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opportunity to transform a ‘mediated’ educational system that tends to reinforce social injustice into one that affirms and actualizes social justice.” In the review by Melinda Reichelt of *Landmark Essays on ESL Writing*, edited by Tony Silva and Paul Kei Matsuda, we are made aware of a first-rate “chronological overview of the development of research in the field of ESL writing, especially for writing center professionals who focus on first language composition and want to bring themselves up to date on ESL composition issues.”

In this issue of *WCI*, we are also inviting applications for the editor’s position starting 2002-2003; we strongly urge two (or even three) writing center professionals to apply together and serve as co-editors. The co-editors can be from different institutions. This is an opportunity that should be accepted by writing center professionals in secure institutional positions with ample support. For example, editors should have either graduate student or staff support, experience and help with institutional budgets, appropriate space, database and desktop publishing skills, and equipment (i.e., computers, software, bookshelves, file cabinets). While other monetary support from the institution in the form of postage or printing is optional, such commitments are not uncommon on campuses and are public demonstrations of support for writing center scholarship.

Potential editors should consider their current obligations to their institution and to their personal lives, their positions within their institutions, and the time commitment an editorship entails. Please note that the NWCA executive board voted that the editorship for *The Writing Center Journal* would be for three years, with a renewable three years thereafter. Candidates are asked to submit the following:

- Cover letter expressing your intent, what will make you a capable editor and, in the case of more than one applicant, how you will divide the labor;
- Curriculum Vitae;
- Writing sample (publications);
- Letter of support from the institution explaining an understanding of the editor’s commitment and detailing the institution’s commitment to the future editor(s) in terms of level of support: e.g., release time, and/or money, and/or secretarial support (e.g., use of assistant/secretary), place for the journal’s budget, press use, post office help, graduate student, student work study.

For information on mailing materials, contact either current editor: Joan Mullin (jmullin@utnet.utoledo.edu); Al DeCiccio (adeciccio@river.edu).

All application materials due to editors by August 31, 2001.

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**Writing Centers as Sites of Academic Culture**

**Molly Wingate**

Writing centers have spent at least the past twenty years carving out a place, a space, to exist and to be valued. The millennial messages in the Spring/Summer 2000 *Writing Center Journal* speak well to the whys and hows of this important and enjoyable work. Creating new venues for teaching, thinking, and learning has been a terrifically invigorating educational enterprise.

As we have made a place for writing centers, many of us have talked and written about administering writing centers and creating the kind of collaborative and institutional structures that help writing centers thrive. We have theorized and debated the merits of being out of or inside the mainstream. Many have agreed to disagree. We have talked about accreditation, evaluation, and all that credentialing brings with it. Again, we are not all in agreement. All the while, writing center professionals have struggled to assure our place on our campuses with annual reports full of statistics. We have tied our successes with the missions of our institutions, and we have cultivated allies on our campuses. This hard work has had positive results. We can feel fairly certain that writing centers will be around next year. No longer do we wring our hands. Instead, we have moved on to further theorize our work, striving to help ourselves and others understand the challenging and important work we do.

While our scholarship has become more theoretical, in our everyday work we continue to tally the numbers of appointments we have, the number of students we serve, and so on. We keep track of our contribution to student retention, and we continue to link these numbers to the missions of our schools. We show how we help feed the bottom line. At this juncture, I propose that we use the same data to spread the news about how writing centers do more. I propose that we use our statistics to

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show that writing centers help to create a climate where struggling students succeed and successful students excel. Let us consider how we add to something less concrete than the bottom line: academic culture. Writing centers are terribly important places on campuses because they enhance and advance a culture of academic seriousness. Writing centers support the present academic culture; at their best, they model elements of what academic culture could be.

Far from being solely a repository of boneheads, a writing center is full of talented, bright, and academically serious people. By thinking of writing centers as sites of academic culture, we acknowledge that students at the writing center are serious about their academic work, more serious than most. Whether as tutors or as writers, students are drawn to writing centers in part because they are great places to learn about academic thinking, critiquing, and writing. They do solid academic work at the center, learn how to carry that work into the rest of the institution, and they come back to the center to do more work that is serious.

