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ARTICLE

Centerless? Making Sense of Disruptions in the Graduate Writing Center

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Abstract  This critical self-reflection is not a success story; rather, it is an effort of decolonial thinking that reckons with the idea, experience, and practice of centerlessness during pandemic-induced online transitions and operations in a graduate writing center (GWC). By tracing the contours of a series of interlocking disruptions the author and her graduate writing center community experienced during COVID-19, this article brings into sharp focus present colonial legacies inhibiting effective developments, moves, and adaptations to the GWC physical center space and praxis. Through retrospectively following pandemic-induced disruptions to her center, the author critically engages how epistemologies of coloniality and modernity cultivate a narrative of centeredness that unintentionally objectifies graduate writing centers and reduces them to disembodied artifacts of the institution. Ultimately, the author shares how the struggle with feelings of centerlessness—in space, practice, and ideology—provides insights into how we might move toward different, always emergent, and unrealized alternative relational praxis for decolonial and ecological graduate writing center futures. Rather than conceive of and experience the graduate writing center as a placed and institutionalized entity, the author imagines how the disruptions she felt with her center might instead suggest storying and practicing the GWC as a distributed interactional space.

Keywords  graduate writing, writing centers, a/synchronous consulting, coloniality, relationality, interactional spaces, COVID-19
With each Hi, how are you? chat message I sent that began a synchronous online writing consultation, I instantly regretted the emptiness of those words. We were living in a pandemic, after all. Working some seven or eight months exclusively online, I began to lose track of time—or at least, lost my operative sense of time before COVID-19. Some graduate students were overseas and awake at 3 a.m. to work with me. Some did not have childcare because everything was shut down and they apologized constantly for their children’s “interruptions.” Many others were stuck in their homes in complete isolation while their families were continents away, or might as well have been. Most writers responded back to me in the chat with something like, I am ok.

And we were, to some extent, ok, strengthened slightly by the smiling face of the other in our Zoom windows as we tried to make some sense amid the pandemic with the writing that nevertheless needed to be done. For some, the writing productivity expectations increased and intensified as a result of stay-at-home orders; still, others’ work was halted, and they faced a terrifying indeterminacy about funding or visas and student status. Many sat—isolated—waiting for labs to reopen and research to be possible. Immediately following our university’s move to online spaces, demand for our graduate writing center (GWC)—where I was working as a graduate student coordinator and consultant at the time—also changed, increased, and intensified. Our GWC’s scheduling system was booked to capacity, which prompted an increase of three times more weekly emails in our inbox from new and returning clients requesting additional appointment hours; many writers informed us that demands on their writing productivity did not change during isolation and they were struggling to navigate how to keep working after losing all their dependable connections (i.e., physical office/desk space and resources on campus; in-person workflows with colleagues and advisors; in-person seminar learning) that structured their working lives. We video chatted with writers who simply needed someone to listen to their fears; we issued countless apologies for lost internet and poor connections; we scheduled consultation hours outside of 9–5 EST for the first time; and we ceaselessly exchanged emails, chat messages, and document drafts with writers.

As demands and expectations transformed in focus and multiplied in scope for writing consultations during quarantine, a major challenge COVID-19 presented to our almost exclusively in-person GWC was how to work effectively entirely online. The compilation of narratives I offer here do not tell a success story; rather, they constitute a critical self-reflection of what my colleagues and I wrestled with during pandemic operations. In the narratives, I follow and detail a series of interlocking disruptions to our GWC that brought the coloniality of writing centers into sharp focus. There were developments and moves and adaptations to our physical center space and praxis that we weren’t ready or prepared for, which, hauntingly, exposed
how much of our work still carried colonial force because of our unrealized reliance on the traditional idea of the writing center. Accordingly, what I hope to accomplish in retrospectively following pandemic-induced disruptions to our center is to story both the problems of coloniality in traditional U.S.-based writing center (WC) design and future decolonial potentials of unrealized practices. In writing center studies, of course, there is rich engagement with interrogating the storying of writing centers (Faison & Treviño, 2020; García, 2017; Greenfield & Rowan, 2011; Grutsch McKinney, 2013; Madden & Eodice, 2016; Villanueva, 2006); my storying continues in this spirit to work through how epistemologies of coloniality and modernity cultivate a narrative of centeredness that unintentionally objectifies writing centers and reduces them to disembodied artifacts and institutions structured through hierarchies and binaries. Taken together, the narratives of disruption ultimately characterize a struggle with centerlessness that provides insights into how we might move forward to different, always emergent, and unrealized alternative praxis for decolonial and ecological graduate writing center futures.

The center-dependent identity and practices of our GWC are loudly active across our campus, and, as difficult as it is to admit, my colleagues and I internalized and actualized them despite our hopes for a less peripheralized reputation on campus. Our university GWC’s historical and institutional identities, commensurate with many other U.S.-based writing centers, were constructed according to European modernist ontology and representational ideologies that value conquering and delineating space, and cognitive approaches for objectification and analysis (Canagarajah, 2023). In essence, the identities of modern American writing centers were first conceptualized as laboratory and clinic-stylized sites (Lerner, 2013) relegated to, arguably, peripheral places on university maps. Writing centers were literally put on university maps according to the “world-making” tradition of Western thought that assumes the physical land space is “waiting for humans to give it shape, form, and meaning” (Canagarajah, 2021, p. 576). “By dint of [its] location,” Christie Toth (2016) reminds us, the university GWC is “part of the ‘settler colonial situation’” (p. 497). The European progress narrative haunts the ways these laboratories or clinics were conceived through boundaries drawn between mainstream or status quo learning, through the labels and mapping techniques used to articulate a purpose for certain spaces, and the categorizing discourse practices that policed the movements of different kinds of bodies and knowledges in and around early writing support centers.

