

## Keynote: Notions of Writing Center Community and Some Challenges to Them

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# Notions of Writing Center Community and Some Challenges to Them

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**Abstract** It is crucial for writing center professionals who discuss community to ask ourselves what we mean by the term as applied to writing centers. In this keynote, I explore various notions of community that are influenced by writing center growth, expansion, and complexity, especially in relation to Iowa's writing center. After relating a personal story about our new tutors' traditional notion of community and an account of our own center's expansion and growing complexity over the decades, which challenges their traditional notion, I discuss other obstacles to community, bringing in the critiques of writing center scholars. Finally, I synthesize what I consider to be the most important bases on which to build writing center community today, focusing on the special I-Thou relationships writing center tutors form with students.

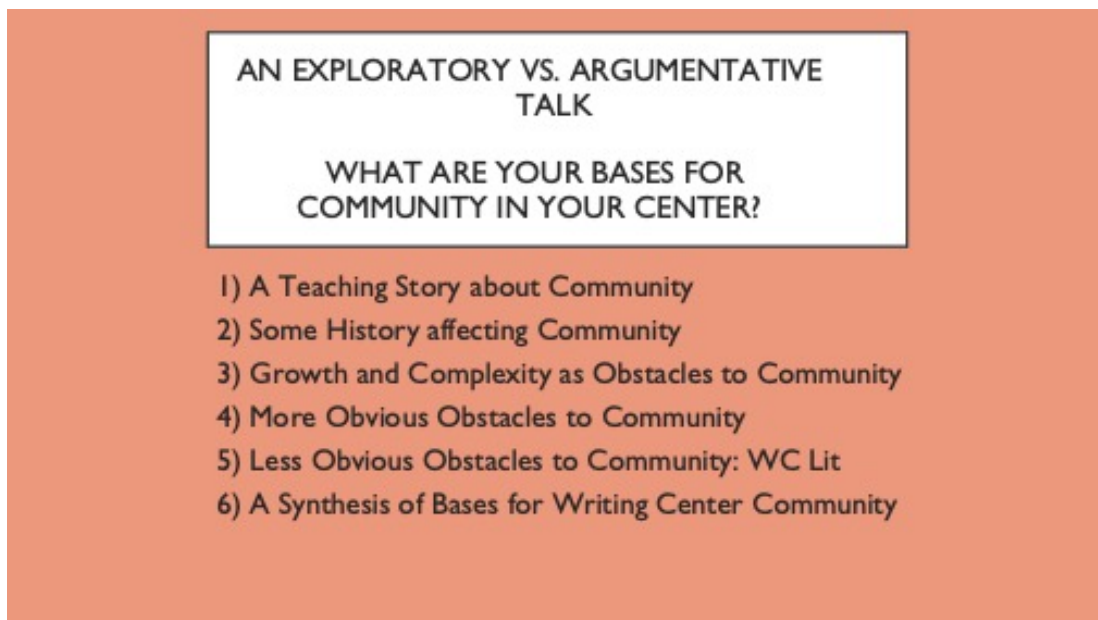
**Keywords** writing center, community, expansion, growth, complexity, challenges, COVID

I'll never forget my first Midwest Writing Center Conference up in cold, snowy St. Cloud, Minnesota—my first exposure not only to winter in October, much like it is now in February, but to the writing center world, since I had never worked in a writing center before, let alone directing one. At my first ever writing center conference sessions, I was all ears, trying to figure out what to do in my new job, what my options were.

So now that I've had 30 years to become familiar with writing centers, I'm going to explore our conference theme of writing center community. I'll discuss some notions of community and some challenges to them. Why? Because it's important to ask ourselves what we mean by "community." We can probably

agree that the shared endeavor of helping students with their writing forms a basis for writing center community, but there are so many subtypes. Do we mean community between tutors and students? Among the tutors themselves? Between directors and tutors? Among directors themselves? Between writing centers and programs outside the center? Between writing centers in the same university, state, region, or athletic conference? All the above? More importantly, how does it feel to belong to a writing center community? How does it feel to be excluded from one? In your writing center, what are the bases for defining, forming, and building community?

