freshman composition—or a mixture of these different groups. The instruction a writing center provides may be geared to taking students through the process of writing, working on rhetorical principles, reviewing grammar, preparing for competency tests, mastering English as a second language, writing technical reports, and/or learning how to use a word processor. Or the center may offer other teachers help with structuring writing assignments in courses across campus or may hold workshops for people in the community. Instruction may be offered individually, in small groups, in workshops, or assisted by self-instruction, computers, and/or handouts.

It would seem then, at first glance, that the only thing these facilities share is merely a generalized interest in writing. Thus we should have some sympathy for colleagues in our departments who ask, “But what is a writing center anyway? What does it do?” And we can also sympathize with the newcomer charged with starting a lab who asks, “Which students does the lab serve? Do I need computers? How many tutors should be hired?” These would seem to be questions that ought to have easy answers, and our inability to offer any universally applicable response seems to some a symptom of chaos or an indication that, since writing centers can’t be defined in these terms, they lack validity—the kind of validity that resides in the idea of a

composition program. After all, NCTE makes pronouncements about such matters as class size, and most schools have well-defined procedures for determining which students are assigned to which writing courses. Moreover, there is usually a syllabus to outline what is taught in each course.

And if the variation between different writing centers causes concern, there's the added problem of the dynamic nature of writing centers, for they are in a constant state of motion—growing, expanding, and redefining their roles. This need for flexibility and change is inherent because writing centers have to meet different needs, needs that change year by year. As writing programs add new courses, new requirements, and new majors, the writing center must provide appropriate materials and resources. If tutors are asked to work with journalism majors, they must learn how the organization and style of journalistic writing differ from expository prose. If the engineering school sends students over with reports, tutors have to master the format and style of technical writing. If collaborative writing is introduced into the composition program, group tutorials need to be introduced into the writing center. In these cases, the writing center follows along, either responding to new requests and needs or complementing other writing instruction. In other cases, the writing center is freer to move into new areas of instruction. Introducing a writing emphasis into other disciplines or word processing into a writing curriculum represents forward movements that are more easily initiated by a writing center than a writing program. Thus, writing centers which find themselves doing this year exactly what they did three years ago may also find signs of ossification and entrenchment.

So, if we can't define the ideal writing center by its size, by its staff, or by its services; if we can't define it by its student population; and if we can't even make it stand still long enough in time to be examined under a microscope, how can we characterize the concept of a writing center, much less an ideal one? This argument may sound as if it is headed toward reinventing the philosophy of the ancient sage Heraclitus, who acknowledged something about the flux of the world when he realized that he couldn't step twice in the same place in a river. But those of us who choose to find some underlying truths or unchanging constants in writing centers can wiggle out of that argument by claiming that behind the flux of the observable world are ideals that guide and shape those specific instances. In short, there are a few things that define ideal writing centers.

One guiding principle of ideal writing centers is that whether they are called writing centers, writing labs, writing places, or writing rooms, they are labs. There are, no doubt, those of us who recoil at the medical or clinical image of that word. (Lives there a human being so sheltered from the real world that he does not have one single after-dinner story of medical incompetence or AMA-approved arrogance?) But, despite anti-doctor attitudes, a medical image of what we do is not as repugnant as it might sound at first. Consider Donald Murray's view of what writing teachers do:

The writing teacher must not be a judge, but a physician. His job is not to punish, but to heal. Most students are bad writers, but the more serious the injuries, the more confusing the symptoms, the greater the need for diagnostic work. ...[The family doctor] doesn't treat the headache, the difficulty in breathing, the stomach cramp, the lack of sleep or loss of weight; he tries first to diagnose their cause. Is it an organic problem? Is it a tumor, a problem of circulation, or is it psychiatric?