Consequently, from these Western ideological roots sprung forth writing centers as physical sites that operated as a hub for intensified writing development and support. Despite the “experimental ideal” at the soul of writing center beginnings (Lerner, 2013, p. 33) of teaching and learning as a continuous process of experimentation, the
surviving and dominant writing center narrative handed down through time and frustratingly still perceived by the larger institutional community is, as Neal Lerner (2013) writes, “a familiar one: An obsession with correctness [that] has long been present in the teaching of English” (p. 29). This narrative of an obsession with correctness, while motivated by the ideology of claiming and marking space for human use, also assumes “our mobilities should result in being placed” (Canagarajah, 2021, p. 576). In other words, GWCs became and continue to be widely perceived as places for international or multilingual writers in particular to visit for English language teaching and grammar correction (Ayash, 2016; Tardy, 2011) in service of their degrees and social mobility opportunities as professionals. These conceptions perpetuate a sense of rootedness or centeredness of the GWC as a type of home that, imbued by Eurocentric orientations to habitation, adheres to an ideal about Academic English homogeneity and academic disciplinary identity; its practices to fulfill those ideals, as many scholars have argued, are exclusionary. Pointedly, Alexandria Lockett (2019) tells us the GWC still “functions as the ‘academic ghetto’ . . . [because] it literally organizes underserved demographics into a space for ‘development and improvement’ that is physically (and conceptually) isolated from mainstream or privileged learning communities in the university” (para. 4). As academic ghettos, GWCs remain a “home for ‘problem students,’” whose performance and competency of academic discourse and standardized English “has been evaluated by authorities as an obstacle to their self-sufficiency and social mobility” (para. 5).

With stay-at-home orders during 2020, the GWC as a place/center and the work that we do was wholly changed in ways that meant our long-held identity as a place/center to go for writing work—haunted as it is—and our physically privileged practice were at odds with our COVID-19 reality. The challenges in moving our GWC online were not exceptionally different from those facing the rest of academia, and, quite honestly, anyone else who suddenly needed to figure out how to balance safety and health with our day-to-day work through online digital approaches. Thus, the aim here is not to compare our GWC’s challenges with those of other academic centers or professions; rather, the goal is to put forth experiences of disruption to and vulnerability in GWC work in ways that suggest new centerless possibilities. Writing and publishing during the pandemic, scholars explored the relationship between writing professionals’ affect or beliefs about online writing centers (Worm, 2020) and how online consulting work directly compared to traditional face-to-face interactions (Wisniewski et al., 2020). These contributions intervene at a moment when online learning is becoming a new “normal,” especially as the dust settles around us following the waves of COVID-19, to offer pedagogical and attitudinal insights for educational inclusivity in writing centers. In this spirit, I wonder, broadly, is the
Graduate Writing Center even a center anymore? What do disruptions from the pandemic mean for the GWC?

These broad questions guide critical self-reflections of my experiences with disruptions to my university’s graduate writing center beginning a semester before pandemic lockdowns in the United States and our cautious return to in-person interaction two years later. I share these stories from my position as a graduate student who experienced the isolating effects of COVID-19 on productivity and motivation, and as a GWC consultant and coordinator who desired to support writers through their own struggles with COVID-19 related policies that threatened to disrupt their livelihoods and subjected them to heightened suspicion given their multilingualness or international student statuses. These narratives represent only my story and my perspective, and any colleagues or graduate students I include in my narratives are written about as I encountered them. I take seriously Romeo García’s (2017) observation that “writing centers have spatial and temporal attributes . . . they are always becoming in the sense that centers are made through the particularities of bodily movements and actions” (p. 41). Through a storying of forms of coloniality present in our GWC’s practices during COVID-19, I share what I realize now in our moments of returning to campus and rethinking workflows for reinventing my graduate writing center praxis. This reinventing takes its cues from deeply uncomfortable confrontations with colonial hierarchies of knowledge, extreme Zoom-working fatigue and frustration, and unrecognized biases and binaries of technological design and implementation. In the context of GWC work, the pandemic disrupted how I learned to orient myself and a writer to a piece of writing through ocularcentric rhetorics and practices; it disrupted the unannounced but ever-present deference to my L1 Englishness; it disrupted my colleagues’ and my default practices of retrofitting the flow of in-person consultations to online spaces; it disrupted my conceptions of what graduate writers need, want, and how they move through and around a space for writing support; and it disrupted what I thought the graduate writing center could be and become. These narratives and insights I glean from them are offered invitationally for making sense of disruptions for our graduate writing center futures.

DISRUPTIONS

Confronting Writing Center Space Narratives Amid Pre-Pandemic Office Moves

Before most universities moved completely to online platforms in response to COVID-19, our graduate writing center (GWC) conducted the majority of its weekly
consulting hours in person. When I first assumed my role as co-coordinator of the GWC, the center was located in the Graduate Student Center building. In truth, it was a closet-sized space with no windows, a horrible door alarm that we learned how to disable all too late, and a computer, phone, and other artifacts reminiscent of the technology I used in early elementary school two decades ago. Only three or four people could sit or stand in the space comfortably, but for writing privacy and noise concerns, only one consultant and one writer occupied the space at a time.