To start exploring writing center community, I'll begin with a teaching story. (See



**Figure 1.** How the talk is organized.

Figure 1.) Then I'll present some history that spells out both the advantages and disadvantages of growth and expansion for building community. Next, I'll examine some obvious and common writing center features that challenge the formation of community, followed by some less obvious ones discussed by writing center scholars. I'll close by synthesizing the bases for writing center community from my point of view and invite you to do the same. My purpose here is mainly exploratory rather than argumentative.

First the teaching story. Some background: The first homework assignment for new graduate student tutors in their very first week of our writing center orientation course is to peruse some introductory materials on writing centers in general and on our center, in particular. Then the tutors-to-be post questions to the course blog. I suggest they ask about policies or practices they find confusing or controversial; so typically, they might question a policy such as not taking sides in conflicts between students and their classroom instructors.

One recent semester, though, most of the new tutors' questions coincidentally were about the notion of community, especially from those who had tutored as undergrads at their small liberal arts college writing centers, which seemed to have more of a traditional

community vibe and culture than ours at Iowa does now.

A few of the new tutors questioned the "cold professionalism" they perceived our popular tutoring guide to be espousing. One new tutor noted that in contrast to that cold professionalism, "writing can be a fun process and I loved the camaraderie among tutors at my undergrad college and our 'frequent fliers.'" Then in bold she asked: "**Is there a space for tutors to chat and relax together?**" Then came the clincher, also in bold: "**Does our Writing Center have opportunities to lighten things up?**" These questions stunned me into reflecting: Had our writing center somehow become cold and heavy? If so, when and how did that happen? Worse were the personal implications: When had I become cold and heavy—like a huge pile of wet snow?

But wait, there's more. Another new tutor wrote: "I'm curious how to make our writing center seem more welcoming and intimate as a one-on-one tutoring environment. Can the university allow the writing center to use different non-fluorescent lighting, for example, which often makes a big difference in ambiance, or provide small screen dividers between tables for more privacy?"

And last was this clincher: "At my undergrad college, students became very close to the tutors, and the tutors would even bake

## NOTIONS OF WRITING CENTER COMMUNITY

- “Cold Professionalism”
- Coziness, Camaraderie, Cookies, Couches
- A group with a mission of shared goals, purposes, and interests and a shared feeling of belonging to both one another and to something bigger than ourselves.

**Figure 2.** Notions of writing center community.

weekly treats for students, and it was still just as professional. Can we make the writing center feel homier than what they’re describing here? While it is quite cozy (at this point, I was grateful for any positive comment), I would be thrilled if we added more comfy chairs; I know students tend to relax when a room feels homier. Is there any way we can make that happen?”

I pondered the four Cs of their posts: Coziness, Camaraderie, Couches, Cookies. Hmm . . . So familiar. Where had I heard about these before? Of course, in Jackie Grutch McKinney’s award-winning book, *Peripheral Visions for Writing Centers* (2013). Grutch McKinney describes what she calls the grand narrative: a story of writing centers as cozy homes, symbolized by couches, coffee pots, and plants. Chapter by chapter, though, much to our surprise and chagrin, she exposes this depiction as false, one reason being that not all homes are cozy. (We’ll talk about her other reasons later when we look more closely at this grand narrative.)

Note that I did not begin explaining to the new tutors how they were being deceived by subscribing to a false narrative. That certainly would have ruined any community developing between us. Instead, I found myself feeling nostalgic about how cozy and homey the writing center used to be back in the day. I

shared with them that unfortunately, these days most tutors seem too busy with courses, committees, and comps to bake treats for WC students. Meanwhile, though, I passed around the plate of cookies I’d bought from the co-op, and I made a Note to Self: Keep bringing cookies to class. In retrospect, I realize that I could have reassured them that they had been in our writing center for only a week; that given their background, experience, and skills, a sense of community between them and their students would surely emerge even though our ambience did not seem optimal. I could also have told myself: “They must feel some sense of community here if after only a week, they already want to redecorate the place.”