The writing teacher must train himself to be an expert diagnostician. This is central to the job of teaching writing. He wants to spot the most critical

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problem in each student's writing to give that student a prescription which will be effective for him. (19)

In the writing center diagnostic work is even more critical because the center is the referral place. Like the lab that diagnoses samples sent by doctors, the writing lab diagnoses samples sent by teachers, though our sample to examine is both the student and her paper. And because we have the opportunity to work on a regular tutorial basis with both the student and the writing this student has produced, we can function more effectively. Though Donald Murray advocates diagnostic work for all teachers, this seems not to be a workable solution for most classroom teachers, especially those who do not use, as Murray does, the conference approach. What most teachers do manage to do is to isolate and identify problems and then refer their students to the lab. One student has organization problems; another student has sentence structures that go "awk" in the night. What causes those "awk" sentences or disorganized prose? Disorganized prose may be a result of a lack of planning skills, an inability to rework drafts of a paper, lack of audience awareness, or unfamiliarity with tools such as outlines. Choppy sentences may be the observable symptom of a hesitancy about the correct use of transition words or a fear of writing long sentences, which need punctuation that the student can't handle. We in the writing lab know that the reasons are as various as the students who come in our doors, and we also know that it is our job to look beyond symptoms to underlying causes. That's lab work.

Lab work is also hands-on, trying-out work. In chem labs students break bottles or get results that are slightly off the mark. In engineering labs students try out techniques they've never encountered before, but they know that help is near-by when they mess up or need advice. And a writing lab should offer the same opportunities for trying out and re-doing, for getting advice in the act of writing, for puzzling over alternatives, for doing something a couple of times until it comes out better. And this is as true for the tutor as it is for the student. As lab tutors, we must constantly be aware of the need to change direction or try a new teaching strategy that will be more effective for a particular student.

A few years ago it seemed as if the term "writing lab" was going to designate materials-centered facilities that would help "students produce correct finished products" while the "writing center" would be the place that "relies on tutorial instruction to assist students with the writing process" (Harris, "Process and Product" 1). This distinction seems not to have become a reality, for *The 1984 Writing Lab Directory* shows that few if any labs or centers rely mainly or solely on materials.

The chemistry, engineering, or writing lab is also not the group lecture place and not the room where everyone is doing exactly the same thing at the same time. Moreover, like the experimental physicist's lab, the writing lab is also a research place—an environment especially conducive to case-study research, to research focusing on individual differences among writers, and to research on the conference or tutorial method of teaching writing. Thus, we can say that any ideal writing center, writing lab, or writing clinic is actually a "lab" in the senses described above.

If the notion of a writing center as a lab defines one set of ideal characteristics, another less tangible set of qualities resides in what can loosely be called the lab's "atmosphere" or "ambiance." Anyone walking in an ideal lab quickly notices that it is a lively, active, slightly frenetic place in need of a traffic cop and a bit of straightening up. A writing lab is, after all, a friendly support place for students and not a tightly controlled classroom or that perfectly organized, spotless museum every parent dreams of when asking children to clean up their rooms. Ideal writing labs don't threaten or intimidate students by being too quiet, too impersonal, too

much like an old-fashioned library or a sterile modern office. Instead, ideal centers are open, airy, and noisy because of all the people coming and going, the discussions buzzing in different parts of the room, and the laughter of a few lab groupies who come in just to chat for few minutes. The furniture in most ideal labs is slightly dilapidated and comfortable with no possibility of being mistaken for the stuff that can only be described as motel modern. And ashtrays, a coffee pot, and perhaps a candy dish are visible. At the front desk is a receptionist to greet people, to make appointments, and to answer the phone. (Since no one has ever seriously considered asking teachers to answer phones during their class hours, administrators of ideal labs also recognize the validity of writing lab teaching by providing some sort of reception personnel.) One other noticeable aspect of ideal writing labs is that they are rich in resources, such as handouts, books, and tapes. But these resources don't dominate the lab because a writer and his reader/coach/helper are the focal point of what is going on in the ideal lab.

Another aspect of the ideal writing lab's atmosphere is that it does not have to exist in a constant defensive, or "state of alert," posture. The administrators responsible for the lab are not constantly assessing its usefulness, wondering whether to close its doors, or demanding that it be a self-supporting or credit-generating facility. The teachers who use the ideal center understand its contribution to teaching the writing process and don't refer students solely to have their comma splices fixed. And students walking in the door know they are not there to get someone to correct or edit their papers for them. Thus the ideal lab has managed to create an environment where the director is freed from having to spend time justifying the lab's existence to administrators or re-educating the teaching staff by repeatedly issuing policy statements which explain that the lab does not and will not "fix" student papers. In the ideal writing center, students and their tutors are free to work on writing at whatever level seems productive for the student.

