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# Trading Spaces: Space as Metaphor for Contingency in Writing Centers

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**Abstract** This article offers a critical reading of writing center workplace space. Weaving together counterstorying with semiotic, geographic, and rhetorical analysis of space, the author provides an alternative way of understanding the connections between our physical and metaphorical workspaces. Precarity and contingency, the article posits, are made more palpable through connection to physical space because writing center labor (and workers) are often identified mostly through their space and availability. Ultimately, this article argues for a new way forward that decouples writing center workers and labor from inhabited workplace space. Arguing that these spaces are gendered, classed, and raced (among other things), we need to reimagine our workplace identities as separate from the spaces in which labor takes place.

**Keywords** space, precarity, contingency, labor studies, writing centers.

**A**s a researcher of labor, wellness, and care in writing center work, I can't help but notice that there is something in the state of writing center work that makes it perpetually contingent. Even the most secure among us are just a single administrative decision away from leaving writing center work, either by our own volition or because of circumstances outside our control. And, as the pandemic has shown us, this kind of movement is only accelerating, both within the profession and in the larger landscape of employment in the United States. Our field is composed of different kinds of contingent or precarious workers and contingent or precarious spaces, which function as metaphors for the power dynamics that shape our field.

In this essay, I explore how contingency suffuses our work and our writing-centered spaces. And I also think about how to contend with this kind of precarity. I want to

acknowledge that while I am saying that even the most secure around us labor in contingency-adjacent positions, this is, in many ways, quite different from how adjunct and staff in writing center work experience their labor. Often, these positions are even more precarious as they are on yearly or even semesterly contracts. So, while I want to explore how our field is one that is in perpetual contingency, I also realize that not all of us are laboring under the same kind of precarity. It's a kind of paradox: If the field is contingent, aren't we all contingent? Perhaps, but we aren't all equally precarious. And I want to decouple and unpack precarity and contingency because despite their similarities, they aren't synonymous.

A recent experience I had at my elite, wealthy, predominately white, liberal arts institution helps to underscore the difference between precarity and contingency, and some

of the lasting issues with our field that I hope we can eventually solve. It involves a new person who started directing the center in which my writing center is housed. I had worked with them over the past few years through our First-Year Seminar (common in SLACs, this is the equivalent to a first-year writing program at other institutions), and I had a good rapport with them.

So, imagine my surprise when, late one evening, during the first week or so of the semester, I received an email with a plan to remove me from my office and co-locate me with peer writing tutors in an office that would be used as a kind of swing space and drop-in writing center. I swiftly responded with a firm “That’s not appropriate for my position as faculty.” And the emails from my colleague kept flying. In their response, they mentioned a new HR policy for staff was coming out and I needed to be in my office.

I understand that most administrators are likely feeling the pressures that have arisen since the start of the pandemic, which drew attention to the spaces in which we do and can work and to the contingency of employees across work environments. I also recognize that this space solution might have seemed like a really good way to solve two issues—scarcity of tutoring space and office space—at once. And I acknowledge that we writing center administrators are touchy about space. It’s a running trope in our research and it moves through our historical and professional histories like a creeping monster. It’s both metaphorical and material, as Nedra Reynolds (2007) observes, and it reminds us that we are just one decision away from workplace tensions and potentially challenging outcomes.

I can get into the details of all the ways in which this kind of experience brings up the marginalization of writing centers. I can refer to the basements and the closets and Stephen North (1984) with his invective of what a writing center is and is not. I can even talk about the misperceptions of my position—were I staff, this kind of an exchange would likely have ended quite differently than it did in my position as faculty. I know we have all been here before—confusion over our contracts and roles, frustration that we are neither fish nor

fowl, neither fully faculty nor fully administrative/staff. Our positions occupy liminal space if not in titling then in task. But what struck me most about this interaction is how very little my colleague seemed to know about my reportage at the college and their general line of thinking that it is okay to smash together a faculty member and their tutors (or, really, anyone) in an office-sized space. At the same time, I was struck by how forcefully I responded to a suggested change in my space. (There’s that touchiness.) Maybe some kind of sentimentality (Cresswell, 2014) fueled my response. I, like other directors, might also be territorial over the space I have (Tuan, 1977). Then again, as Reynolds (2007) suggests, our lived experiences often occur in specific spaces (places) where we develop memories and experience emotions. Spaces, then, are not just symbolic. They are material, they are embodied; and how we experienced space prior to our current moment often shapes our in-the-moment responses to space (Tuan, p. 2). In other words, space is not interchangeable, despite the neo-liberal turn toward swing spaces, open spaces, and otherwise informal spaces. Space, like contingency, is also not value neutral.