These new tutors made me flash back to when I inherited our writing center in 1991. Our policy was that every student was enrolled for the entire semester and followed a program of writing prompts called invitations and hardly ever worked on course papers. At that time, about 15 tutors worked with about 150 students a semester.

Now, decades later, we’ve added appointment and online tutoring and allow enrollment students to work as soon as they want to on course papers; because we’ve more than quadrupled our staff, writing center participation has gradually increased tenfold. But in the meantime, have we lost some sense of

### UI WRITING CENTER IN THE 1990S



**Figure 3.** Tutor Cinda Coggins-Mosher, then a graduate student in English, now chair of the Rhetoric Department that sponsors the Iowa Writing Center, tutors her student with her son, now 30, on her lap.

### UI WRITING CENTER POTLUCK



**Figure 4.** A writing center staff-family potluck. My son, now 42, is on the right wearing his cap backward.

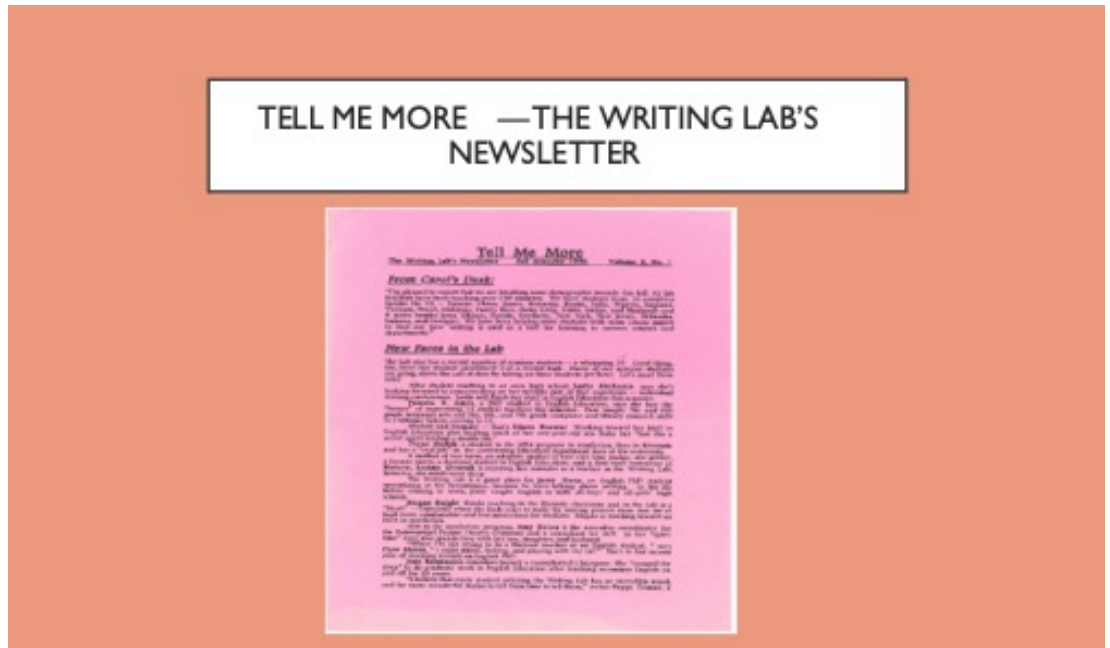
belonging both to each other and to something bigger than ourselves, a mission of shared goals, purposes, and interests? To prepare to answer this question, let's review our notions of community so far, which are not mutually exclusive. (See Figure 2.)