After spending a summer in this isolated suffocating closet, the other two GWC consultants and I were notified that the entire first floor of the building was going to be renovated. Thus, the uprooted centerless story of our GWC begins. During the renovation, which was set to complete in spring 2020, our GWC packed up and moved twice. First, we packed the books on the shelves, the pottery pieces a previous consultant crafted, posters from CCCCs and IWCAs of yesteryear, and the clunky, heavy computer, phone, and massive printer, and wheeled them to a building that is perhaps one of the furthest and most inconvenient locations from graduate student parking and many graduate student offices. The GWC shared this otherwise vacant building with a maintenance crew. We pushed and carried cumbersome, slightly smelly, and stained left-behind chairs and tables into our new office space and unpacked the previous office’s technology, books, and décor.

Shortly after settling in, we learned our new building was to be renovated in spring 2020. We packed up and moved once again to a group study room located in the leisure reading room on the first floor of our library. Essentially, we were floaters: We lost complete autonomy of our center—what it looked like, how we fit into it, and when we could occupy it. We needed to collaborate with the study room coordinator librarian to establish and publish our schedule and could only work with the group study room space, furniture, and materials offered by the library. There was one big table with plenty of outlets, four chairs with wheels, and one large whiteboard covering an entire wall. Opposite the whiteboard was one wall-length window open to the town-side library entrance. None of our books, computers, or pottery pieces came with us (they remain packed up in an empty office). The only marker of our GWC identity was a bright yellow 8 × 11 laminated sign with printed text that we taped on the door and removed at the end of each working day: GRADUATE WRITING CENTER. Consultants and writers had to bring their own laptops, tablets, books or articles, paper, and pens, and remove them after every single consultation.

At this point in my service as GWC coordinator, before COVID-19, I had worked through and within three center locations. While these moves were certainly disorienting to the GWC consultants and graduate writers, our praxis, in general, maintained a surface-level consistency. Writers would usually arrive five minutes before their scheduled session, we’d sit down next to each other at a table, and we’d pass
materials between each other’s hands. The in-person flow of a consultation might best be characterized as negotiating a series of body movements and expressions: As a consultant, I’d point with a pen or my finger to places in writing—on a screen or physical page—to prompt verbal discussion. My physical pointing was our entry point into talking about writing. The writer and I would both then use our pens to strike through text on a physical page, annotate the margins, draw arrows to reorganize sections. We used scrap paper to discuss text on screens, to take notes about our discussion points, and to sketch out relationships between theories and concepts, and draft figures. Engineers and STEM graduate writers in particular would bring their own scrap paper or notebooks, poised with anticipation of needing to visually sketch out and explain concepts for me.

I learned about graduate students’ writing by writing with them, by pointing, by moving my hands in the air while thinking, by watching and listening to their hands and their facial expressions as they thought about revision, what it was they wanted to express in writing, or contemplated my feedback. We learned together by sitting next to one another, talking about writing and moving through writing with shared pens, paper, keyboards. Sometimes, I’d ask to take control of the writer’s keyboard, to capture their sentences on the screen as they talked. Every time, the writer would ask if they could please keep any physical notes I took during our consultation. We passed materials between our hands, shared three different spaces—in disparate campus locations—with our bodies, and left with physical marks and mementos of writing.

Although the other consultants and I felt a loss of autonomy and control, we managed to adjust—annoying as it was—with each move. We realized quickly, however, that the brunt of disruption in moving our office three times in two semesters was felt by our graduate writers. Suddenly the rates of no-shows, late arrivals, and late cancellations soared. I answered my personal phone many times to hear panicked voice and tears from writers who couldn’t find our new locations, were delayed because of an unfamiliar bus, parking, or walking timetable, or who realized the vastly different hours wouldn’t work with their personal and professional schedules. Similarly, my email inbox flooded with writers’ apologetic emails and requests to go back to our original office location. Some writers even asked if they could help support us consultants in any way in advocating for our own permanent space¹ in a graduate student–friendly environment.

While the majority of our returning clients, as I observed, were disturbed by the moving GWC, the semester we temporarily moved into a library study room attracted a significant number of early career graduate students. In preparation for our end-of-semester operations reports, my colleagues and I reviewed our postsession surveys and discovered that overwhelmingly, the early career writers we met that semester in the library stumbled across us because we were visible to them for the
first time; despite our other advertising efforts, they learned about our GWC because a bright yellow 8 × 11 sign taped to a study room window caught their attention. In follow-up conversations with several of these early career graduate students, my colleagues and I—all English department graduate students with guaranteed office space in our department’s home building—learned that many of these early career students were not granted office space in their home departments and thus ended up working regularly in the library.

These contradictions tied up in the disruptions of moving for the consultants, returning clients, and new clients alike begged questions about whether our GWC should move back into its previous location once renovations were complete. At stake was an interrogation of the assumption that our previous location and space were ideal for graduate writers. Was the center upon which we relied and whose loss we lamented really the “comfortable, iconoclastic place . . . all students go to get one-to-one tutoring with their writing” (Grutsch McKinney, 2013, p. 3) that writing center storying says it should be? What if our GWC didn’t need or shouldn’t need to be that kind of space anymore? The disruptions of our physical moving, put simply, caused two distinct reactions from returning writers and new early career clients that seemed incompatible to my colleagues and me at the time. Amid the disruption of the office moves, we witnessed graduate writers asserting themselves and their needs in ways we had not witnessed before or that they had not done before; we experienced a shifting of meaning-making, a resistance to writing center storying of domestic space comfort (Faison & Treviño, 2020) and accessibility as well as the academy’s disembodied demarcating of space. How early career writers found us in the library (despite our other advertising efforts) and how returning writers entrusted us with a different kind of vulnerability in sharing their frustrations and challenges and personal stakes in our operations encapsulate how “writing doesn’t just happen between pen and paper or during the clicks of the keyboard. It grows out of the renegotiations among one’s mind-heart, body, and space” (Faison & Treviño, 2020, p. 100). Weeks before international shutdowns, our GWC team was poised to request permanent space in our university library.

