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ABSTRACT

The power that writing centers have to change their institutions lies in their working with faculties across the various disciplines, starting conversations about the nature of teaching and the role of writing in education. Engaging in this adventure requires some change, some adaptation, in the way a center operates--in at least a practical, day-to-day level. Stephen North, in his essay "Revisiting 'The Idea of the Writing Center,'" shakes what is left of writing centers' comfortable assurance that they know who they are. The major points of his essay are that: (1) his earlier "Idea" essay presented flawed or unrealistic images of the center which have been adopted uncritically; (2) adhering to these images, these idealizations, has hampered writing centers in various ways; and (3) writing centers are more likely to be co-opted by their institutions than to change them. Muriel Harris, in an essay on tutoring, suggests that writing centers look past the confusing proliferation of things writing centers do to find something distinctive that would define them as a unique, valuable part of education both now and in some transcendent future when institutions have been transformed into what writing centers want them to be. Different as the directions North and Harris take may be, both are rooted in much the same idealization of the writing center. Taken together, these essays should prompt writing center personnel to rethink what the purpose of writing centers should really be. (RS)

2nd (Inter)National Writing Centers Conference
St. Louis, MO – 28 September 1995

"The Evolution of a Writing Center's Pedagogy, or What Happens When We Get What We Ask For."

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When we seek—as most of is in writing centers do—to transform the pedagogy of our institutions, and especially to transform the understanding of writing and its roles in learning, our writing centers also will change as we find ourselves operating in altered contexts and encountering new challenges. In other words, we can expect our efforts to produce some type of reciprocal effect on us. So the important question before us is not whether we will be changed but how we will manage change or, more significantly, what the evolutionary path we choose to travel will ultimately mean for us: will it mean crisis or challenge? loss of identity/values/purpose/mission or some form of energizing, reaffirming recognition of core identity/values/purpose/ mission?

We have been interested in making two points in this session today. The first is a point that Stephen North and Lil Brannon touch upon in a 1990 interview published in *The Writing Center Journal*; namely, that the power that writing centers have to change their institutions lies in working with faculties across the various disciplines, starting conversations about the nature of teaching and the role of writing in education:

> **North.** But what Lil said about writing across the curriculum, I think they [writing centers] will continue to seize power in the institution by following that route.
>
> **Brannon.** In fact, I really see that as some of the most interesting work ahead of us—working with faculty in various disciplines and helping

them to understand the way we've begun to think about discourse practices within English studies, beginning those same kinds of conversations within their own fields. And at Albany we've just begun that, and it's quite fascinating because it opens up all the questions of teaching that we've come to feel are settled.

North. It transcends the writing centers. When you start to do that, the conversation immediately transcends somebody's narrow conception of the issue of what writing is to the whole issue of what education is and even what American life is like. (10)

Our second point is that engaging in this adventure requires some change, some adaptation, in the way a center operates—on at least a practical, day-to-day level. Consequently, it should involve us in thinking about who we are, once again or even again and again, just as we press faculty in our institutions to rethink what are for so many of them fixed concepts of appropriate pedagogy and of their role as teachers.

Suppose, for a moment, we take seriously the possibility of "seizing power" and the implications of this sort of language which so many of us have used in some form. Taken literally, writing centers would be buying into the existing system of power relationships in higher education by taking over the show, choosing a sort of Faustian self-annihilation. Taken metaphorically as a utopian triumph in the battle of ideas—a time when writing center pedagogy has come to characterize our institutions—would it still be possible to distinguish a writing center from an institution recreated in its image? North cautioned in that 1990 interview, "But the writing center has to stay on the margins, in a sense, in order to be effective. Otherwise, if it adopts the model of the university as a whole, it will disappear. . . . There's a tense relationship; there is always tension. And it has to be resolved over and over again in different ways"(8). Disappearance through selling out or disappearance through victory? Is the only alternative an existence in perpetual tension whether struggling in some

precarious middle ground or heckling from the fringes? So countless presentations at conferences have said.

Anyway, working with faculty in other disciplines inevitably brings changes in what writing centers do, creating the need for us to think about whether our adaptations are strategic adjustments or a form of selling out our principles, and ultimately challenging us to revise our sense of who we are.