For writers, writing centers add to the culture of academic seriousness because they:

- Take the writers and their work seriously;
- Engage writers in academic talk and teach them how to do it, too;
- Demonstrate critical thinking strategies and give writers a place and the time to practice critical thinking;
- Provide a place to meet and talk;
- Teach and support communication skills;
- Push writers to think harder and write better.

These qualities of writing centers also add to the academic culture of our schools by getting more people engaged in the academic enterprise of critical thinking and writing. Muriel Harris, in “Talking in the Middle: Why Writers Need Writing Tutors,” details why writers use writing centers, and she explores the kinds of knowledge they come to gain (27-42). We can build on such discussions to talk about what writing centers add to the whole institution.

I challenge readers to think about how their writing centers enhance and advance a culture of academic seriousness. I challenge them to prove it, too. What could be considered measures of seriousness? Some familiar categories of statistics can help us out here. We can use graduation rates and grade point averages to sketch the picture. For example, in the case of the class entering Colorado College in 1995 (Appendix A), students who used the Writing Center two or more times (31% of the class) had an average GPA of 3.32. The average GPA for the class was 3.27. Students who used the Center once or not at all had a GPA of 3.25, that is .07 lower than those who used the Center two or more times. The people who returned to the Writing Center did better in school. What about graduation rates? (Appendix B) Of the students who used the Writing Center two or more times, 90.1% of them graduated as compared to 74.4% of the students who used the Writing Center once or not at all. The average graduation rate was 79.2%. To make sure that this data was representative, I looked at the classes entering in 1992 and 1989. The picture remained the same.

In the past, I used these statistics to talk about a possible causal relationship between the Writing Center and higher GPAs and increased graduation rates. But today I am using them to show that the students who use the Writing Center are more academically serious than those students who do not use the Writing Center. They get better grades, on average, and they are more likely to stick it out until they graduate. Bear in mind that our higher GPA persists despite the many struggling students who use the Writing Center religiously but who have low GPAs. Our graduation rate persists despite those who work with us and decide to transfer or drop out. A slightly different question asked of the same data database reveals that the Writing Center is a site for people who are willing to work at doing well in college.

Another way to prove that writing centers are places where students are serious is to document the conversations that occur in tutorials. We have many examples of research analyzing the nature and content of tutorial conversations. Perhaps an analysis of seriousness in the writing center would be fruitful. Certainly, the conversations one overhears at a writing center are often very serious. For example: “Help me understand what you mean.” “I don’t see how those two ideas are connected.” “Even when I am talking about my personal identity politics, do I need to cite academic sources?” The conversations that develop from these comments are at least anecdotal proof that the writers and tutors are deeply engaged in serious academic work.

Let us turn our attention to the tutors. How do they add to the academic culture of an institution? My experience is with peer tutors, but I believe my remarks apply to all tutors, no matter their status or age. Using the same measures as I did for students using the Writing Center, I looked at the undergraduate tutors who entered Colorado College between 1990 and 1995 (Appendix C). I learned that tutors had a graduation rate of 94.3%—4% higher than the average for students entering in 1995 who used the Writing Center two or more times and 17% higher than the average graduation rate. As for GPAs (Appendix D), the tutors’ average general GPA since 1987 was 3.55. This is a full quarter of a point higher than the average (3.27) for the college. Their GPA in their majors was 3.6. Clearly, the tutors are pretty serious about doing well in school and graduating. Please remember that I am not saying that the writing center made them better students; I am arguing that the Writing Center is a
congregating place for students who are serious about academics. What does the writing center offer tutors—in addition to a job and a great line for their resumes? Why do the tutors want to be part of the writing center and how do they contribute to sustaining academic culture? In interviews with peer tutors, I have learned that the writing center provides the tutors with a community, a safe place on campus that is more diverse than most. It is a locus where tutors learn about and practice teaching and where they can be with peers who are serious writers. To quote some of the peer tutors I have had the honor of working with, “This is a place where we can hang out with others who like to talk about writing. Caring about a comma is not a laughable offense here.” “At the Writing Center, we get the chance to stretch our minds without competition for grades.” “I meet people I would not have otherwise—tutors as well as writers. I am sort of a solitary person. Being a tutor urges me out.” “Tutoring gives me the chance to get out of my own head and to put someone else first.” The writing center is an important part of these students’ academic lives where they work with people who share their interest in being good students. Surely, these students are supporting a positive academic climate.