Retrofitting Representational Orientations to Technology, the Body, and Language During COVID-19

When our university moved to remote learning starting the week after spring break 2020, I began conducting regular online consultations. Before the pandemic I had done maybe a handful of online consultations and held weekly recurring online sessions with a blind scholar. Until this point, I taught undergraduate classes exclusively in person and had little formal training or experience with digital writing.
pedagogies or online instruction. Like others, I was left panicking, wondering how I was supposed to work with writers via Zoom and run a GWC in this odd rushed liminal space. The GWC still existed in our minds, memories, expectations, and practices as it had in its former physical spaces but opened and closed, literally, with the click of a mouse: Leave Meeting.

My training was at odds with the Zoom world in which I worked. The training I received as an undergraduate tutor and brought into my GWC work comes from two tutor training guidebooks, *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors* and the *St. Martin’s Sourcebook for Writing Tutors*, first published in the early 1990s and which continue to wield canonical significance (Denton, 2017, p. 179). Student- or writer-led, dialogue- and negotiation-driven, and process-oriented approaches are hallmarks of writing center practice (Denton, 2017, p. 183). Stephen North (1984) explains, “In a writing center the object is to make sure that writers, not necessarily their texts, are what get changed by instruction” (p. 438). Derived from this objective, writing center mantras include, “A good tutor makes the student do all the work,” “The ultimate aim of a tutorial is an independent writer,” and “Our job is to produce better writers, not better writing” (Grimm, 2011, p. 81). In a physical center, these mantras can—and I would argue do, more often than not—materialize into practice that prioritizes using the physical and material tangibility of the center as the way to do writing collaboration. In the first disruption narrative, I noted how even though our space was changing, and the center was uprooted from one physical location to another, the way we did writing work in a consultation operated without much change as we continued to orient our bodies to writing in the same spatial and sight-centric ways.

My GWC colleagues and I resolved to devise a plan for day-to-day online GWC work. The plan was to meet with writers over video chatting platforms, such as Zoom or Google Hangouts, with cameras on. We asked writers to share their documents through Google Docs for simultaneous collaboration. We’d resize the video and document windows so that writers appeared next to their writing—as opposed to next to us, of course—on our screens. We planned to continue reading texts out loud with writers and make marks, channeling our in-person practice, using various on-screen marking tools (e.g., highlight, underline, or comment bubble features). Consultants would type editing or revision suggestions in the document using suggesting mode or track changes and respond to writers’ edits as they typed. Instead of physical markings of arrows, lines, and punctuation marks, writers and consultants used a range of digital marking tools, tracked changes, and cursors to move sentences, selections, and chunks of text within the digital document.

The plan we adopted was a retrofitting of physically oriented pedagogical practice to digital online consultations. While these practices are meaningful and effective,
we experienced several issues in their execution as well as unforeseen challenges and limitations to their use that necessitate critical examination. These retrofits also revealed much of the GWC’s haunted colonial past that erected physical/bodily barriers, linguistic barriers, and geographic barriers to entry. First, in moving to Zoom video chatting, silence became incredibly difficult to interpret and navigate. I was accustomed to silence in the physical center, embracing silence as space for thinking or formulating responses. When I’m sitting next to a writer, I understand that after we’ve discussed something in the writing, the writer—who is poised with their pen hovering over the text—is most likely employing silence as a way to make space for thinking. Over Zoom, I only saw from the writer’s shoulders and above; more often, however, only their name appeared printed across a black box as many writers opted for cameras off. In silence through a Zoom box, I cannot see the way their body is positioned: Are their fingers hovering over keys? Are they taking notes on paper? Are they just thinking through something? Is the connection bad or has the video frozen? Did I say something wrong? What do I do in this silence?

In these moments of digital silence, I’ve sat quietly, started typing in the document, started speaking, looked at another open window on my computer screen, and/or anxiously cracked my knuckles. Because I was unsure of how to understand digital silence and how to attend to it, I employed these filler practices. But these filler practices are risky and can be ineffective or harmful. For example, if I look to another open tab on my screen, I am not fully with the writer and their writing (see Nadler, 2020 for a fuller discussion of Zoom consulting anxieties). If I start speaking or typing during silence, I am privileging my voice and my writing. Other markers of digital silence are just as uncomfortable and uncertain as the writer sitting in silence with a good video connection. If the connection is unstable, as mine can be given that I live in a rural area susceptible to outages, digital silence might also materialize as “Internet Connection Unstable” message notifications over blurry, choppy video. When video is not an option due to power failures, I turn to audio only or using the chat box to continue sessions. Silence over audio-only is even more difficult to understand without visual cues as to what the writer might be doing in silence. In my experience, however, the most challenging form of digital silence is that present in working through the chat box. Sometimes, the only indication I have of the writer’s active presence is the ellipsis that represents the writer typing a response to me or the bright band of color outlining the writer’s user profile icon to signal a recently active user. If the ellipsis or the bright band vanishes, do I keep working in their document alone? If so, what kind of work am I reduced to, editing? Do I keep trying for a response in the chat box? Do I stop working? How long do I wait until I receive a message? The expectations of interpreting and managing silence
that I bring with me from my physical GWC are ineffective in these moments of digital silence.

