

## Chapter Two: An Overview of Writing Centers

*The idea of a generic writing center makes us uneasy because it is a truism of this field that writing centers tend to differ from one another because they have evolved within different kinds of institutions and different writing programs and therefore serve different needs.*

—Muriel Harris, “What’s Up and What’s In” 27

This chapter examines various facets of writing centers, such as writing center names, practice and pedagogy, staffing and administration, reporting lines and budget, and location in the institution. Some of the topics introduced in Chapter One will be followed up here. As an overview, this chapter necessarily disregards the subtleties of different writing centers. I do not, for instance, discuss writing centers that exist only online. The purpose of the chapter is to provide a context for the discussion of OSU’s Writing Center.

### Writing Center Names and Their Connotations

Although commonly known now as writing centers (and referred to as such in this thesis), for many years writing centers were generally called *clinics* or *labs*. In his essay, “What Do We Talk About When We Talk About Our Metaphors: A Cultural Critique of Clinic, Lab and Center,” Peter Carino analyzes the connotations of these metaphors, as they have been the most common names since the emergence of open admissions and the increase of facilities offering one-to-one instruction in writing. His exploration provides valuable information about how writing centers were and are perceived.

The term *clinic*, Carino says, is one of the older names. While the word was more commonly applied to economics or business “to elevate their [economics’ or business’] activities to the scientific status of medicine” (38), Carino notes a reference to a *composition clinic* in the

journal *College English* in January, 1951. This reference states that the student's "writing is diagnosed and [the student] is given whatever treatment he needs" (39). The main problem with this metaphor, says Carino, is that deficiencies are placed on students, thus "degrad[ing] students by enclosing them in a metaphor of illness" (39). Students' "illnesses" were treated with the use of worksheets (on mechanics, punctuation, etc.). Carino further argues that this metaphor, is that it fails to recognize that "learning is a negotiation of new habits, values, expectations, turns of mind, [and] strategies of representation" (40). The term *clinic* is no longer used in regard to writing centers and appears to have died out during the early 1980s (40).

The term *writing lab*, on the other hand, had different if almost equally derogatory and problematic connotations. This term, says Carino, became popular in the late 1960s just as the idea of writing as a process, discussed later in this chapter, was taking hold. The main problem was that often labs, as places to "experiment," were used, instead, as places "to do the dirty work of grammar [. . . thus] free[ing] classroom teachers to concentrate on the new process pedagogy" (41). Because most of the visitors to writing labs were sent there for remediation, students who went felt marginalized and punished (40, 41). We can surmise that it was hard for these students to learn when feeling as if they were experimental animals and being punished, marked as different and deficient. Some writing lab staff did work actively, though surreptitiously, on writing with students, collaborating with students on students' writing. But some others—grateful for a chance to be working in any capacity in a university during an economic recession and eager to focus on their own writing with the hope of career advancement—left students on their own "to work on drill exercises, audio cassettes, or computer terminals" (42-3). (This style of writing center work was mentioned in the previous chapter.)

The term most commonly used in contemporary settings, according to Carino, is *writing center*. Carino does not see this term as pejorative, as it “evokes the communal aspect of the center as a microculture in which camaraderie replaces the competitive atmosphere of the classroom” (43). Further, Carino states that *center* can be a,

move toward empowerment, not only by claiming to central to all writers but also through such activities as the training of teaching assistants, faculty workshops for writing across the curriculum, credit courses, grammar hotlines, and tutoring for standardized tests such as the NTE and GRE. (43)

Granted, not all writing centers offer this array of activities. Too, Carino cautions that even this metaphor may have difficulties. It may be seen merely as a new name for the old writing clinic or writing lab and not as a process-oriented program (43). Also, while *center* implies inclusion as a core part of the university, it may appear, then, as less welcoming or safe for students—less of a place insulated from the stresses and politics of the university (44). The separation between the university and the writing center—what Boquet would call secrecy (“Our Little Secret”)—may be lost. In sum, no matter what writing centers are called—and there doesn’t seem to be a perfect title—they often continue to be associated with remediation, as was discussed in Chapter One.

Many variations exist among writing centers, but scholars agree that one-on-one meetings and collaborative learning should be the goals. Writing center staff do help students with mechanics, but that is not the main focus. Many centers offer handouts on grammar, punctuation, and usage (as well as other topics) to allow students to practice and/or learn these skills. Ideally, though, the focus in conferences is on the papers as a whole, the larger issues, such as concept, organization, audience, support, and more, as opposed to sentence-level issues (until later drafts). And most people associated with writing centers agree with Stephen North that the

goal is “to make sure that writers, and not necessarily their texts, are what get changed by instruction,” or, more concisely: “our job is to produce better writers, not better writing” (“The Idea” 76).

