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CCCC 2014 Friday, 9:30-10:45 AM

Centering our Stories: Applying Spatial Metaphors to Writing Center Publicity

[Slide 2] I begin with the question, how can writing centers use digital spaces to position themselves as assets to their campus and local communities? While most writing centers have pages on their universities' websites, there continue to be new ways that writing centers can take advantage of these spaces to make their work more visible to wider publics. One way they can do so, I suggest, is through publishing stories about and by the people with whom they partner.

To that end, I'll be sharing examples of writing center websites that use their online spaces to not just provide information about their services, but also to tell stories about them. Moreover, these stories give greater visibility not only to achievements, but also help to position writing centers as liminal sites, or third spaces, that bring together faculty and students from a variety of academic and cultural communities. In doing so, they challenge some of the more worn metaphors for writing centers, especially that of a storehouse or garret.

[Slide 3] While stories abound in writing center scholarship and within the walls of our writing centers—in other words, in how we communicate our work to each other—they're less commonly found in the images we present to outsiders. Instead, in our more public documents we're likely to find numbers and bullet pointed lists, and, when the voices of those served are shared, brief, select quotes. In Purdue Writing Lab's annual reports, for example, one of the appendices has typically included a list of positive comments from teachers and instructors who have utilized the center. And I recognize, as many writing center scholars have already pointed out, that this quantitative and concise recording of achievements is necessary, allowing writing center directors to share their centers' institutional value with higher administration, garnering funds and other forms of support. Muriel Harris, for example, adapts concepts from business, professional writing, and other fields to argue that writing centers should introduce "stickiness" into their writing, language that is "positive, appeals appropriately to our audiences, is highly memorable, and is concrete and specific" (48). Joyce Kinkead & Jeanne Simpson similarly claim that writing center directors need to understand the culture of central administration, arguing that "administrators value proposals—not essays or editorials—that are short, communicate effectively, use graphs, figures, and lists" (78). Furthermore, applying technical writing principles to writing center annual reports, Andrea Zachery summarizes common approaches to our communication with university administration, which include document design elements such as bullet points. She points out that administrators prefer quantitative more than qualitative information and then illustrates how writing center directors can "translate" qualitative into quantitative data (5). WCDs are thus advised to reach a potentially resistant audience of higher administration through providing numbers, bullet-pointed items, and other concisely-phrased evidence that their writing centers are worthy university investments. While this approach to administrative communication is not exhaustive of writing centers' documentation practices, scholarship on the topic suggests that it is a common one.

When documents written in this concise language form the majority of writing centers' archives, however, writing centers may lack more nuanced narratives of their work. Today I want to show how stories about those we serve and with whom we partner, when placed in digital public spaces—especially writing center websites—can help writing centers define themselves as liminal spaces where students, faculty, and community members can learn about and share their perspectives on writing. By soliciting stories from these individuals and incorporating them into digital genres accessible to the public—such as blogs, podcasts, and digital stories—writing centers

can achieve a range of goals: further engage those they serve, provide tutoring staff with a better understanding of those they reach, and, importantly, provide central administration and other external audiences with narratives of writing centers' value that can be more engaging and nuanced than numbers, bullet-pointed items, and brief summaries of writing center services—the kinds of data and general information that are common in public documents like annual reports and on the homepages of writing center sites.

[Slide 4] My interest in the incorporation of stories into writing center's public documents stems in part from my several years as a development manager in the non-profit sector, where coworkers and I collected stories from those we served to use in our fundraising and other promotional materials. When I transitioned back into academia, with a focus on writing program and writing center administration, I noticed a lack of this storytelling emphasis in writing program's public documents. In particular, my research on my institution's writing center's annual reports evidenced a prioritization of numbers over narratives. This emphasis on data in how we present ourselves is not limited to academic programs, and many consultants in non-profit management have written about the value of memorable storytelling for non-profit organizations. As Daniel Portnoy recounts in "The Nonprofit Narrative: How Telling Stories Can Change the World," when he speaks with his non-profit clients he often encounters what he calls the "data option": "They quote stats and figures to me about their scenario," he writes, and "then they say: "This is our story." While "Facts are important and crucial for credibility," he notes, but "Communicating a story only with news items is like trying to get a sense of what a room looks like by looking through the key hole" (23). Portnoy then goes on to summarize the essential elements of a story (and here I recognize that story is a term with various definitions and examples), that highlights some important aspects for writing centers to consider when soliciting stories: First, a story has a setting (so writing centers might first consider all the locations of their work (which might include the center itself, classrooms across the university, libraries, or sites in the local community). As Portnoy points out, the setting of an organization's stories isn't always at its headquarters (25). Second, a story has multiple protagonists, which seems particularly apropos for writing centers given the many different kinds of staff, students, and partners we serve. As Portnoy states, "The organization is a main character, but each person who works for your organization is also a character in the story" (25). Third, a story has an inciting incident, or the answer to the question, "Why is this story happening?" (30). When considering this final element of storytelling, writing center staff might consider two levels of why: first, the why of their individual stories, but also, secondly, the why of their writing center—Why tell the stories you're telling? Why do they help you to represent the mission and vision of your writing center?