A second significant challenge we faced in our physically centerless digital GWC is how writers and consultants might engage in and respond to translanguaging practice in digital writing collaboration work. Translanguaging, broadly, refers to the ways individuals “negotiate both the diverse semiotic resources in their repertoire and the context to produce a text that is rhetorically most appropriate and effective for the situation” (Canagarajah, 2012, p. 8). In writing consultations, writer and consultant may translanguage through a variety of processes and communicative modes. One common practice I’m most familiar with is codemeshing, “the distinction of language norms in diaglossic terms, with different spaces or functions assigned to SWE [Standard Written English] and vernaculars” (p. 112). In other words, a multilingual writer who goes to the GWC with a section of their dissertation that is written in Standard Written English (SWE) and annotated with comments written in Arabic is engaging in codemeshing. This writer is negotiating use of Arabic and SWE in rhetorically significant ways that are performative and representative of their identity and choices. When talking about writing together in a physical center, for example, I have asked writers to share with me what their non-English notes say or writers have initiated talk about their non-English notes when asking questions. My experience with codemeshing in a physical center has been that writers’ vernaculars have been present on the page—written in nonerasable ink or as valuable notes in a notebook—which concretizes their active and physical presence in our writing space.

One of the most difficult and upsetting online consulting moments for me happened with an international graduate student who shared a PowerPoint file to prepare for an upcoming Zoom conference. In the notes section at the bottom of each slide, the writer included notes written in Korean. The PowerPoint slides, the public-facing text, was written in a Standard Written English register. The writer asked for help in reviewing the slides and, I remember their request explicitly, to “make sure the content made sense to a native English speaker.” The writer suggested that I make any necessary edits directly in the slides because they wanted to move quickly and get as much done as possible in our 50-minute session. I read the writing in the slides out loud and when we reached the notes section, I asked what the Korean notes said. “Oh, you can ignore those, they are just notes to myself about how I wanted to write the slides.” Before this moment, I had, to the best of my memory, never been told to ignore any non-English writing. To me, the notes mattered, in Korean or not, because they were multimodal, multilingual composing choices rhetorically significant for achieving the writer’s intentions (Lee, 2023). Ignoring the notes felt as if we were displacing the writer’s intentions for my perceptions as a native English speaker.
Although I’ve only detailed one real moment here, I offer it too as a narrative representative of similar moments in online consulting when I’ve been told to ignore any non-English writing. One time, in response to my question about what the Arabic in comment bubbles said, the writer deleted the bubbles without answering me. Another writer told me that we didn’t need to talk about her Korean notes in between the paragraphs. Toward the end of one session, I finished reading out loud the closing remarks of a draft cover letter and pronounced the Chinese writer’s name incorrectly; when I asked her to please correct me if I was wrong, she said it didn’t matter. When another writer was reading their work out loud, they stopped when they came to a section of text written in Spanish and said, “We can skip that.” I replied, “I speak Spanish so we can talk about that part too!” The writer told me, “Let’s not read it, only the English.” While I must recognize that prioritizing Standard Written English and grammaticality of their academic texts is a valuable and reasonable expectation for many real personal, political, and academic reasons, it was striking for me to experience numerous instances of dismissal in online consultations for two reasons: (1) I did not experience such patterns during in-person consultations, and (2) I have established working relationships with writers who have previously engaged in codemeshing with me and have subsequently refused or chosen not to do so in our online space.

What this story of the centerless digital GWC reveals are the consequences of retrofitting our physical center-based pedagogies to digital spaces. As I’ve described above, digital silence is tricky to understand and navigate. But our issues with digital silence also index questions about the representations of the body in digital spaces. Rather than attuning to the physical body next to me, I am now cognizant of voice, sound, and the computer interface, for example, and how digital silence might make me interpret a body that is not present or a body that is disengaged. Digital silence in chat boxes and audio-only interactions reduces representations of our bodies from small head-to-shoulders boxes to sound waves or ellipses in comment bubbles. For me, because my conceptual apparatus for understanding silence has its roots in an epistemology of sight and touch, of writing work being done in a physical writing center space, digital silences felt like an absence or erasure of the body. Similarly, as a consequence of retrofitting practices, the multilingual body felt absent or totally erased when the online ethos became all about productivity and efficiency for English writing during the real-world pandemic time that disrupted mobilities of graduate student bodies to their labs, offices, and classes, threatening their livelihoods—often their very statuses as funded graduate students in the United States—should they fail to produce academic work in English even during quarantine. My interaction with various languages in writing and conversation was limited by writers’ choices to ignore or delete non-English writing and/or
the technological reality that writers who have non-English notes in a notebook in front of them can’t project those physical notes onto my computer screen beside their digital documents.

Slow Movements Back to Campus and Toward Relational Futures

The narratives of our disruptions expose issues in retrofitting in-person practice to online consultations; further, they explore difficult and challenging consequences of the GWC’s multiple spatial displacements. These stories are of disruption, of a vulnerability precipitated by incompatibilities and inequalities inherent in my attempts to reconcile an inevitable Zoom GWC with my long-held beliefs about the GWC as defined by its walls and the work intended within. When taken together, these stories of disruptions in both physical and physical-to-digital moves reveal how hegemonic and normalized ways of thinking about GWC spaces and writing collaboration are insufficient (Bell, 2020). And, perhaps more significantly, from these cracks in stagnant physical space-based identities and practices emerge opportunities for theorizing and mobilizing other communicative and discursive modes as integral to a more accessible, equitable, accountable, and collaborative GWC praxis.