I want to show you some Iowa writing center artifacts from the cozy '90s, 25 years ago, that demonstrate the kind of community the new tutors seemed to be seeking. In Figure 3,

in the foreground there's a graduate student tutor with her child on her lap. Incidentally, now, over 25 years later, Cinda Coggins-Mosher is chair of the Rhetoric Department, which sponsors the writing center. Hanging from the ceiling are Chinese lanterns reflecting our international student population, and on the walls, textiles, paintings, and photographs.

In Figure 4, you can see a cozy tutor family potluck. In the foreground, with his hat on

Severino



**Figure 5.** The newsletter’s title, *Tell Me More*, was at the time our most common tutor response to students’ writing, most of which was done in the lab in response to prompts called invitations.

backward, holding the popcorn, is one of my kids, now a 42-year-old father of two.

But probably the best symbol of our communal culture and cozy camaraderie back then was a chatty newsletter whose title, *Tell Me More*, was our favorite comment to writers needing to develop their ideas (Figure 5).

The newsletter features “New Faces in the Lab” (we didn’t become a center until 2000) and “Papers and Publications,” not only by tutors but their children. We’ve also got “Language Development Milestones,” not only of children, but of their tutor parents, and an “Oh So Important Notice” publicizing our writing center magazine, *Voices*, composed of writing done or worked on in the writing center. Notice the difference in formatting sophistication between then and now (Figures 6 and 7).

That pink gossipy newsletter undoubtedly gave some of us a sense of belonging, but let’s consider the questions Ben Thiel wisely asked in our “Call for Proposals”: Who might have felt excluded by that newsletter? Maybe tutors who didn’t have kids, publications, or language development milestones? Or maybe they had kids, but their kids didn’t publish. Yet the newsletter conveys the chummy camaraderie notion of community, which for better or worse is not as apparent in 2021. We do have a sense of community, but it’s based more on

the collaborative achievements and writing development of our students and tutors and our shared love of writing and tutoring writing. Pride in our outreach and research and our ability to adapt to a pandemic plays a big part, too. It’s not chummy camaraderie, but it’s not cold professionalism either. Let’s call it warm professionalism and add it to our list of “Notions of Writing Center Community” (Figure 8).

So to what extent is writing center growth, development, and diversity a challenge to community? I wondered. Certainly, in the 1990s with a staff of only 15 mostly white middle-class graduate student tutors, all from the English Department, and only one program of weekly enrollment, community was easier to create than it is now with over 60 tutors from over two dozen programs and majors, working at all hours of the day and night in 10 different locations. That’s pre-COVID. Right now, we’re all at the same location: WC Online.

### Multiple Community Membership as a Challenge to Writing Center Community

Growth, program development, and the complexity of a disciplinarily diverse staff who belong to communities that intersect, but also

