

Chapter Five: Revisiting the Oregon State University Writing Center in Context

Other stories can be brought to light, stories which write the developments of the contemporary writing center in theoretically sophisticated ways, stories which consider the critical capacities of networking, of linking writing centers with WAC [Writing Across the Curriculum] programs, of placing peer tutors in classrooms. Stories which draw on the history, and the continued problematic, of the at-odds-ness inherent in the writing center in order to pry apart distinctions which have become fused in our discussions of writing center theory and practice, enabling us to tease them out in a manner consonant with our intimate relationship to the teaching of writing in our institutions. All of these stories can be written. Should be written. Are waiting to be written. Will be written.

—Elizabeth H. Boquet, “‘Our Little Secret’: A History of Writing Centers, Pre- to Post-Open Admissions” 479

Many scholars working on the history of writing centers have called for more extensive histories of individual writing centers, and Beth Boquet’s statement in the epigraph above is an example. This thesis responds to Boquet’s and others’ call, telling the story of the Oregon State University Writing Center: its development, its link with the Writing Across the Curriculum movement via its WIC program, and its “at-odds-ness” with its larger institution. It also pries apart some of the distinctions that Boquet mentions by challenging some of the myths that have become fused with the idea of writing centers. In responding to the work of writing center historians such as Boquet, Lerner, and Carino, this thesis contributes to the ongoing scholarly conversation.

This thesis also responds to another, connected, call: to explore the history of writing centers in the richest and fullest context. As discussed in Chapter One, Peter Carino has been a particularly strong advocate for this historiographic approach. This thesis responds to Carino’s call by situating the OSU Writing Center in the overlapping larger cultures of the Center for

Writing and Learning and OSU. It also acknowledges the multiple internal cultures at play within the Writing Center, as writing assistants, the Writing Center coordinator, and the CWL's director work together to create a community. In doing so, the various perspectives enhance readers' understanding of this Center and, to a certain extent, of other writing centers.

Despite the myriad variations among writing centers, a review of the literature suggests a number of common themes which influence many, though not all, writing centers. These themes—or some of them, for there are surely more—were presented in the first chapter of this thesis. In this conclusion, I return to these themes to determine their relevance to the OSU Writing Center.

Analysis of Writing Center Themes and Context in Relation to Oregon State University's Writing Center

The themes presented in Chapter One are culled from various “conversations” about writing centers. Readers may have connected OSU's Writing Center with some of these themes while reading the previous two chapters. Nonetheless, in the following discussion I will systematically explore the relevance of these themes for OSU's Writing Center. These themes include the reputation of writing centers; remediation versus collaboration; the role of open admissions in writing center development; the vulnerability of writing centers; how the variety of students who visit writing centers are worked with; and the question of whether writing centers do what they say they intend to do.

The first theme, that of the reputation of the OSU Writing Center, calls attention to how it is seen by the English and other departments at OSU, as discussed in Chapter Three. As is the case at many colleges and universities, the purpose of the Writing Center at OSU is understood

by some but not by others. It is hard to know exactly how faculty perceive the Writing Center, but some faculty seem to believe that the Writing Center is an editing service, one which will correct students' papers, or that only struggling writers might benefit from conferences with writing assistants. In the last fifteen years, however, the implementation of the WIC program has undoubtedly improved some faculty members' understanding of the mission and philosophy of the Writing Center, as its training includes a presentation about the Writing Center. The classroom visits made by the coordinators, a service which has been offered for most if not all of the Writing Center's existence, have also disseminated accurate information about the Writing Center.

Conversely, it is probable that some faculty members believe that the Writing Center offers only remedial services instead of collaborative ones, the second theme mentioned earlier. In fact, the OSU Writing Center staff has offered both ways of working with students but has always felt that the most productive use of the Writing Center has been collaborative work. Collaboration was, perhaps, an internal purpose, whereas the the remedial work, in the form of the EDT-driven support, was an external request or requirement. The phasing out of the EDT was an important moment in the history of OSU's Writing Center because it allowed the Writing Center to perform its central, self-stated purpose without the burden of doing remedial work.