The most recent disruption narrative is a slower one of my return as a consultant to our GWC after a year and a half serving in another role to find my graduate colleagues coordinating the center offering a mix of online and in-person consultations and still without any GWC designated physical office space. My colleagues and I planned to offer online consultations and work out of a library space, a small group study room like the one we moved to just before COVID-19. Most generative and critical for our GWC at this moment, I think, is how we are returning to campus but aren’t returning to any predetermined Graduate Writing Center space. We are essentially rebuilding our GWC after the havoc of the pandemic, but we aren’t starting exclusively from an office space nor an established identity as an online writing center; our GWC space is a distributed one with multiple centers and focal points of writing interaction precipitated by disruptions to the center from which to emerge and evolve.

From these disruptions, we might understand that retrofitting a center and its in-person practice with accommodations for digital technologies and spaces is a rhetorical impediment that hinders both the consultant’s ability to perform traditionally conceptualized writer-based and writer-led practice as well as the writer’s ability to perform rhetorical and linguistic dexterity. If we approach future GWC praxis developments through border thinking (Mignolo, 2011, 2012), however, then we can begin to realize the inventive and creative potentials of local knowledges and
the resonances of relations between writers, consultants, languages, materials, and the broader relational (Walsh & Mignolo, 2018) ecology of graduate writing collaboration. The question that exhausted my colleagues and me, like many others during the onset of lockdowns, was, how are we supposed to move to online writing consulting? When I consider the disruptions I experienced alongside many others over the past three years and will face with postpandemic reparations, that question now becomes, how can we reenvision the GWC to be always moving?

The disruptive effects of COVID-19 cannot be romanticized as positive outcomes, nor is that the intent here; rather, from the disruptions precipitated by the pandemic, I recognize how the future of our GWC depends on a reinvention of praxis. As these disruptions demonstrate, disparate as they are in their explicit severity, I was constantly challenged to delink from my reliance on the logics of the center in which I worked, my reliance on my so-called expertise in writing instruction, and my reliance on the authority granted to me by the title “Consultant” and my identity as an Anglo-American L1 English speaker and PhD candidate in Rhetoric and Composition. These disruptions exposed such reliance and the inequitable and unsustainable consequences of its maintenance; these disruptions exposed complacency and stagnation in retrofitting approaches. A GWC that is centerless and always moving isn’t necessarily on the move in the way that my GWC was moving from building to building to online to building. In what follows, I share my critical self-reflections on nonlinear and nondichotomized potentials for cultivating a centerless GWC that is always becoming through vulnerability and relationality.

BEYOND RETROFITTING: NONLINEAR AND NONDICHOTOMIZED POTENTIALS FOR FUTURE PRAXIS

European modernity and representational orientations to knowledge, language, and the body cemented coloniality into the walls of the writing center, objectifying its work as disembodied institutional practices for correctness—in language, form, body, and notions of success. But writing center professionals feel all too well the tensions between the hopes we have for our futures and the haunting histories within those center walls (Boquet, 2002). As my university’s graduate writing center was rocked with one disruption after another, increasing in intensity from just before the world shut down to nearly two and a half years later, my colleagues, our graduate student writers, and I felt the colonial legacies quite literally squeeze us off the campus map. And, with my own praxis, I had to learn what I still needed to unlearn. Being displaced and written off the campus map, however, didn’t delegitimize the
relationships my colleagues and I built with graduate writers, nor did it extinguish
the graduate writing center entity from campus consciousness. What happened
was that graduate writers sought us out with an unprecedented enthusiasm and
compassion and demand. Although we kept moving and then suddenly couldn’t even
work together face-to-face, graduate writers, my fellow consultants, and I pursued
community in a/synchronous ways, a community that, strained as it was and elusive
to describe, was nevertheless visceral and real and patched together through disparate
connections. By necessity, we found ways to support and mobilize each other while
physically distant through new relations and attitudes toward our collaborative
writing work and the digital means through which we worked. In short, when our
GWC was centerless, it grew ecologically and compassionately.

One development our GWC was unprepared for was the physical displacement
before and because of COVID-19, and given our reliance on the traditional ideas of
the center, we thought of those displacements as a debilitating loss of a center office
space. In turn, this duality of thinking reinforced our desires and intense efforts to
make the library and Zoom spaces feel like normal, feel like the center. When I follow
the disruptions critically, I realize that the graduate writing center opened to different
types of accessibility, relevancies, and roles that were not predicated on the physical
centeredness of our original office in the graduate student building. When I am not
consumed by dichotomizing tendencies to think about the GWC as an institutional-
ized space for writing work, I can instead realize the GWC as an ecological and inter-
actional space. Incoming, early career, and even returning graduate students without
office spaces in their own departments found us more accessible and, in some cases,
more visible with a temporary 8 × 11 sign than with a permanent office space in the
perceived central location for graduate students. And, when completely virtual and
even less advertised (because we had to focus our efforts on keeping ourselves and
the GWC afloat during the pandemic), our GWC became an indispensable fixture
for a deluge of new and returning graduate writers in ways it wasn’t before.