Since North's "The Idea of a Writing Center" was published in 1984, there have been many calls to recognize the reality and the necessity of writing centers' adapting to local conditions. They have in common an air of reassurance, as if to say essentially that it is okay to deviate from the ideal articulated in North's 1984 essay. For this reason alone, it is helpful that North himself, in an essay published in *Writing Center Journal* in Fall 1994, has questioned his earlier essay and spoken of the need to re-examine, revise, reinvent our idea of a writing center:

> ["The Idea of a Writing Center" (1984)] offered a version of what we do that is, in its own way, very attractive; but one which also, to the extent that it is a romantic idealization, presents its own kind of jeopardy. . . . More to the point here, it has come back—a highly visible version of our mythology, a public idealization—to haunt us. . . . [W]e are bound by "The Idea of a Writing Center" to the extent to which we have endorsed it: asked training tutors to read it, cited it. . . . And there is plenty of evidence, I think, that we have indeed endorsed it . . . in ways that make it harder for us to disown or renounce what may be its less desirable legacies. (9)

It is fortuitous that North's "Revisiting" essay in *Writing Center Journal* and Muriel Harris' essay on tutoring in *College English* appeared in mailboxes at nearly the same time because North tries to shake what's left of our comfortable assurance that we know who we are as writing centers and Harris suggests that we look past the confusing proliferation of things writing centers do to find something distinctive that would define us as a unique, valuable part of

education both now and in some transcendent future when our institutions have been transformed into what we would wish them to be.

Now it may be assuming a lot to assume that there is a way that writing centers would wish higher education to be, not dozens of different ways. But the rapidity of our adopting North's 1984 essay as, in his words, our "mythology" or our "public idealization" of ourselves, is powerful evidence of our sharing some commonalty of view independent of our local differences and it is evidence of his 1984 essay's having captured the essence of that view—even if imperfectly as he suggests now.

North sets his "Revising" essay in the context of a deconstructionist reading of the 1989 film *Dead Poets Society* as a "grandiose, idealized" vision of teaching that ends with an illusion of triumph and that poses a danger to viewers "especially as [the film's] idealization is allowed to embody expectations" concerning education (9). He proceeds to try some deconstruction of writing centers and of his 1984 essay as similarly presenting us with dangerous idealizations that we might continue struggling hopelessly to make real, thereby preventing us from recognizing and dealing with the realities we encounter: "I no longer believe that our energies are really best applied trying to live up to—*real*-ize—the rather too grand 'Idea' proposed in that earlier essay"(16).

Among the major points of North's provocative "Revisiting" essay are these:

1) His 1984 "Idea" essay presents flawed or unrealistic images of the center which have been adopted uncritically;
2) Adhering to these images, these idealizations, has hampered writing centers in various ways; and
3) Writing centers are more likely to be co-opted by their institutions than to change them.

It is not possible, of course, in summarizing parts of North's "Revisiting" and focusing on a few of his ideas to do justice to what is in many ways a complex and tricky essay. But then my purpose today is not really to remake his

argument, which I would encourage you to read if you have not yet had the opportunity.

North revisits there his earlier images of tutor in relation to writer, tutor in relation to teacher, and tutor in relation to institution.

In regard to writers, tutors he says are "shocked" and distressed to encounter unmotivated and problematically motivated writers instead of the deeply motivated, serious, committed writers that his "Idea" essay and their training have led them to expect (10-11). Similarly his 1984 image of unobtrusive, low-intervention tutoring he now sees as "handcuff[ing]" tutors and as "denying" the artificiality of any writing center setting which necessarily makes even the least obtrusive tutoring an "invasion" of the writer's activity (12). Tutors take these images, he says, "pretty much at face value"(11) and encounter troubling difficulties. But, in your experience, how likely are tutor training programs to ignore the challenge of dealing with unmotivated and poorly motivated writers? Or to treat the issue of intervention as an uncomplicated, unchallenging matter? Both have occupied a good deal of our tutors' attention back through 1984, and both have been perennial topics of workshop presentations at regional writing center and national peer tutoring conferences.

In regard to teachers, tutors he says feel a lot of "pressure" and conflict as a result of taking the pledge to refrain from any second-guessing or commentary that teachers might find threatening to their authority (13). It is especially difficult since, he says, tutors hold low status positions in institutions and inevitably encounter bad teaching. He's right. It is frustrating to be unappreciated and caught in the middle between writer and teacher, with or without a pledge of neutrality.