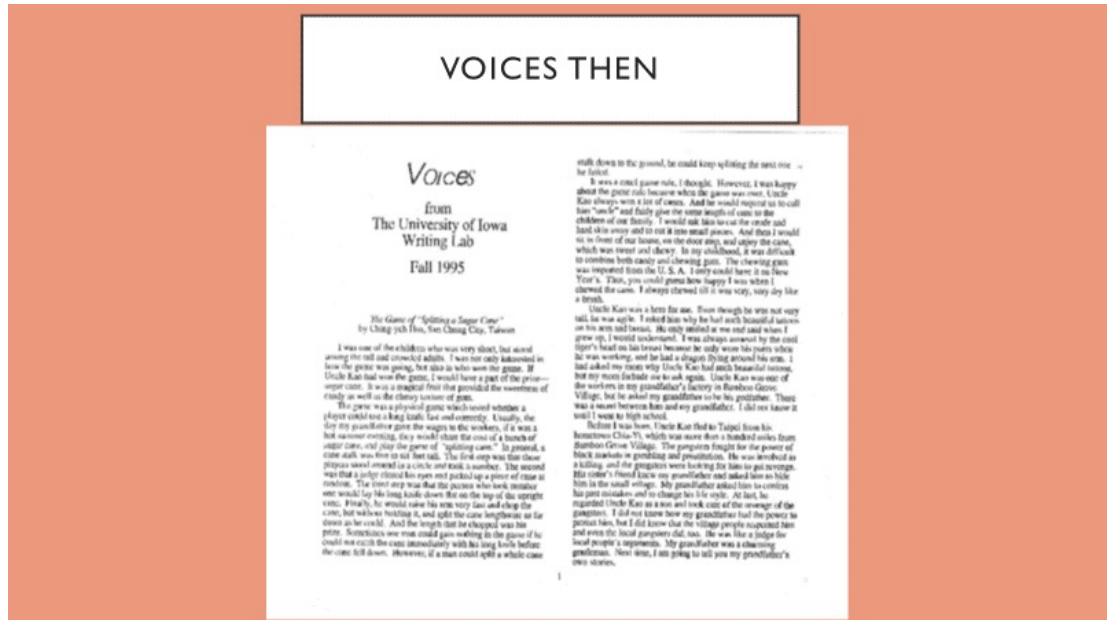


Figure 6. Voices then.

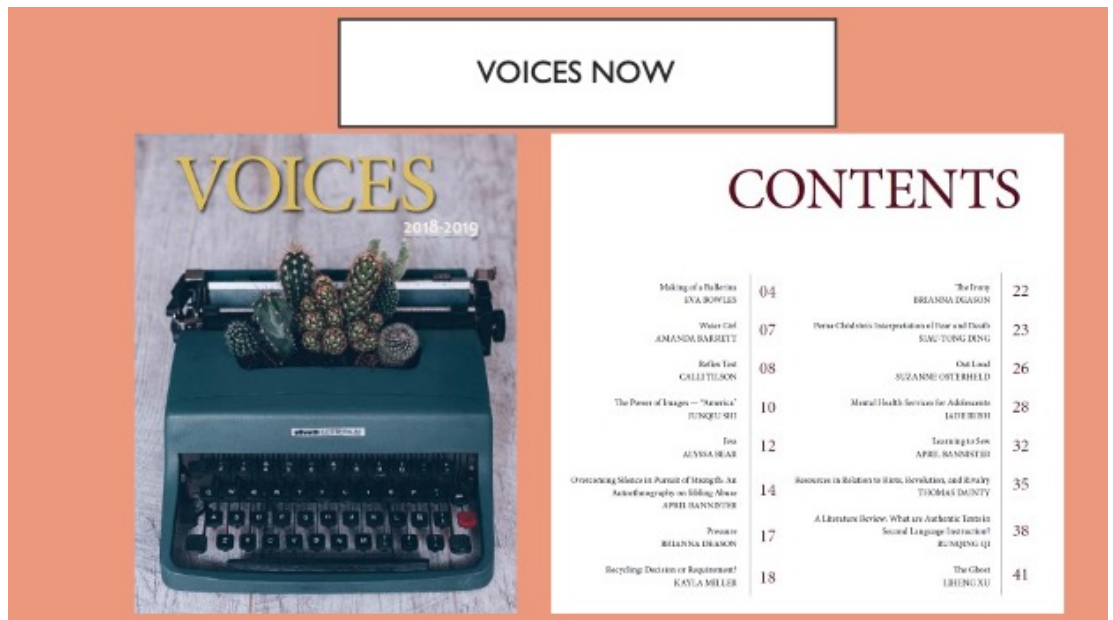


Figure 7. Voices now.