The move to the library space and the graduate writers the move attracted reveal
the plurality of graduate situations, experiences, and choices on our campus and,
I imagine, many others like it. When establishing and building a graduate writing
center, or even when assessing praxis, how often are we attending to the factors and
contexts that make a space accessible? How can we prioritize the realities—forced
and chosen—of where graduate writers are when they write? How can we observe
and learn from how and why graduate students move (or don’t) around campus to
conduct their writing work? When I think critically about the multisite design of
our university’s undergraduate writing center, which has locations in the library,
academic buildings, and common areas, I wonder how we can resist the physical
manifestations of graduate education as a colonial model (Madden, 2020) and
transform GWC praxis that reflects the ecological and distributed experience of graduate writing.

Salient in the narratives of disruption are diverse practices of interaction through which graduate writers and I conducted our work and connected to one another as human beings experiencing an unprecedented pandemic. At the time, I was reliant on the institution of the GWC as a static entity with ways of doing writing work able to be facilitated faithfully through Zoom. This preoccupation resulted in the retrofitting of in-person practice detailed in the narratives and my extreme discomfort when things didn’t go as planned: I fidgeted in the silences because I couldn’t see what the writer was doing; I filled the silences with my voice in service of maintaining a linear idea of productivity in 50 minutes; I had no idea how to facilitate writer-led practice, especially when cameras were off or work was asynchronous. Subsequently, I reenacted monolingual and monomodal orientations to writing, reducing the activities of writing and consulting to disembodied experiences privileging an amodal text. Even my efforts to orient my screen to mimic in-person practice went awry as the text dominated the screen space, the writer’s and my notes were rendered imperceptible to the other, and the writer and I were reduced to mini floating heads on the side.

Rather than a placed and institutionalized entity, the disruptions we felt might instead suggest we conceive of, story, and practice the GWC as a distributed interactional space. What would it mean to reframe the binary of online or in-person consulting services? What kinds of interstitial configurations become possible if online/in-person was representative of a range of interactional moments? For example, when I lost the walls of our center, I perceived, too, a loss of the materiality of a dry erase board or shared paper between a writer and me to sketch out ideas; I perceived a loss of multimodal engagement. Why? During one of my online sessions, a graduate writer from engineering stopped me mid-sentence and asked, “Can I show you my board?” She turned the computer camera, stepped back and away from the camera toward a dry erase board, and pointed to her concept map. “Here’s how I’m thinking about it. Can you see that?” Immediately I regretted not thinking to ask writers to sketch out concepts for me on a piece of paper and hold it in front of the camera or do so myself as was integral and common to in-person sessions.

The hegemonic representationalist orientation to the digital prescribed how I thought Zoom and Google Docs were technologies to use in service of writing consulting work. Likewise, this kind of representational thinking hierarchized the uses for knowledge-making applications of various materials, like paper or a dry erase board, and relegated the potentials of these materials to a static place. Such hierarchical and linear thinking “occludes the multistranded nature of processes” and “risks glossing over the overlapping and entangled material, lived, social, and more-than-human processes and relationships that constitute the world” (Radcliffe, 2020,
p. 596) and those that constitute our graduate writing center. In a recent reflection on their own university writing center, Courtney Werner and Diana Lin Awa Scrocco (2020) acknowledge the challenges in shifting to online work and are, too, critical of retrofits from in-person to online consulting. They suggest, however, that writing centers don’t need to let technology determine our actions, but rather our commitments and attitudes to online consulting can maintain the integrity of writer-based and writer-led praxis (Werner & Scrocco, 2020). What I think my experiences of disruption during the pandemic crisis can contribute is not only a corroboration that consultant attitudes toward technologies is paramount, but that technologies such as Zoom, Google Docs, and chat boxes are actually a part of the interactional space of writing work rather than tools to use and with which to do writing work.

The distinction between technologies as tools to facilitate writing work and technologies as a part of writing interaction is important. The former favors the human and adheres to modernist values of instrumentality and efficiency for progress, while the latter speaks to human and nonhuman interaction and interdependent relationships. Our GWC’s pandemic plan was to use Zoom and Google Docs in the service of efficiently conducting consultations and progress through a text as we had done in the center. We wanted business as usual, so to speak. However, the business-as-usual model did not and cannot work because it assumes digital technologies are simply used. As Selfe and Selfe (1994) argue, the computer interface signals a constituted world and the “ideological, political, economic, [and] educational” values of our culture “mapped both implicitly and explicitly [through the interface], constituting a complex set of material relations among culture, technology, and technology users” (p. 485). As such, computer interfaces are “non-innocent physical borders (between the regular world and the virtual world), cultural borders (between the have and the have-nots), and linguistic borders” (p. 495). The disruptions of COVID-19 exacerbated and, in many cases, blurred these borders for our GWC and my own praxis.

The blurring of these borders became incredibly meaningful to me through this critical retrospective of our GWC’s disruption experiences because of the ways my writing consulting work was reshaped by Zoom silences and audio-only interactions. Initially I resented Zoom because I found it difficult to sense what a writer was thinking without visual cues and it was impossible to see what they were doing outside the lines of their little Zoom speaker box. Like the tutor participants in Werner and Scrocco’s (2020) study, I realized upon reflection that I had the same tendencies to fill the silences with my own voice, mostly to maintain efficient linear progress down the page and fill our time productively. These tendencies failed me when writers and I worked with cameras off. In the disruption narratives, I describe moments when I felt I lost the presence of the writer and, in many cases, the presence of the multilingual body because I couldn’t see the hallmark surface- and
text-level markers of codemeshing, non-English language texts, or a writer’s hands poised over a keyboard.