Despite how space shapes our lives, affect, and memory, I have worked hard (not always succeeding) to move past my sentimentality and territoriality over space because, in my current job, the writing center doesn’t have its own space. We are distributed across the college through our writing fellows program. And we have an online tutoring center that has exploded in popularity since COVID-19. We also have drop-in tutoring a couple of nights a week in the main office suite space. We already occupy a kind of swing space model, and while it is in no way perfect, we have worked through these space limitations, grown, and formed community. I am no longer as sentimental about running a stand-alone writing center space. I recognize the benefits of not having to be tethered to my physical writing center. Cleaning up, sorting, arranging, as if this space is not a professional space that many hundreds of students walk through on a weekly basis, but a personal space that reflects on me, my work, my values. These writing center spaces, in this way, are charged with

all kinds of emotions and expectations that grow over time. One might even say that these spaces can be haunted by the expectations of those who inhabit them. I count myself in this particular group of expectant ghosts, by the way. When managing a physical writing center, I did treat it like an extension of myself. Every cup, used tissue, damaged plant, riled me. These reactions were gendered and classed, of course, but they were also responding to the materiality of the space and the precarity that I felt if one object was misaligned, dirty, or broken. Space, then, like contingency and precarity, is a legacy as much as it is a burden that we carry in our work.

In writing about my particular experience with space and about writing center spaces in general, I have to admit that I am still territorial. These kinds of reactions are instinctual; they run deep and often respond to past traumatic workplace experiences.

Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) argues that there are many things that impact our relationship to space and place. Some of these factors are cultural, some are behavioral or even animalistic; however, there are also experience-based factors that impact how we relate to space and place. While he discusses space from an environmental and urban planning standpoint, we can just as easily see how we bring many prior experiences, beliefs, and cultural practices into the workspaces that we occupy (p. 6). And the pandemic has shifted many of the ways in which we relate to space, perhaps for better and for worse. We are more flexible and mobile, to invoke terms that executives might use in discussing contingency, but, perhaps, more distributed, and constantly “on” in our work lives. Of course, distributed space was the norm for my work at the college even before COVID-19, and I often felt “on” well into the night because our residential campus hosted most of its tutoring work in the evenings. The pandemic, for us, ironically, gave rise to more coherent, if not physical, spaces, such as online spaces for tutoring and training. It has also made me rethink my constant engagement with work. When you are living through a crisis, work emergencies seem far less significant.

Of course, many of us at the college are feeling space crunches, and these extend

throughout the entire campus. This is likely from a combination of factors that will be familiar to many of us and that has roots in the hollowing out of tenure over the past several decades in favor of far cheaper contingent labor. We are experiencing overenrollment while full-time faculty lines have remained static for several years (nearly a decade at my institution). From classrooms to dorms, we are stuffed full of students and our spaces are continuously in use.

In one respect, this is a good thing, especially with declining enrollments at many higher education institutions around the United States. But this space issue is hitting people differently as they perceive the pandemic to be winding down—for some, this is a return to the values and culture of our institution while, for others, we feel another way forward outside of former space-centered labor is possible. Beyond limitations in space, there seems to be less of everything to go around—time, money, support, relief—and faculty and staff are feeling these resource crunches acutely. At the same time, as Marc Bousquet (2008) notes, “Changes in the academic workplace come about as a consequence of clearly understood and clearly intended managerial, corporate, and political initiatives with the explicit intention of inducing the faculty to relinquish certain values and practices” (p. 10). In some cases, this means weakening of faculty governance, but, also, autonomy over research and teaching, among other things.