### **Practice and Pedagogy**

But how do writing center staff members help students become better writers? One way is by teaching students who seek help about the way writing comes about. The big word in writing from the 1970s to the 1990s was *process*\*—a movement emphasizing what happens to and with writers while writing, that is, the different phases that writers go through when writing. A complaint among those writing about writing centers during this period was that *process* has become a catch-phrase, losing some its nuances of meaning (65; North “The Idea” 77). Nonetheless, *process* remains useful as a definition of the different phases writers go through in order to write. These usually involve prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing (Murray, Perl). While, for simplicity's sake, most books and articles explain these ideas as a linear progression, research has shown that people move all around these different phases while writing (Perl 34). If writers get stuck, sometimes they go back to prewriting by brainstorming, freewriting, or outlining. Some writers, while reviewing what they have written (perhaps to see where to move on to) make some changes, which could be revision (moving a paragraph or section to a more effective spot or adding evidence) or editing (correcting a comma or rewording a sentence). Still, teaching student writers that writing is a process—that even for “good” student writers, even for professional writers, the work does not emerge fully formed onto the paper, perfect in all ways, like Athena emerging from Zeus’ head—is vital. Writing center tutors, therefore, tend to talk with students about what writing is—and what it isn't.

The most important words in the previous sentence are “talk with”; Stephen North says that “[t]he essence of the writing center method [ . . . ] is this talking” (“The Idea” 82). Writing center work involves discussion between tutors and writers starting where the student writers are, whether it is brainstorming about a topic, revising a first draft, or editing a final draft. Nearly always, discussion involves helping students understand the writing assignment.

Most of the talking focuses on the work at hand, but some may digress into seemingly unrelated areas, such as background, family life, and more. In *Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times*, Nancy Grimm suggests that these “off-topic” conversations are vital to the work of writing centers, that it is important for tutors to connect with the students with whom they work and to try to understand how those students’ culture, socioeconomic status, family lives, and values affect their writing. While not everyone agrees with Grimm about the importance or practicality of trying to achieve this level of awareness, most do agree that the human interaction between tutors and writers is central to effective conferencing; knowing what is going on with students is important because this can affect their writing (and concentration, memory, etc.).

Working in a writing center requires various skills: interest in students, interest in writing, and effective listening and questioning. Most of these skills can be taught, and many writing centers provide training for the people who work there—some formal and some experiential. Some writing centers, such as at the University of Iowa, offer a semester-long class specifically for training potential tutors before they begin tutoring on their own (Kelly 17). Others, including OSU’s Writing Center, depend more on “on-the-job” training, beginning with observation and soon moving into one-on-one work.

As was mentioned briefly in Chapter One, some centers have strict rules about the role and actions of tutors. Irene Clark says that many “writing center policies seem to be characterized by a large number of ‘nevers’” (91). Others are more flexible, allowing tutors to find their own ways that work best with students, at least to a certain extent.

One of the more common suggestions, endorsed by Jeff Brooks, is that tutors should never write on students’ papers. The reasoning is that students are more likely to take responsibility, to “own” their papers, if they are the only ones making changes and corrections. They are, it is suggested, less likely to sit back and let the tutor do the work; this approach can be helpful if students seem to be resisting involvement. It has the merits of, again, more fully involving students and encouraging conversation about their writing, and it keeps tutors from getting too enthusiastic about making a paper what it could be instead of helping students themselves see what it could be. Brooks states, “[w]hen you ‘improve’ a student’s paper, you haven’t been a tutor at all; you’ve been an editor” (83).

Yet others suggest more flexibility in deciding what is appropriate assistance. Clark challenges the concerns many express (humanities professors, in particular, she says) about tutors intervening too directly in students’ writing and about plagiarism (89). This model, Clark observes, assumes an individual, rather than a social model of writing. She agrees with Jerome Bruner that the ultimate goal of writing centers is to make students not need them anymore; however, she insists that to accomplish this, tutors need to be more “active” in response to each student, especially early on (92). Clark even states that, “[s]ometimes the suggestions of a phrase or two can be wonderfully instructive” (93).

Many centers also encourage the reading aloud of papers; Brooks suggests that students read their own papers aloud to the tutor (85). In practice, this may be done by students or by

tutors; often, students are shy about reading their work aloud. In other cases, they may have read it aloud already and would benefit more from hearing it in another voice. Reading aloud is beneficial for numerous reasons: finding syntactical errors, fragments, run-on sentences, and other mechanical errors; hearing if the organization makes sense or if the paper shoots into different directions; and discovering sections that don't hold readers' interest.