Finally, in regard to tutor and institution, he sees examples of writing centers' successes in becoming "centers of consciousness about writing on campuses" as diminished and illusory due to factors of scale and image. Scale because tutor-student ratios are far too high, especially on very large campuses, for people to "talk with and know one another"(14). As he explains it,

> Of the four passages I've presented here, this one [writing centers as "centers of consciousness about writing on campuses, a kind of physical locus for the ideas and ideals of . . . commitment to writing"] is likely both the most accurate and, at the same time, the most genuinely laughable. It is the most accurate because what was true when I first wrote those words would appear to be even truer now. Many centers can, in fact, claim such a status, do serve their respective campuses as that institutional node to which primary responsibility for writing is ceded, both functionally and symbolically. They are responsible, then, not only for tutoring the "underprepared" student writers who have so often been understood to be their sole province, but—to offer a sample listing—for any writer, student or otherwise, interested in talking about his or her writing; for the direction and execution of writing-across-the-curriculum programs; for publishing student writing. . . . What makes this apparent success, this fulfillment of my essay's prophecy laughable—and I do apologize for the harshness of that term—are two factors: scale and image. (13-14)

Behind this scale issue is, of course, the assumption that every student on campus should work with writing center tutors regularly throughout their time as students. (Muriel Harris works from a very different assumption in her essay.) North sees the image factor, however, as the more serious problem:

> Regardless of the commitment by a writing center staff to reforming the larger institution, the tendency seems not for the center to become the locus of any larger consciousness. On the contrary, there is a very strong tendency for it to become the place whose existence serves simultaneously to locate a wrong-ness (in this case, illiteracy, variously conceived) *in* a set of persons (and in that sense to constitute language differences *as* a wrong-ness); to absolve the institution from further consideration of such persons, in that they have now been named ("basic," "remedial," "developmental") and "taken care of"; and, not

> incidentally, to thereby insulate the institution from any danger to its own configuration the differences such persons are now said to embody might otherwise pose. In short—and to put it in the most sinister terms—this particular romanticization of the writing center's institutional potential may actually mask its complicity in what Elspeth Stuckey has called the violence of literacy. (15)

Basically, he sees the successes that writing centers claim as empty victories, representing no real transformation of the institution but instead a transfer of responsibility for writing issues from the institution to the center so that institutions can feel virtuous about dealing with writing issues while actually avoiding them.

The picture he sketches here is not far from—perhaps would suggest the inevitability of arriving one day at—his facetious 1990 suggestion of a writing center as an indoctrination center for the masses:

> I always considered the role of the writing center was to help the kid be a better writer, but in the context of writing papers the way institutions want them written. Now—always—there's been a tension about that. I haven't always approved . . . but I always thought . . . that it's not up to us in this case. I still train the tutors to think that way, but . . . suppose we decided that the structure was really stupid and should be changed—then what would we do? . . . you know it's an ethical issue of a kind, and I'm not sure who's going to be right. Maybe it would be better to have a big writing center, and everybody who went there then went and wrote papers for courses that we knew about, and we all agreed that this kind of writing is OK; this is what we'll learn to do. If you don't like it, too bad; this is what you're going to learn. You know, it's Sheridan Baker through the writing center. We won't do that, but I can see how somebody could. They could argue that they were doing a lot of good by doing this so their retention rates could go up or something. ("Interview" 9)

Curiously, or naturally depending on how you choose to view his "Revisiting" essay, North doesn't conclude that writing centers need to reconcile themselves with the bleak realities he presents in this or any other sort of way. What seems at times a harsh rejection of his earlier, romantic idealizations of the writing center turns out to be, instead, a rejection of the essentially unchangeable institutional realities that in his view make those idealizations unattainable illusions. He concludes by holding to the romantic idealizations in his 1984 "Idea" and looking to reconceive the writing center within a different set of institutional realities. In other words, he doesn't change the ideals but instead changes where they'll be applied:

> For our purposes [SUNY-Albany], the best way to create this situation is to tie the Center directly to our Writing Sequence through the English major: to make it the center of consciousness, the physical locus—not for the entire, lumbering university—but for the approximately 10 faculty members, the 20 graduate students, and the 250 or so undergraduates that we can actually, sanely, responsibly bring together. They can meet there, and talk about writing. (17)

If the ideal of a group of committed writers struggling and working together just isn't the reality of the institution-wide writing center, maybe it can be the reality of a center limited to committed writers, screened at the door as it were. Instead of a problematic writing center for the masses, a writing center where the elite meet. Maybe it <u>is</u> the best way to deal with the local conditions of a large university.