In keeping with the erosion of governance, much of the rhetoric around repairing community seems to be an invective coming from the top down (administration to faculty and staff), though some small number of workers also echo this rhetoric with ground swellings of nostalgia. Henri Lefebvre (1991) calls this the “fetishization of space” (p. 21), and while he is discussing space in relationship to the state (among other things), we can see this kind of material understanding of space playing out over the pandemic, too. Space, after all, is often equated with economic production, as the countless articles bemoaning remote work and learning—and its impact on businesses, real estate, and capital—shows us. Physical space has become the solution to

this very complex issue of production—which is tied into globalization and homogenization of culture—and that predates the pandemic and results from neoliberal practices by the managerial class. Space, in this figuration, is controlled for material and power-related purposes and therefore has coercive effects on those who occupy these spaces. In place of this, however, there is resistance to such figurations of space. Some of us seek autonomy in our spaces, both mental and physical (pp. 26–27).

Having worked hard to make the writing center and its programming accessible over the past few years, decoupling myself and my workplace identity from a physical space, I am not as preoccupied with permanent physical space as a means of developing or repairing community, as others might be. In fact, I am resistant to such nostalgic and coercive figurations of physical space, as I have written about before (Giaino, 2022). I realize that there are many ways to form a community, from an outside cider and doughnuts meetup with tutors in the fall, to Zoom workshops and asynchronous resources on contemplative writing practices during the quiet cold months of a Vermont winter, to masked meetings in my office. Place, as Tim Cresswell (2014) notes, is locatable but not necessarily stationary (p. 13). Community, I have often thought, can be built out of the intangible; it is also relative insofar as developing less out of preference than out of necessity.

Additionally, social and mental space are interconnected, as Lefebvre (1991) argues, and they both occur in space. But, with online and digital spaces, the work of writing centers is no less social *and* mental (creative, inventive, etc.), no less effective than in physical space. Our labor occurs in the “space of thoughts and utterances” (p. 28). It occurs through speaking and writing and feeling. This work happens on Zoom, via email, on Google docs, on WOnline, and on countless other online platforms, as well as in physical space. Sometimes, however, digital spaces might even facilitate a merging of the social-emotional with the intellectual work of talking about writing. Online spaces can facilitate the “incommunicable” (p. 28).

While I celebrate digital space as a site of socioemotional and intellectual work—and

benefit both from digital spaces and private spaces to preform my labor—I also value my on-campus office. Co-locating with tutors would take that special place away from me. Maybe space matters, in the abstract or as a symbol, because we academics—especially writing center folks—are afforded so little of it (here is that material-economic model coming up again). Often co-located with our support services, our identities become intertwined with our administrative work. This dissolution between the boundaries of the labor we perform and our professional identity makes us hazier, less well-defined, to those around us. This positional opacity, in turn, makes us more precarious. It’s hard to champion (or even acknowledge) that which is unseen. We fall into our spaces.

Then again, metaphor and materiality intertwine around specific spaces; the study of space, as Reynolds (2007) notes, “can be so emotionally loaded” that it is hard “to understand how some places can feel like home to some while alienating to others” (p. 3). As academics, it seems as if we are always scrapping for our space. We are always trying to justify what we have. Sometimes, we are trying to get more. And, I think, this kind of work—and what we carry into our current positions regarding autonomy, support, and, yes, space—starts in graduate school, or even before. Prior experiences, especially work experiences, after all, impact our relationship to space.

In graduate school, I was one of six in an office with three desks. Before I entered my PhD program, I was an adjunct who roamed from school to school in Central Massachusetts. Swing spaces, informal spaces, inadequate spaces have been a constant in my career.

Consider, even, my first position: a tenure-track job at a community college. There, I was co-located in a learning commons suite. Where other faculty had stand-alone offices, my dual position as faculty and writing center director relegated me to staff offices. So, while I was not contingent, my dual role made me an outsider (especially because the WCD work was not part of the union position as my faculty role was) among faculty. These liminal positions make even noncontingent faculty precarious.

The 1970s new brutalist concrete construction of the building meant that I had an office that was partitioned from the other offices by false walls that didn't reach the ceiling. Because of the concrete, it was deafening when all five of us were in our offices and tutors were working in the suite area outside our doors. I remember working late at night just to get things done. Silence has always been a part of my work process, even if the spaces in which I worked were usually quite loud.