[Slide 5] Following our theme of master narratives in the writing center field, I'm interested in applying the practices of non-profit storytelling to writing center publicity, and more specifically in ways that communicate with and perhaps even challenge the master narratives that writing centers have told about themselves. Narratives embodied in spatial metaphors are particularly interesting to me, here, because they can help writing centers reflect on the settings for their stories. I therefore briefly review several of the dominant spatial metaphors for writing centers, metaphors categorized by Andrea Lunsford in her essay "Conflict, Collaboration, and the Idea of a Writing Center": storehouse, garret, and Burkean Parlor. In the view of center as storehouse, writing centers are "information stations or storehouses, prescribing and handing out skills and strategies to individual learners," and thus not particularly amenable to collaboration. Collaboration also poses a threat to the second metaphor, the writing center as garret; whereas in a storehouse center information is exterior to the writer and imparted to them mechanically, in the garret model the writing center helps students get in touch with the knowledge that is already within them. Finally, Lunsford

proposes a third model, the idea of writing centers as Burkean parlors, “as centers for collaboration.”

Others have extended Lunsford’s ideal of collaboration to other spatial metaphors, like that of third space, liminal space and borderland. Elizabeth Coughlin et al. of DePaul University, in their Fall 2012 ECWCA article, “Outreach: Expanding Writing Center Third Space” use this concept of “third space” to consider the potential for writing center outreach, contextualizing third space among many similar spatial metaphors for writing centers included “liminal space, ‘in-between-ness,’ border-crossing, intersections, interstices, hybrid discourse, Burkean parlors,…”...and I’m only half way through their list. For the authors of this article, “outreach is the creation or extension of third space in a writing center, and we define third space as the location or ideology that is negotiated and/or created when different identities or spaces come into discussion with one another.”

[Slide 6] In the more widely cited “Moveable Feasts, Liminal Spaces: Writing Centers and the State of In-Betweenness,” Bonnie S. Sunstein discusses writing centers’ academic and institutional liminality, whereby we “find ourselves everywhere and nowhere. We house programs to ‘write across the curriculum,’ to serve ESL, LD, and non-traditional students, to link full-time and part-time faculty, to employ students as tutors, to tutor faculty.” As she puts it, “A writing center cannot define itself as a space—we’re often kicked out of our spaces. It’s not a pedagogy. We’re always re-articulating our pedagogy. It’s certainly not an academic department. It crosses all disciplines.” Rather than seeing this lack of spatial definition as a lack, Sunstein and others position their liminality as a unique asset, opening more spaces for writers and crossing academic borders. (of course, there are many other metaphors that have been applied to writing centers, including “frontier”—however, because that metaphor focuses on writing centers as leaders in composition research (a topic that will be covered by Tammy later in our panel) I focus here on metaphors for writing centers’ pedagogy and positioning within the wider local community.

That said, how might writing centers begin to collect their stories if they don’t have a storytelling plan in place? One way, as demonstrated by the websites I’ll show today, is interviews with students and WAC partners. In a recent edition of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, Carey Smitherman provides a guide for writing center staff hoping to conduct oral interviews in their own institutions. She begins by writing that “Documentation of the history of individual writing centers has been fragmented and widely dispersed. Available pieces of writing centers’ histories tend to generalize individualized experiences, such as personal struggles and triumphs, feelings of marginalization [...] to the whole writing center community.” According to Smitherman, oral histories can provide writing center can provide writing centers with personalized accounts that “get beyond the surface dates and events in any field”—the kinds of information that “would otherwise be excluded or overlooked” (1-2). **[Slide 7]** For more suggestions, we can again turn to the field of non-profit management and sites like “5 Ways to Tell Your Nonprofits Story,” which encourages its readers to tell their organizations’ stories in a range of media: pictures, videos, writing, verbally, and finally, through others’ voices. Given the range of genres afforded by writing center websites, it’s feasible for writing centers to apply these ideas to their own storytelling.

[Slide 8] Continuing to explore the metaphor of liminality, next I touch upon a few examples of how writing centers have used their websites to tell stories about their center, and in ways that amplify their contributions as Burkean Parlors or liminal spaces. I ask, how can writing centers 1) make more visible their successes with collaborative pedagogy? 2) define themselves as a common ground for students, faculty, and other partners across academic and local communities?, and 3) use websites and other digital spaces to amplify their value as Burkean Parlors and Borderlands?


I suggest that stories told in digital spaces can challenge those and forward the view of writing centers as borderlands [and importantly these stories are told in voices outside the “headquarters” of these centers—which as Sunstein notes are often fluid and transient]. To research

ways that writing centers tell their stories in digital spaces, I read a range of writing center websites. Overwhelmingly, I found that writing center websites tend to be used as information sources, with the familiar tabs “About Us,” “Contact Us,” and “Resources” for faculty and students. Several writing centers, however, used their sites in innovative ways. In sharing these examples, I do recognize that most are based at large research universities, clearly have well-established WAC or community engagement programs, and thus might not be easily comparable to smaller, less well-established centers. With that in mind, I conclude my presentation with some questions and issues to consider when tailoring a storytelling strategy to a writing center’s local needs and capacities.