Recently, writing centers have been employing computers and other online technologies to extend and diversify their services. Eric Hobson examines the uses and concerns surrounding computer and online use in "Straddling the Virtual Fence," and he urges caution. One way of using computers in writing centers is for tutors and students to sit at the computer to work on the students' paper, allowing students to make changes at the time. Another way in which computers are used is via online writing labs (OWLs\*); one purpose of this is to allow students to e-mail papers to writing centers and receive written feedback by a tutor. Hobson says that this service is very useful to non-traditional students but, again, cautions that it may not be as effective as meeting in person. The concept of the OWL encompasses not only feedback on specific papers, but more general information about the center itself and grammatical explanations and exercises. The OWL at Purdue University (<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>) is both an excellent example and resource. Hobson suggests the need to reexamine writing centers' mission in regard to technology.

Various theories support writing center work. One of the most important of these is collaborative learning. Kenneth Bruffee, an early advocate of collaborative learning, suggests that writing is, put very simply, thought made public (90-1); therefore, he says, the duty for tutors and writing instructors includes,

engaging students in conversation at as many points

in the writing process as possible and [ . . . ] ensur[ing] that that conversation is similar in as many ways as possible to the way [they] would eventually like them to write. (91)

Collaborative learning with tutors, he adds, enables students to converse with peers in an academic context, to, as it is said, enter the conversation. These conversations, says Lisa Ede, are inherently social. She points out that the idea that writing as a solitary activity is a cultural construction, about which those who work and who run writing centers must educate others. Otherwise, she warns, if writing is seen as inherently individual, then writing centers might seem to be going against what is natural (collaborating on what is usually a solitary activity) and, as a result, be further marginalized (“Writing as a Social Process”). Andrea Lunsford, in “Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of a Writing Center,” explores the need for writing center staff to be aware that they are not taking control of students’ work in conferences while believing that they, the staff, are collaborating simply because they are meeting individually with students. She admits that true collaboration is “damnably difficult,” explaining that “[c]ollaborative environments and tasks must *demand* collaboration [ , and s]tudents, tutors, teachers must really need one another to carry out common goals” (emphasis original; 111). She further points to seven reasons that collaboration encourages student learning, including that it helps students to learn abstractions, to transfer and assimilate information from different fields, and that it leads to overall greater accomplishments (111).

As writing centers become more established, other theoretical perspectives common in the field of writing are increasingly applied to writing centers. For example, as mentioned earlier, Nancy Grimm supports a postmodern approach. Alice Gillam suggests an approach based on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, and is supported in this by Laura Rogers and Carolyn A. Statler.

Whichever approach one takes, however, Lil Brannon and C. H. Knoblauch strongly encourage tutors to be able to explain their pedagogy—based on experience and evaluation (39).

Furthermore, Steven North suggests that those who work in writing centers “test their assumptions” about what works to make sure their methods are truly effective (“Writing Center Research” 24).

### **Staff and Administration**

Writing centers have different types of staff, including undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, professional tutors, and volunteers, all of whom may bring or use different pedagogies. Many writing centers have a mixture of types of tutors, as can be seen in Joyce Kinkead and Jeanette Harris' book, *Writing Centers in Context*, which describes twelve different schools' writing centers. For instance, at the time that this collection was published, while the University of Southern California's tutors were only either graduate or undergraduate students, and those at Utah State University's Rhetoric Associates Program were only undergraduates, tutors at the University of Toledo were made up of peer-tutors, graduate students, composition instructors, journalists, and reading teachers (231). Harvard University specialized somewhat: most of the tutors were undergraduate and graduate students, but there was one English as a Second Language (ESL) tutor and a faculty member to assist with senior theses (229).

Kenneth Bruffee in “Peer Tutoring and the ‘Conversation of Mankind’” and Harvey Kail and John Trimbur in “The Politics of Peer Tutoring” discuss the issue of peer tutoring. Although Bruffee acknowledges the concerns of some faculty and staff about the use of peer tutors—such as it being “the blind leading the blind” (93)—he endorses their use, as do most writing centers. Some of this endorsement is merely practical: students might be more likely to accept help

offered by peers than by teachers (who could symbolize the formal classroom) (Bruffee 87). And although the practical and financial aspects of “[paying] their tutors in credits rather than money” (North “The Idea” 84), done by some writing centers, are important, the benefits to both students and tutors are even more important. As Muriel Harris puts it,

As a corollary to the tradition of active involvement in learning, of making the student a participant instead of a passive listener, writing centers have a tradition of offering a kind of experience for tutors that is not offered elsewhere in the academic setting. Through training courses, at conferences, and at work, tutors are developing skills and talents that enhance their own writing skills, their understanding of the learning processes, their interpersonal skills, their awareness of writing processes, and their employability. (“What’s Up and What’s In” 33)

By collaborating in this way, tutors learn not only how to talk with students about work in progress, they learn new information (especially if a student’s paper is on an unfamiliar subject) and develop stronger interpersonal and communication skills. Many students are less intimidated by a peer than by a teacher (even one who will not be putting a grade on the work) and thus may be more open to suggestions and more able to discover their own solutions to rhetorical problems. Peer tutors may be particularly effective at modeling helpful writing behavior, as well. For example, while all tutors and teachers encourage students to consult a reference book when confused (instead of feeling as if they should try to memorize all grammar rules), the act of a peer tutor actually doing it may have a stronger impact on students.