This idea of space extends to our writing center spaces, not just our offices or workspaces. At my previous job at an R1 institution, the first thing that I did was push to totally renovate the writing center and office suite spaces, which were filled to the brim with bulky office furniture (complete with overhanging desks), inaccessible glass partitions that bounced sound around our main tutoring room, and submarine gray paint that felt more like prison than like a welcoming educational space. I set myself to tagging all the useless furniture, sketching new configurations of our workspace, and sorting broken technology and expired foodstuff in our office suite. Over a semester of work, the space was transformed into one that was accessible, functional, and welcoming. We even managed to create a breakroom/waiting room for tutors and clients in what was a disused office suite that connected my office to the writing center's tutoring rooms.

In that position, I was adamant that the writing center space should offer respite for tutors and clients alike. Working at one of the largest universities in the country meant that students often had few places to go between their shifts and their classes (or other off-campus jobs). This decision proved to be one of the critical factors that led to community-building, which, in turn, encouraged tutor-led research, collaboration, and leadership work. More than that, however, the tutors became friends (and sometimes paramours) and I, in my adjacent office space, became enmeshed in their day-to-day lives, which extended far beyond their work to include their personal lives and experiences. So, in some ways, there are positive outcomes that accompany deep investment in our spaces. The question, of

course, is if this investment is sustainable in the long run.

I look back with pride on the work I did to renovate and rehabilitate our spaces but also with regret. Only after the fact, I realized that I was doing work that the men administrators before me did not do. And, as in my previous position, I worked hard to "rehab" the writing center only to walk away from it when I realized the work was unsustainable. In making our workspace better and more welcoming and accommodating we draw from our own personal resources to create something functional and, potentially, beautiful.

This space work, though, has a toll on us.

Suddenly, I associated myself and my well-being with the writing center space. When it became dirty, I cleaned it. When chairs were left pulled out or whiteboards left filled with notes, I fumed. My working-class background felt deep shame in disrepair and mess. But because of my past experiences and my current values, I became a kind of maid. I also noticed others—mostly BIPOC tutors—inhabiting that role on top of their regular tutoring and administrative duties. In this way, we were not the utopic community that I gushed about in earlier paragraphs. As Elizabeth H. Boquet (2002) notes: "Academic cleaning services, like writing centers, house their share of the politics of race, gender, and class" (p. 16). Spaces, then, can be haunted by classed, raced, and gendered internal and external expectations.

Of course, not all of us feel compelled to listen to, or develop, these expectations. Some folks are comfortable traversing and using space while not contributing to it, while others cannot help but stop and do the work of maintaining those spaces. This is one of the most frustrating things about physical space in a writing center: the more precarious we are, perhaps the more adrift in the institution we feel, the more we perform meta-labor—outside of regular job obligations—to create and maintain physical space. The givers and takers who use the space, though, are never equally distributed.

At my current institution, which is very residential, space seems like less of a necessity, perhaps because there is less of it to go around and, also, the student population is

small enough and connected enough that they see one another throughout their days and evenings. It is hard to hide on such a populated but bounded campus.

Another way of putting this, however, is that even as we writing center administrators provide welcoming and intentional spaces to staff, we might not necessarily be afforded that same kind of space (metaphorically and materially) at our institutions, particularly if we are contingent. And, sometimes, the additional tasks that we take on in managing space are both burdensome and embarrassing. Space, after all, is political; it legitimizes our communities and our work just as denying space disenfranchises us (Cresswell, 2014). It takes a lot of work to maintain an inclusive physical space for others. Furthermore, many of us become so enmeshed with the writing center that it seems unthinkable that we are separate entities with obligations beyond our administrative work. This is the double-edged sword of space—it welcomes but it also binds us to it.

Which brings me back to contingency.

Typically, when writing center administrators lose their space, they also lose control over their work. It starts with learning commons or co-location in the library or other kinds of models that separate the writing center from its spatial (and often scholarly) practices. From there, we WCAs need to decide if we will continue with our work or not. I have heard so many heartrending stories of secure faculty—those with tenure or on tenure track—struggling with poor administrative decisions that separate them from the writing center or that make their administrative work so untenable that they must leave it behind.