Disruptions to practice exposed for me how the reliance on technologies as tools and a hierarchy of the senses—where visuality was privileged as access to knowing—maintain Eurocentric structures of competence, communicative ability, and grammar/language as separable from the body. The moments detailed above where multilingual graduate writers told me to ignore their non-English notes to themselves can be understood as speaking perhaps to the overbearing narrative of the GWC as equivalent to a site of English-language correction, or the leading moves I made to orient us as writer and reader to the English text, or the writer’s perception of my English “nativeness.” I consider this moment and others like it a personal failure; what is evident to me now is how I ignored and worked against the digital as already part of our interaction and thought that Zoom as a tool limited the translilingual potential of our work. But what if I let go of my reliance on the supremacy of visuality and the visible as evidence for linguistic dexterity? What can I learn about graduate writers with a praxis of Zoom-audio, sound, and listening (Ceraso, 2014; Droumeva & Murphy, 2018)? Rather than “assume distance from the digital” (Boyle et al., 2018, p. 252), it is possible that attunements to writers and writing through silence and sonic experiences embodied through and with the digital might enact what Arturo Escobar (2018) describes as an ethic of relationality, an inquiry “into existing and potential rationalities and modes of being that emphasize the profound relationality and interconnectedness of all” (p. 20).

Because these disruptions challenge ocularcentrism in practice and the hierarchy of the senses—and each sense’s capacity for being useful to human cognition and knowledge-making—there is potential for consultants to enact, feel, and hear translilingual presences, especially in their online work. With the writers who told me over Zoom to ignore the Korean or Arabic notes in the margins, I reacted in a way that legitimized only the English-text as worthy of our time. I was uncomfortable, but nevertheless followed the writers’ instructions. Maybe it was appropriate for me to push the issue a little more or maybe backing off in respect of the writer’s direction was more appropriate. Regardless, I think the point worth making here is that I internalized the writer’s direction to ignore the non-English text and continued to work as if that text went unseen. As if it didn’t have a presence. As if the Korean or Arabic text we came to next also didn’t exist. There is potential here, I believe, for acknowledging translilingual practices that are not text-based or present visual evidence. For instance, at the beginning of an online or Zoom consultation, as the consultant I might engage the writer in conversation about their marginalia, note-taking, voice-memoing, and/or prewriting habits. I might express that these kinds of drafty supplemental musings can help me better understand the writer’s intentions.
and goals. Perhaps I could invite writers to share whether they use Grammarly or other text-editors, checkers, or translation tools, which are not visibly obvious to the consultant but carry significant rhetorical and linguistic force as part of the writer’s processes. And rather than seek attitudinal or emotional insights solely from visual cues, I might pay attention to how the writer’s voice and silence communicates their anxieties, excitement, or questions.

If a writer wants to schedule a consultation at my university’s GWC, they do so through an online scheduling system that, as part of the session record form, prompts the writer to indicate what they want to work on during the session. Like other scheduling systems I’ve worked with and seen in different writing centers, ours provides a drop-down list of genre types: Conference poster/presentation, Abstract, Literature Review, Book Chapter, Class assignment, and so on. During the pandemic, I found myself thinking and half-joking with my colleagues that we should add “moral support” to that list. A little bit of a joke at the time; now I reflect about how from the very first moment graduate writers initiate (or revisit) a relationship with our GWC, they are instructed to do so in a text-based, product-based, disembodied, and prescriptive way. Our scheduling form doesn’t leave room for relatability or for support; rather, it indexes the totalizing design of the colonial model. Through the disruptions we felt together to life and our work, our GWC community transformed the role I thought I had in supporting graduate writing from supporting writing to supporting writers through compassion, listening, vulnerability, and creative communicative options despite unprecedented and unpredictable situations. If our GWC added “talk through things” or “motivational support” or even “write together” to our drop-down list of consultation activity options, consultant training would necessitate cultivating dispositions to openness, to empathy, to difference, to a range of multisensorial, embodied, and polysemiotic resources.

These disruption narratives are only one storying of the coloniality haunting U.S.-based graduate writing centers that peripheralize graduate writing support to pseudo-accessible “graduate spaces” on campus maps. While I recognize that issues of administration, campus space politics, lack of resources, equitable labor considerations, and funding decisions are not to be ignored in GWC developments, there is significance in moving forward with our commitments to slight-but-constant attitudinal and ideological delinking in the meantime. These narratives are also a critical self-reflection of my internalization and enactments of pieces of the canonical tutor training I and many others received. My reflections, questions, and ideas are intentionally broad and open-ended; they are my attempt to imagine otherwise and question the plurality of options for GWC work. At the end of one of our last consultations, a graduate writer with whom I worked nearly every week for two years (much of that time was during the pandemic) commented on our unique workflow. The writer identified as blind,
an L1 Korean speaker, L2 English speaker, and STEM scholar. They were musing that even though we had never seen each other’s faces, they felt as though through our voices and the attunements we made to anticipate each other’s comments, ideas, or needs, “we [were] customized to each other.” I think about that comment often, especially during this critical reflection of disruptions, and wonder what graduate writing support work could be if we all approached those interactions hoping to become entangled, interdependent, and customized to one another.

AUTHOR NOTE

No known conflict of interest to disclose.

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NOTES

1. While issues of campus space decisions, politics, and funding are germane to our GWC’s situation in securing a new space, consideration of these issues were beyond the scope of my role, responsibilities, and authority as a graduate student fulfilling her assistantship requirements as a GWC coordinator and consultant. Accordingly, I do not engage with those issues here.

2. My use of the term “blind scholar” reflects this individual’s chosen formulation for representation.

REFERENCES