What does go on in tutorials in an ideal writing lab? Talk and more talk—and a lot of writing. The staff of an ideal writing lab is chosen not because they are the best writers around but because, no matter where they are on the academic ladder, they are dedicated to helping fellow writers. They are capable not just of spotting writing problems but—more crucial to the role of the writing lab—of diagnosing causes of writing deficiencies and of helping the writer acquire needed skills and knowledge. In the imperfect writing lab, the tutor/editor says, "You have a comma splice there. What is needed is a semi-colon between these two words" or "Your second paragraph should be rewritten like this...." In ideal writing labs, the tutor/coach helps the student to recognize the problem and then helps her learn how to correct it. In the ideal writing lab, the paper is in front of the student, not the tutor, and the pencil is in the student's hand. The tutor in this lab has had enough training to recognize that writing is a process, that errors need to be prioritized, that editing skills are important only at the last stage of a piece of writing, that the tutorial is a dialog and not a lecture, and that the tutor's job, as Stephen North phrases it, "is to produce better writers, not better writing" (438).

In the ideal writing lab, the director is not off somewhere in a quiet office but in the lab tutoring along with the rest of his staff. Without that day-to-day awareness of what is involved in tutoring or what students need help with, a director is in danger of distancing himself from the reality of the writing lab's work. And without a daily sense of what is needed, the director is less likely to keep moving the lab forward. When not tutoring, the director looks slightly harried with too much to do because of his commitment to responding to the needs of both students and faculty. Ideally, the director either spends all of his time in the lab as a full-time director or teaches in classes that help him coordinate the writing program with the writing lab. Only in the less-than-ideal writing lab is the director's attention diverted elsewhere with non-lab

activities. In the ideal writing lab, the director has either committed himself to yearly revisions of the tutor handbook that is perpetually out of date or to recognizing that, because change is a constant, attempts to keep that handbook updated are futile.

In ideal writing labs, the services are so varied that they defy cataloging. Tutors offer assistance to writers with a variety of assignments—to writers preparing professional documents such as resumes and letters of application and to writers learning English as a second language. Staff positions in the lab offer training for English education majors and for others exploring their potential as teachers. The huge variety of questions that need answers yesterday and the huge pool of data available from every student using the lab offer a rich resource for research. Teachers around the campus find the lab to be an excellent resource for them as they add writing emphases to their courses, assess writing competence, or restructure their writing assignments. Some ideal writing centers have become high tech centers, helping students master word processing; other centers are training grounds for graduate students interested in specializing in this exhilarating, exhausting, and effective individualized form of teaching writing.

On and on the list goes, for no two ideal writing labs function in exactly the same way. But a few common threads of commitment run through their guiding philosophies. An ideal writing center, for example, is predicated on the idea that writing is a process, an act in which the writer moves along exploring, discovering, changing, adding to, finding, and refining his message. An ideal writing lab helps writers become more proficient with all of these processes. Ideal writing centers are also committed to a unique view of the writer as an individual whose differences are acknowledged by close diagnosis and tutorial assistance suited solely to that particular writer. One textbook may be chosen for a whole class, but no one tutorial method is ever selected for everyone coming for assistance. In ideal writing labs, no instructor ever becomes complacent because, even when the same student returns, she has new problems, new assignments, and new skills to master.

Characterizing writing centers, then, is difficult because it depends on our perspective. Viewed from one angle, they function too differently for us to find a common "ideal," but viewed from a different perspective, there are theoretical commitments which characterize ideal writing centers. It is these commitments that inform the reality of day-to-day tutoring and make it work so effectively. And then there is the commitment to change that characterizes the best writing centers. Does anyone teach in an ideal writing center? If asked, someone in a ideal lab would undoubtedly answer, "No, but I'm working on it."

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Muriel Harris, associate professor of English and Director of the Writing Lab at Purdue University, is the editor of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*; author of articles on writing labs and individualized instruction in journals such as *College English*, *CCC*, and *English Journal*; and editor of *Tutoring Writing: A Sourcebook for Writing Labs*. Her most recent work includes a book of rhetorical exercises for lab and classroom, *Practice With a Purpose*, and a co-authored textbook entitled *Making Paragraphs Work*. At the end of the last academic year, she and her staff once again spent several days shoving bookcases and re-arranging tables and couches in yet another attempt to achieve the atmosphere described in the article printed here.