inevitably compete, in terms of time commitment, with the writing center make maintaining that cozy kind of community a challenge. Let's take a typical peer tutor. How many communities do they belong to? Well, how many communities do you tutors here at MWCA belong to? Many of you undergrads have two majors, that is, two professional communities. An example is an Iowa undergrad tutor I'm thinking of who graduated last May; she was majoring in global health and in ethics and public policy. She had three other jobs besides writing fellow assigned to a course and writing

tutor assigned to the writing center. She was an orientation guide, an ambassador for the Iowa Center for Research by Undergraduates, and president of an organization she herself started, which advocates for refugees. That's seven communities! Most of you lead similarly jam-packed lives. If we take our 60+ tutors and predict that each belongs to three other communities besides the writing center, that's 180 additional communities. That kind of complexity could definitely cut into cookie-baking time. It could also reduce the number of what theologian Martin Buber (1958) calls I-Thou

## NOTIONS OF WRITING CENTER COMMUNITY

- 1) “Cold Professionalism”
- 2) Coziness, Camaraderie, Cookies: Chummy Community
- 3a) A mission of shared goals, purposes, and interests, a feeling of belonging to both each other and something bigger than ourselves
- 3b) Warm Professionalism:” pride in collaborative achievement/writing development of tutors and students; outreach and research. A love of writing and tutoring writing.

Figure 8. Notions of writing center community.



Figure 9. A poster advertising our Midnight Madness event.

relationships, those holistic relationships that foster community as well as meaning in life. In Joseph Harris’s critique (1989) of the ways “community” is used in composition studies, the parent profession that writing centers belong to, he observes how individuals, including himself, can have the “sense of being at once part of several communities, yet never wholly a member of one” (p. 11). In fact, we could even say that although a community generates feelings of belonging, an overwhelming proliferation of communities can create a sense of anomie and alienation.

Not that one can’t find community in complexity, even in chaos. For example, at Midnight Madness, our writing center’s only walk-in event per year (Figure 9), although we missed it this year because of COVID, half our tutors see about 90 writers, and the writing center is often standing room only. At that event, some of us feel community in our collective sense of purpose and the exhilaration of tutoring, say, 10 writers from 10 different walks of life with 10 different writing projects one after the other like speed-dating, fueled by coffee, chocolate, and diet Coke. But others,





**Figure 10.** Midnight Madness: Pre-Thanksgiving vacation annual walk-in tutoring event.

especially students who don't know how long they'll have to wait to get help with their writing, feel stressed and overwhelmed by a noisy, crowded room (Figure 10).

This complexity that comes with growth may apply more to writing centers at the larger institutions that belong to MWCA—the community colleges (DuPage, Lake County, Kirkwood) and the state universities like Iowa, Iowa State, the Universities of Wisconsin, Madison, Eau Claire, and Stout; Nebraska (both Lincoln and Omaha), Minnesota, Michigan Tech, Kansas, Kansas State, and North Dakota State. But an opposite force, contraction vs. expansion—the financial pressures to consolidate services and merge with other units—apply to both larger universities and smaller colleges in our Midwest regional: Mt. Mercy, North Park, Grandview, Clarkson, Wheaton, Cornell, Grinnell, Drake, Coe, Capella, Augustana, Augsburg, Upper Iowa, St. Olaf, St. Thomas, Benedictine, Bethel, Lindenwood, and Logan. (If I left your college out, please include it in the chat.) Many institutions across the country are struggling with rising costs and falling student enrollments, especially now due to COVID, resulting in program reviews, usually based on metrics not of our own choosing, for example, numbers of classroom seats filled, numbers of semester-credit hours generated, and numbers of majors,

none of which apply to writing centers. Because most centers have no majors and offer few courses for credit, thus not generating review, many have been absorbed by Academic Support, Student Success, or Centers for Excellence, often forcing writing center staff to start all over again under new management to find a new sense of community in new organizational patterns with new partners—another adjustment writing centers have made remarkably well.