The writing center also helps to prepare these students for their lives beyond higher education. Even if they do not join the ranks of writing center professionals, tutors learn skills for their professional lives. A few years ago, the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing featured a collaborative keynote where six schools reported about what their tutors went on to do. It seemed that almost despite what career path the tutors had chosen, working with writers in the writing center had an important impact: if not with an initial career choice, then on how they manage employees, or on how they present themselves to clients. One even said that tutoring was the best thing she ever did in college to prepare her for her career—she is technical writer and consultant.

I think it is these sorts of connections that help make the tutors loyal alumni. Since 1987, graduated tutors are slightly more likely to donate to my college: 71% as compared to 63% (Appendix E). However, they are much more likely to be active in alumni activities: 42% as compared to 28%. This involvement is a predictor of their eventual giving to the college. In a small, private institution such as mine, these are important numbers for sustaining academic culture. Without the active involvement of alumni and their donations, a place like Colorado College has a hard time existing, much less maintaining a strong academic culture. Writing centers contribute a great deal to the lives of our tutors, who in turn contribute to an atmosphere of academic seriousness while they are enrolled and after.

Documenting how writing centers contribute to academic seriousness can help us better evaluate new trends on our campuses. We might follow Al DeCiccio’s advice to look at what writing centers contribute to campuses as a way of evaluating the full usefulness of outsourcing (4). Outsourced writing center services, services provided by an off-campus company and usually online, can speak to many concerns, but they do not provide a campus with a cadre of dedicated and serious tutors. A writing center is a location as well as pedagogy, and the location helps to attract and support students who want to do well. An understanding how our center contributes to a culture of academic seriousness adds to the mix of questions that we need to ask as we evaluate whether outsourced services will respond best to the needs of our institutions and our students.

Similarly, we can evaluate trends for incorporating writing centers into learning centers. What might we gain? What might we lose? For example, it might be important for a writing center to maintain its identity for a few years as it joins a learning center because several of our campus constituencies understand us and like us the way we are. Certainly, faculty members can be slow to change their attitudes and allegiances, but I am also thinking of alumni groups such as graduated peer tutors. Any changes in a writing center might need to be thought out carefully to avoid unintentionally alienating a part of the way a school assures its academic culture—loyal alumni.

Supporting academic culture is important in this age of credentialing, grade inflation, and student consumerism. While we hear stories of students only being interested in picking up a few skills and some knowledge, and we certainly see some of these students at the writing center, we also work with and support students who wish to learn about the life of the mind, about citizenry, and about communication. On my campus, serious students often lie about how much time they put into projects, downplaying their commitment and interest. The Writing Center is a place where these serious students can engage in their academic enterprises, discuss their ideas, write with more force and clarity, and then move out into the larger academy, empowered to take their own work seriously. What a terrific role for writing centers to play on our campuses: We help to sustain a culture of academic seriousness.

We also have an important role to play in changing the culture of the academy, too. Joan Mullin and others have urged us to continue to move our writing center pedagogy into the classroom and thereby continue to affect the academy (Mullin 2). I would add to this thinking a term Aaron Retka, a tutor at Colorado College, uses. He calls it a writing center attitude that students get. As a result of our pedagogy, tutors and writers grow accustomed to being treated with respect, to being listened to, and to having the opportunity to respond thoughtfully. And they take their self-respecting attitude into the academy. The writers and tutors are more than ambassadors for writing centers; they are our emanations. They question, they ask to write drafts and to get responses, they request clearer assign-
ments, they take on big ideas and want to collaborate, and they do the work. With their writing center attitude, they become collaborators in their own education, working to take on more responsibility for their own learning. And they are serious about it.

The tutors also carry into classrooms their experiences as teachers. They can help a class get going when it is failing in energy. They can and do give instructors valuable feedback about assignments and entire courses. This is one way that writing centers teach both writers and tutors a few things that may not be part of academic culture, but ought to be.