[Slide 9] I’ll show three examples of sites: one that incorporates stories from students about how their university’s writing center helped them reach their goals through collaborative pedagogy (which aligns more with the Burkean Parlor metaphor than with the metaphor of third-space; two that position their writing centers as a common ground for instructor voices across the curriculum; and finally, one that highlights the writing centers engagement with the local community. The examples I show—from Writing Centers at University of Colorado Denver, University of Wisconsin-Superior, Texas A&M, and DePaul University—use a variety of digital genres including blogs, podcasts, and digital storytelling, showing the range of ways that writing centers might share their stories.

[Slide 10] As I noted at the beginning of my presentation, the public documents of writing centers often prioritize data. Supplementing numerical evidence of students served, the Writing Center at University of Colorado Denver explains that they “see small successes every day, every hour across our locations — clearer sentence structure, more accurate citations, organization that better reflects established arguments. Sometimes, however, “success” feels a little bigger: a scholarship, study abroad program, or career opportunity; admission to a certificate or graduate program; a completed thesis or dissertation; a published manuscript or funded grant. This space is dedicated to celebrating those successes, *your* successes.”

These stories help amplify the value of collaborative pedagogy, akin to Lundsford’s Burkean Parlor]. **[Slide 11]** For example, one student’s story states that, “The Writing Center helped me feel confident in my essay because they challenged me to be creative and think critically in order to craft a winner. Employees in the Center assisted me from the first draft to the final draft, and that support made me feel like a champion. Now I feel optimistic about any form of writing because I learned methods that will make me successful in college.” Through these student success stories, this university’s writing center moves beyond depicting students as numbers served to show the specific ways that collaboration can help students achieve their writing goals and become more independent writers.

[Slide 12] Moving on to examples of writing centers’ value across the curriculum, the University of Wisconsin-Superior’s Writing Across the Curriculum Digital Storytelling Project is a partnership between the University’s Writing Across the Curriculum Project and the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning to “support faculty, staff, and students in their creation of digital stories of their development as writers.” [Digital stories combine elements such as audio narration, still images, video clips onscreen text, and music to tell stories, usually in a movie file of less than five minutes.] An example is [Eleni’s Story of Writing](#)  (4:56 minutes), by **Dr. Eleni Pinnow**, Assistant Professor of Psychology, Department of Human Behavior, Justice and Diversity at UW-Superior, which uses pictures and voice-over to tell the story of a STEM faculty members’ struggles and successes with the writing process. By placing these stories in digital spaces, Eleni’s story can reach students, other faculty, writing centers across the field, and others interested in this writing centers’ value to the university.

[Slide 13] While UW-Superior has collected four digital stories from faculty members across the disciplines, the writing center at Texas A&M devotes a section of their website to “Blogs, Broadcasts, and Videos,” which includes a podcast where writing center tutors interview faculty members on writing across the disciplines. These interviews serve various purposes, providing insight for other instructors and tutors involved in WAC and WID work, and collectively positioning this writing center as a common ground for faculty across the university to share their thoughts on writing and writing instruction.

[Slide 14] Finally, writing centers can take advantage of their liminality through outreach to and partnerships with local community organizations. DePaul’s “The University Center for Writing-based Learning” uses a range of digital genres for its outreach: a YouTube Channel (“The Breakroom”); a Podcast (“Hot Topics in Writing”); and Scrawl Radio, a show on the student radio station that showcases conversation with students, tutors, DePaul faculty, and writers in the local Chicago area. The radio station’s shows include examples of how public stories can showcase the writing center’s role as a partner with the local community. For example, in one of its most recent March 2014 episodes, “Is it Public History,” Scrawl Radio interviewed Lisa Junkin-Lopez, Interim Director at the Jane Addams Hull House Museum about public history and research on social activism in Chicago. Among the websites I researched, I found the fewest examples of stories from the community—and as I suggest in this spring’s *Writing Center Journal*, writing centers might do more to publish narratives by their community partners in order to make this work more visible.

[Slide 15] Conclusion

Before interviewing their staff, students, faculty, or community partners, writing center staff could ask themselves the following questions (on handout):

- Which spatial metaphors--storehouse, garret, borderland, etc.--most resonate with the aims and activities of your writing center? How might these metaphors help you to frame and amplify your centers’ contributions to campus and local communities?
- How might you use memorable stories to publicize and promote your center? Who should narrate these stories? What are the best media, print or digital, for reaching your intended audiences?

While most of the writing centers whose websites I covered today are large writing centers at research universities, and have resources that other writing centers might not enjoy. There are other, more modest ways that all writing centers—no matter their size or resources—could incorporate stories into their presentation of their work. As writing center directors, staff, and tutors, we should ask ourselves, how can we move beyond numbers in sharing our university- and community-wide impact?