So writing center growth, the complexity of multiple communities, and institutional pressures and course-based metrics can all strain the development of writing center community (Figure 11). But what are the common features of writing centers themselves that challenge community? Obviously frequent tutor turnover disrupts community when students graduate or leave for other campus jobs. In addition, I've often thought that our heavy focus on tutor-student pairs makes not so much for community, but for an aggregation of dyads. Mickey Harris talks about tutoring conversations that “fly from one table to another.” And “flying talk” does happen, but maybe not often enough to open up the dyads into a community. We should think more about group-tutoring of students in the same course or students working on the same project, and about writing support groups.

## KEY CHALLENGES TO WC COMMUNITY

- 1) Growth and Program Development
- 2) Multiple Communities
- 3) Institutional Pressures with inapplicable metrics
- 4) Tutor Turnover
- 5) Aggregation of Dyads
- 6) WC Orthodoxy & Mythos

**Figure 11.** Key challenges to writing center community.

## THE WRITING CENTER GRAND NARRATIVE

“Writing centers are comfortable, iconoclastic places, where all students go to get one-to-one tutoring on their writing” (p. 6).

Jackie Grutsch McKinney, *Peripheral Visions for Writing Centers*, 2013.

**Figure 12.** The writing center grand narrative.

Less obvious, however, is that according to writing center scholars, adherence to mythos, lore, and orthodoxy about centers as cozy places that use nondirective tutoring to address only higher-order concerns also challenges community. In historical order these scholars have been Stephen North, Nancy Grimm, Grutsch McKinney, Isabelle Thompson, Lori Salem, and most recently, the team of Denny, Salem, and Nordlof. We'll look at just a few of these critiques.

Let's first return to Grutch McKinney (Figure 12). Here is the Grand Narrative she

deconstructs: “Writing centers are comfortable, iconoclastic places, where all students go to get one-to-one tutoring on their writing” (p. 6). That definition could unite into a community many of the approximately 40 centers in MWCA, as well as the hundreds of centers in IWCA. But Grutch McKinney exposes the downsides of this seemingly innocent narrative; she shows how it is used to “other” and exclude centers that seem to lack one or more of those traits. Take, for example, centers that even pre-pandemic were only online and therefore seemingly lacked coziness.

Or centers that are not iconoclastic, renegade, or rogue, but fully subscribe to the curriculum, pedagogy, and academic hierarchy of the institution they serve rather than subverting it. Ironically, where do you think most of this “othering” discourse takes place, according to Grutch McKinney? At writing center conferences!

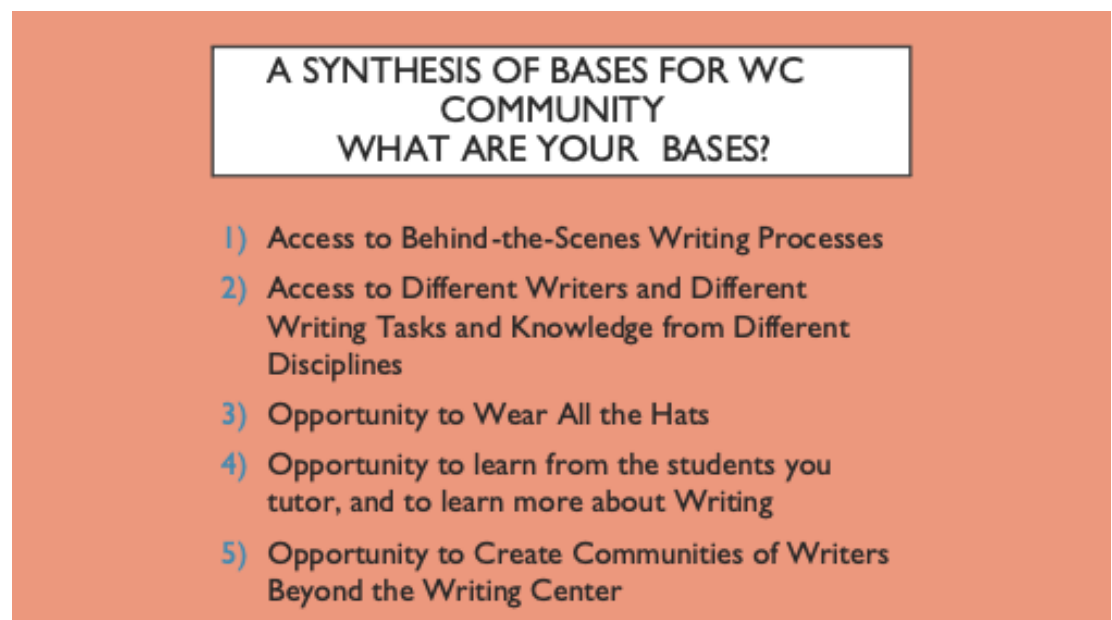
The most serious problem, she says, is that the grand narrative limits and narrows writing center vision, preventing us from imagining and implementing, say, a center that teaches faculty across the disciplines how to teach with writing; or a center that conducts research. As she says, even though the writing center world is complex, its storying is simplistic. She shows how subscribing to the grand narrative can instead create a sense of false community, emphasizing sameness at the expense of diversity and development.