With their attitude, seriousness, and experience, tutors and writers help maintain academic culture, and they enhance it. They are fresh from their experiences of working with and through differences in face-to-face tutorials where they do not have the classroom as a device to diffuse feelings. At the very least, tutors and writers know how to attend to differences in disciplines and opinions, and how to create a generative collaboration out of them. At their best, tutors and writers bridge cultural differences—of race, class, gender, gender orientation, and language. When prepared for these challenges and given ample opportunities to get over being uncomfortable, tutors can work with writers to recognize, respect, and transform initial barriers into bridges of trust and mutual learning. Then they get serious about the academic work the writer wishes to pursue. Writers and tutors with a writing center attitude are teaching the academy how to be fairer and more ethical. The writing center demonstrates an academic culture that is open, adaptable, and vigorous.

While the transformational, liberating potential of writing centers is exciting, I am mindful of the warning shot fired by Nancy Grimm in *Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times*. Grimm warns writing center workers that in our rush to be part of the academy, we have become part of its hegemonic structure (86). She reminds us that the values informing academic literacy are not neutral (102), and that "institutional practices are not fair" (103). She challenges us to become theorists who are willing to have our world turned upside down and who are watchful for our unintentionally oppressive definitions of normal. Using postmodernism to fertilize her ideas, Grimm describes the potential that writing center work has for change—to be fair and just to writers. With her work, Grimm has raised the bar for writing center theory much in the same way Ann Berthoff did for composition studies in the early 80s when she demanded that we think philosophically about teaching writing.

My experience with peer tutors in writing centers bears out Grimm’s observation that writing centers long have been crucibles for issues of justice in literacy practices (xiii). From the earliest days of the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing in the mid-80s, writing center directors and peer tutors have been talking seriously about authority and power issues. They question literacy practices, their own as well as the "A"cademy’s. From the start, tutors have challenged ideas of what is normal and safe and have been wondering why the conference is so white. They debate the power implications of such labels as peer tutor, coach, assistant, and consultant. Many of the conference participants are willing to be uncomfortable and make others that way, too. Yes, these academically serious students show us a lot. They will show us even more as we find better ways to guide them with our theorizing and problematizing.

Eddie Sherman is one of the Writing Center tutors who has taught me and my institution quite a lot. Eddie exemplifies the kind of student who chooses to be part of the Writing Center and feels supported by the Center. When he became the student government president, Eddie did not have much time to tutor anymore, but he scheduled an appointment to work on his speech for opening convocation. He hoped to challenge students to move outside of their comfort area; he wanted each student to meet and get to know students different from his or her usual circle. He had a firm grip on sociological theories that describe the kind of movement he envisioned. As a member of the Navajo and Omaha nations, Eddie wanted to start his speech with a traditional Navajo self-introduction, listing his clans in Navajo. "Grandma is calling me tonight to make sure I have it right," he said. He finished organizing his talk and worked out much of the language he wanted to use. I gave him tips about talking into a microphone and about the echo in our cavernous chapel, where convocations are held. Then I gave him advice that I found ringing in my ears as I struggled to write this essay, "Hold you heart in both hands and say what you know."

Eddie’s talk was a success; students and faculty members refer to it. He believed he could communicate to everyone, and he did. The students were inspired by it. This speech was something stronger and more special than those of previous years. Faculty members referred to his talk, especially his introduction, as evidence that students are willing to present themselves as different from the mainstream and simultaneously as a fundamental part of the college. Eddie sure has that writing center attitude: standing up and talking from a podium, telling people to change how they act and think while being living proof that change is happening. The Writing Center attracted Eddie, and as Eddie reaches out to make the college a better, more just place, the Writing Center supports him. The Writing Center helped him with his political career at the moment of writing the speech, and also when he sought strength to pursue office. He sees the Writing Center as a free zone for discussion and trial and error and as a testing ground for ideas of how people in academia can get along.

I tell Eddie’s story to talk about how a writing center can play a role in making the academy a fairer, more just place. But the story goes beyond our hallowed halls. In addition to creating just literacy practices, writing center work demonstrates and teaches the life skills of nonviolent problem solving, collaboration, and working with and through difference.
Those serious tutors and writers grow up, finish graduate school, join professions, have neighbors, children, vote, participate in their local schools, get elected, volunteer, and protest. Those writing center attitudes go right along with them as they respect themselves and other people, listen attentively, respond thoughtfully, and collaborate with a wide range of people to resolve differences nonviolently. Our job is to encourage that attitude—make it conscious for us, for the tutors and writers we work with, and for our institutions. As educators, we know that our students’ most long-lasting, serious work for change will happen outside academic culture, and we know that we may never see it. Nonetheless, our work starts here.