Although writing centers rely on tutors for the actual work in the center, writing centers are most often run by administrators who are not writing assistants. The administrators, who may be graduate students, instructors, or tenure-line faculty, choose and train tutors, ensure that writing centers are adequately staffed, see to the daily operations, and, often, manage the budget.

Most writing centers are usually administrated by a director or a coordinator, whose role and duties can vary widely—along with title, status, and job security.

### **Reporting Lines and Budget**

In many writing centers, reporting lines\*—which relate to the writing center’s place in the institution—and budget are areas of difficulty. These difficulties range from marginalization to lack of control to inadequate funding and more. And while nearly almost all writing centers struggle with one or more of these problems—it is one of the themes discussed in Chapter One—few share identical situations.

The reporting lines are the means of bureaucratic control within the institution. Variation in reporting lines exists. Some writing centers are under the auspices of the English Department (its chair or director of the first-year writing program), while others are associated with other departments, provosts, deans, programs, or administrative units (Kinkead and Harris). All of these locations have benefits and drawbacks.

In cases in which the writing center administrator reports to the chair of the school’s English Department, “the writing center and writing program should share the same or complementary goals” even if their approaches are different, according to Mark Waldo (74). However, he reports, often difficulties exist between the two; for instance, the writing center may be expected to function as a site of remedial instruction. He also expresses concern about the development of a hierarchy—with the writing center staff at the bottom—when writing centers are part of English Departments. Sometimes restrictions antithetical to writing centers are placed by the English Department. According to a table comparing all the schools in Kinkead and Harris’ book, a few writing centers housed in English Departments serve only students in that

department. More often, though, there is a mix, as Muriel Harris describes about the Purdue University Writing Lab,

From the English Department's perspective, the lab is intended primarily to serve students enrolled in various courses in the department's extensive writing program, though we welcome students from all across campus and seek out opportunities to work with a variety of courses in various disciplines where writing is emphasized. ("A Multiservice Writing Lab" 3)

Harris subtly suggests that writing centers may actually work more broadly than the department to which they report believes they do. As Steve Braye says in a co-authored discussion about the relationship between the writing center and the departments and with the institution itself: "Is the administration/Eng. dept./colleagues/etc. friend or foe? In all likelihood, they are both" (Simpson, Braye, and Boquet 168).

When the writing center reports to a unit other than the English Department, other issues are of concern. Jeanne Simpson, in "Perceptions, Realities, and Possibilities: Central Administration and Writing Centers," addresses six common but generally faulty perceptions about central administration—that central administration wants to keep writing centers "powerless and marginalized" (189), holds "all the power" (189), is unpredictable with funding, makes inappropriate choices about important curricular and tenure/promotional decisions, and more. One of her main points is that college and university administrators tend not to focus on the details of the writing center itself, but rather view writing centers as "space, student use, personnel dollars, productivity, and a program that requires assessment and evaluation on the basis of institutional mission and priorities" (190). Further, she says, that while specific funding for writing centers may be limited, central administration ensures that extra or emergency money is

available where and when it is needed for any program within the entire institution (usually), including writing centers.

In regard to budget, whatever the program or department, different parts of the institution inevitably vie with each other for the money. Sometimes, as Braye points out, English Departments and writing centers compete for assistance (Simpson, Braye, and Boquet 168). Even when it is part of the English Department, the writing center may have limited funding; according to Harris, the Purdue University Writing Lab has “a very meager budget for expenses provided by the English Department [ . . . and] it is a constant struggle to stay within this budget [ . . . ]. The major department expenditure is the salaries of the instructional and clerical staff” (“A Multiservice Writing Lab” 22). And Edward Lotto, from Lehigh University, states that when his writing center reported to the dean’s office, it tended to receive less money, as departmental needs were prioritized; now that he reports to the vice-provost, “[t]his direct connection helps keep the needs of the center above the fray at the budget table every fall” (93). Thus, funding appears to be both unpredictable and a source of concern among most writing centers.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter is intended to give readers an overview of what writing centers are and of some of the variation found in them. The descriptions I have provided inevitably simplify the more complex reality; as Muriel Harris points out, the specifics of writing centers are dependent on their institutional cultures, and, therefore, wide variation does and must exist (“What’s Up and What’s In”). Clearly, Harris understands Carino’s cultural model for writing centers. In the next two chapters, I turn to the history of OSU’s Writing Center.