This scenario is common and it's a story I repeat because I want to drive home how perpetual our contingency can be. Perhaps it's our reportage lines, or our split lines, or our hybrid faculty-administrative lines. Or the exhausting nature of our work, which, unless we are very lucky, can be nonstop. Whatever it is, I have found that neither fish nor fowl-ness hurts us. It makes us vulnerable and muddies our work to those in positions of power above us.

Now, add onto that contingency a healthy dose of precarity. Perhaps our work is only part-

time, or we are staff, or we are in non-tenure-track lines. Well, then, the decisions made about our work and our space have even more dire consequences for us. Positions get cut or combined. New tasks are given to us though our job descriptions aren't updated. In short, every new administrator is both an opportunity and a hazard. A chance to better our positions and that of the writing center AND a chance for it to blow up in our faces.

Space, in the grand scheme of things, seems like such a small thing, even a petty thing, in this larger calculus about livelihood and autonomy. Space, after all, isn't really livelihood. But it represents so much: legitimacy, support, care, investment in students, prior experience, and more. When we lose it, we feel devalued and disenfranchised. But when we have it, we feel pressure to maintain it.

I see space as a metaphor for the perpetual contingency we WCAs find ourselves in. And metaphorical as it may be, it is also a material embodiment of our professional location in the university. We are always seeking more legitimacy, more care, more support, more investment, yet, at the same time, it is always possible that all this groundwork can go up in smoke.

So, what do we do?

I start by setting boundaries around my role and its connection to the writing center as an entity. I am *not* the human embodiment of the writing center, no matter what folks may think. I put my peer tutors front and center and I uplift my professional tutors. I often talk about our work in "we" terms and I ask others to speak for the writing center when I know faculty and administrators might want me to speak for it instead.

From there, I think about ways—outside of space—that the writing center can build community. This might include moving around campus, especially outdoors, and into the community around our institution. I also include digital spaces in our work to make it more accessible and, yes, convenient for our time-strapped and very busy community.

And I think about my relative position as one that, yes, is contingent but is also, for better or worse, not nearly as precarious as other positions that I've been in or ones that I have

observed in the field. I try to own my contingency at the same time that I remind myself that my precarity has shifted over the years. This is a back-and-forth self-dialogue and it doesn't always work. Sometimes, I return to that adjunct position and mentality—or the staff mentality from a previous job—and I panic. The ghosts of past jobs and past spaces come back to haunt me. But I work hard to remind myself that every position I have taken has contingency built into it and different and relative levels of precarity. Reminding myself of this idea is hard because I grew up working class, so precarity was built into my early life and work experiences. I find myself having to unlearn my classed ways of working.

Finally, I talk about contingency because we don't talk about it enough. I talk about growth and movement, and I try to explain that, while I love writing center work, it's just one piece of the teacher-scholar that I am. I work hard to explain that the writing center is a research site and a pedagogical site but that it is only one of many that I am interested in studying. In this way, I am trying to disentangle my professional (and personal) identity with writing centers, which, I believe, is a good thing for my career, my work habits, and my self-concept.

Then, I develop a mantra (which, again, doesn't always work in the throes of distress), which I repeat:

We are more than our labor.

**Genie Nicole Giaino** is Assistant Professor and Director of the Writing Center at Middlebury College. Their current research utilizes quantitative and qualitative models to answer a range of questions about behaviors and practices in and around writing centers. Their scholarly and programmatic interest in fair and “well” workplace practices have profoundly influenced their approach to writing administration to be inclusive, intentionally antiracist, and focused on the wellness of both workers and students. The author of over two dozen peer-reviewed articles and chapters, they recently published their first solo-authored monograph, *Unwell Writing Centers: Searching for Wellness in Neoliberal Educational Institutions and Beyond* (2023).

We are more than our space.

We are more than our titling.

We are more than our output.

We are more than the space in which we labor.

This is what I try to remind myself each day when I work from home or work from the office or meet a student for a walk or a coffee in town. And while the process is hard and one of unlearning all kinds of behaviors and attitudes that are associated with both contingency AND precarity, it's empowering. I hope this process for myself. I hope this process for the field. I hope it for you.

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