If readers are interested in increasing the academic seriousness and potential for change in a writing center, here are some questions to answer:

- How does your writing center contribute to academic seriousness?
- What are the bridges and barriers to contributing more to academic culture?
- Who are the writing center’s allies in terms of creating a culture of academic seriousness that is open and accepting?
- What do you want to do to enhance the academic culture at your institution?

Answering these questions will bring to mind unnoticed aspects of the writing center and will almost certainly affirm the good work tutors do. When I have shared these questions with directors, they have been tentative at first, not really understanding how to get from statistics to just educational practices. But their attitude changes when they start answering the questions, especially when they talk to others about the answers. They get enthusiastic about how they can improve their center’s reputation in their institution with statistics and thereby position themselves to be part of the conversations about the future of their institution and about just educational practices. As we move toward further theorizing and problematizing writing center work, let us include what the tutors and the writers they work with contribute to our institutions, our field, and to justice and fairness in education.

APPENDIX A

GPAs of the Class Entering in 1995

![Graph showing GPAs of different student groups]

- Students who visited once or not at all
- Overall Student GPA
- Students who visited two or more times
APPENDIX B
Graduation Rates of Class Entering in 1995

APPENDIX C
Graduation Rates of Class Entering in 1995
and of Tutors Entering Between 1990–1995

Student Groups

- Students who visited once or not at all
- Overall Graduation Rates
- Students who visited two or more times

Student Groups

- Students who visited once or not at all
- Overall Graduation Rate
- Students who visited two or more times
- Tutors 1990-1995
APPENDIX D

GPAs of the Class Entering in 1995 and GPA of Tutors Since 1987

APPENDIX E

Graduate Participation in Alumni Activities and Funding Since 1987
Notes

1 Adapted from the keynote address delivered at the 2000 National Writing Centers Association Conference.

2 In preparation for the 1998 National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing collaborative keynote on what peer tutors go on to do, I interviewed tutors from the past decade about how their experiences at the writing center influenced their academic career and their eventual work life.

Works Cited


Molly Wingate is the Writing Center Director at Colorado College. Her work has appeared in The Writing Center Journal and The Writing Lab Newsletter; in A Tutor’s Guide: Helping Writers One to One, edited by Ben Rapho; and in Resituating Writing- Constructing and Administering Writing Programs, edited by Joe Janangelo and Kristine Hansen. She is a charter member of the steering committee of the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing and in 1999 won the Ron Maxwell Award for service to NCPTW. She is also a pacifist and long-time activist/organizer.

Peer Tutoring and Gorgias: Acknowledging Aggression in the Writing Center

Julie A. Bokser

The problems of peerness in writing center tutoring have been debated in our literature. John Trumbur points out the apparent contradiction between peer, which implies co-learning, and tutor, which implies hierarchical relations of didactic teaching. Linda Shamoon and Deborah Burns consider the ways in which their own significant writing experiences violated all principles of peer tutoring, and in its place they offer the musician’s “master class” as a positive model for emotive, directive tutoring (140). Andrea Lunsford talks about how a given institutional structure locates control over “truth”—in the tutor, student, or in a negotiation between the two—and she implies that a peer relationship between tutor and student will be more easily enacted in some institutional structures than in others. Peter Vandenberg discusses the inevitable crumbling of a “hierarchy-free ‘collaboration’ of equal peers” in any writing center, since various forms of institutional authority necessarily make students “unequal” (74, 77). These essays help to characterize peer tutoring by critiquing it, and also identify problems in the peer tutoring dynamic. I would like to continue this discussion by underscoring a typically unacknowledged component: the way in which an emphasis on “peerness” disguises the inherent aggression in tutoring relationships.

Words like peer (and our efforts to walk such talk) attempt to evade the fact that that power is never absent from a rhetorical circumstance, and it is to our detriment to believe it might be. In the highly charged rhetorical situations of writing and learning which our writing center conferences comprise, the potentially aggressive relationship between tutor and student is dangerously obscured by an egalitarian pose of peerness. Peerness, in fact, is a complicated relation that involves power and aggression as well as equality. Although we have now begun to talk about the power inherent in the peer relationship, we seldom express this in terms of aggression because we want to avoid the negative connotations of this term. It is this negative potential I propose to examine.