In contrast, Muriel Harris finds less problematic many of the realities that North highlights, at least partly because she proceeds on the assumption that a serious commitment to writing and a long-term involvement in a cohesive community of writers are not pre-requisites to a writer's profiting—indeed growing as a writer—as a result of a visit to a writing center:

> As tutors we are there to help reduce the stress, to overcome the hurdles set up by others, and to know more about writing than a

> roommate or friend, maybe even as much as their teachers. Students may not have come willingly and may (as is often the case) have come with inappropriate expectations that the tutor will fix the paper or show them what to do. . . . Every tutor has tales of students who turn sullen, morose, or even hostile when they learn that the tutor isn't a free editor, but who eventually calm down and join in the conversation about strategies they can use. At the end of such a tutorial, as they are packing up, such students are apt to offer a "Hey, thanks a lot. That helped." Just as frequently, students who come in nervous, apprehensive, defeated, or eager to get any help they can emerge from their sessions feeling more positive, more in control of their own writing. The enormous power of these positive responses to tutors cannot be overemphasized. Students may ignore the existence of the center until required to come in, they may come with all the wrong expectations, and their attitudes toward writing may vary from anger to anxiety about grades to eagerness to produce the best paper they are capable of, but the vast majority emerge feeling that the experience was positive. (29-30)

Harris suggests that transforming the institution—and much that goes with that goal—is a secondary function of writing centers and, in the spirit of North's 1984 "Idea," locates the distinctive contribution of writing centers in a tutorial interaction which empowers writers rather than creates long-term dependency.

> [All of the functions, good work, and accomplishments of writing centers] do not define its core, its primary responsibility—to work one-on-one with writers. In doing so, writing centers do not duplicate, usurp, or supplement writing or writing-across-the-curriculum classrooms. Writing Centers do not and should not repeat the classroom experience and are not there to compensate for poor teaching, overcrowded classrooms, or lack of time for overburdened

> instructors to confer adequately with their students. Instead, writing centers provide another, very crucial aspect of what writers need—tutorial interaction. When meeting with tutors, writers gain kinds of knowledge about their writing and about themselves that are not possible in other institutionalized settings. (27)

Working from Louise Phelps's discussion of the two kinds of knowledge—propositional and procedural—necessary for knowing, Harris argues that tutoring produces an essential form of procedural knowledge that cannot be fully exported from center to institution, a form of learning that would be readily available to students only through a writing center even in a transformed institution:

> This second kind of practical knowledge is knowing from personal experience *how* to act, in the sense of possessing a habit or skill for performing an activity. . . . Helping students get the "feel" of some aspects of writing is part of what a tutor can do as she sits next to the student, talking, modeling, and offering suggestions, even though writing is a more sophisticated activity than any of these. . . . This may seem obvious because it is what tutors often do in a tutorial, but it can startle a student as he suddenly "sees" what he's supposed to do in order to achieve whatever it was he was trying to achieve. . . . [This strategic knowledge is experiential, a knowing through application or rehearsal of theoretical knowledge.] The rehearsal by some students may go well on their own, but it may not for others. That rehearsal enacted with a tutor watching and offering feedback and advice is a particularly effective tutorial practice. Strategies are easy to learn in an environment where the person next to the writer can answer questions as the writer proceeds and can offer some midstream correction or encouragement when something is not going well. (33-34)

Harris's view of the writing center is not one where institutional realities necessarily turn idealizations into unattainable illusions:

> Writing centers may still have to contend with a diminishing minority who view them as unnecessary frills, sucking up funds, space, and personnel to duplicate what goes on in the classroom or to coddle remedial students who shouldn't have been admitted in the first place, but as we turn our attention to the work of the tutor, we become increasingly aware that writing instruction without a writing center is only a partial program, lacking essential activities students need in order to grow and mature as writers. (40)

Different as the directions North and Harris take may be, both are rooted in much the same idealization of the writing center. Taken together, these essays should prompt us to think anew about what we are truly about in writing centers. As we work to change our institutional environment and find ourselves faced in turn with a need to adapt to new circumstances, it becomes especially important for us to think about our goals, our identity, and our role in the growth of writers in order to ensure that we make appropriate evolutionary choices.

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