I must admit that I am more forgiving of the grand narrative than Grutch McKinney, especially if it’s a stage of growth, particularly for centers that don’t have long histories or don’t have much support from their institutions. And considering the cutthroat nature of much of 21st-century higher education, maintaining a writing center that follows the grand narrative could count as a substantial achievement.

Another challenge from the writing center literature: Writing center scholars like Lori

Salem have focused on nondirective tutoring as favoring white middle-class monolingual students from more privileged educational backgrounds, but frustrating multilingual, working-class, and students of color who want more directive help. And instruction is not a bad thing. Through interviews, Denny, Salem, and Nordlof (2018) showed that students from these demographics wanted help that was “more direct, more expert, and more generous than what they found in the Writing Center” (p. 67). Because their needs weren’t being met, their interviewees did not feel a sense of community in their writing centers. Multilingual writers in their study and in the research we’ve done in our center want equal help with language and rhetoric, challenging the maxim that higher order concerns like argument and organization must always come before lower order concerns like word choice and sentence structure. Why not address them both at the same time, as Blau, Hall, and Sparks (2002) recommended, weaving lower order concerns into discussions of higher order concerns?

Therefore, if notions of cozy community, mythos, and lore fail to embrace the diversity of writing center programs and populations, what might be better bases for community we could select and synthesize from all these notions to draw on? What follows is my synthesis (Figure 13), but please share yours in the chat



**Figure 13.** Bases for writing center community.

THANKS FOR LISTENING!



**Figure 14.** Cookies from me to the patient audience of listeners and readers.

and later at the conference sessions. What I value most is our unique writing center vantage point.

Think of what you have and what you learn in your tutoring sessions. You have the privilege of witnessing, behind the scenes, writers' thinking and composing processes at different stages. You have the privilege of intimate access to diverse writers in diverse disciplines with diverse assignments and diverse sets of strengths and weaknesses. You have the privilege of wearing all the hats the tutoring manuals list while you help writers construct knowledge and identities. You have the privilege of teaching your students as much as you learn from them and developing I-Thou relationships with them—reciprocal, mutual enlightenment that is personal, intellectual, cultural, and social. You have the privilege of continuing to learn more about writers and writing—academic, creative, and professional, a learning process that never ends and always rewards. And thinking outside the grand narrative, we can go beyond tutor–student dyads, teaching groups of writers how to respond to one another, teaching faculty across the disciplines how to teach their content with writing. That is, we can create and strengthen communities of writers outside as well as inside the writing center. Then as researchers, we can study the effectiveness of these practices.

Thus, with or without cookies, writing center work can still be a warm, professional, and generative community endeavor, an endeavor that generates more communities, which instead of overwhelming and competing with the writing center, strengthens it and strengthens the institution's writing culture. It's a writing center community based on our gratitude for the privileges and blessings of access and closeness to writers and writing.

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