This is not to say, however, that information about basic punctuation, grammar, and syntax isn't offered. Instead of students sitting at a table or a computer doing exercises, writing assistants educate students while conferencing about students' papers. Writing assistants might also make use of a handbook at this time, modeling strategies that students can employ to find what they need to know. This is consistent with the scholarly consensus that students learn grammar and punctuation best when they are working on their own writing.

The third theme, that of open admissions, is harder to analyze, as no evidence exists about what role, if any, the national open admissions movement played in regard to the founding of OSU's Writing Center and the CSC. Still, given the attitude of the education community nationwide in the mid-1970s, when the CSC was proposed and opened, we can assume that the history of OSU's CSC supports Carino's claim that, in general, open admissions *encouraged* the development of writing centers but did not *start* them. After all, writing services had already been offered through the English Department (the OSU Writing Clinic discussed in Chapter Three), and a math assistance lab, begun by Stuart Knapp, already existed. Further, Tim Perkins mentions the 1975 *Newsweek* article "Why Johnny Can't Write," not open admissions, as a reason why OSU was receptive to the CSC proposal.

The OSU Writing Center is a strong example of the next theme—that writing centers always were, are, and will be vulnerable to a lack of support from their institutions, evidenced most strongly by inadequate budgets and by frequent budget cuts. Like most writing centers, the OSU Writing Center depends entirely on the OSU for its funding. As discussed several times in this thesis, the Writing Center has had significant budget difficulties—and has even been threatened with closure—for most of its existence. It is only in the last few years, with the latest strategic plan, that the CWL—and thus the Writing Center—has been adequately funded in all or at least most areas. Still, although the CWL's function coincides with OSU's current strategic plan, the Writing Center's future is far from guaranteed. In addition, support for public education at all levels in Oregon has declined in recent decades, and OSU, as an institution, feels the impact of this. That impact will likely filter down through every department and program on campus. Unfortunately, money troubles seem to be the status quo for public education in Oregon.

Lerner also suggests that writing centers get the dregs of other types of resources, as well, such as staff and space. Although the CWL is located on the lower floor of an older building, it has adequate space and is probably more attractive than many of the classrooms on the OSU campus. It also has satellite centers, allowing greater access by more students. Yes, it could benefit from more space and would use it well, but it is hardly crammed into a closet. Thus, though the space that the Writing Center is in doesn't match what Ede would design in an ideal situation, it seems that it is as good or better than that of many schools.

And the Writing Center is certainly not staffed with under-qualified people. As stated earlier, Lisa Ede has been the director of the CWL for twenty-six years; while her PhD is not in rhetoric and writing, she has been a productive scholar who has become renowned in this field. In addition, although the salary for coordinators was shamefully low until a few years ago, the coordinators themselves were of high quality. All but the first one had at least a master's degree (she was working on hers while working in the Writing Lab), and some had PhDs. And as we've seen in Chapter Four, all brought various skills and interests to the Writing Center, which enhanced the Center's function. Finally, the writing assistants are also of high quality; the coordinators and director have been careful in hiring students with strong writing and communication skills. Increases in the amount of funding for student pay in recent years have only strengthened the overall quality of writing assistants, who receive substantial pre- and in-service training.

This training touches on the fifth theme, that of how writing assistants (or tutors) work with student writers. The OSU Writing Center staff is, again, similar to many other centers' staff in its approach to writing assistance. To put it simply, the philosophy followed is that of helping students to think like writers, not to just have them produce better papers. To encourage this,

writing assistants generally follow a “hands-off” pedagogy, but they are strongly encouraged to be flexible, helping students differently when they feel it is necessary.

Even with extensive training and a common philosophy, it is still not possible to know that every writing assistant—and every conference—is guided by the Writing Center’s collaborative philosophy. This final theme discussed in Chapter One is important, as it is easy for most people to believe that their work follows their philosophy—particularly when they are not observed or encouraged to evaluate themselves. The staff at the Writing Center do all they can to ensure that writing assistants adhere to the Center’s philosophy and pedagogy by eavesdropping (for lack of a better word) on writing assistants’ conferences and by encouraging writing assistants to reflect on their beliefs and practices. However, only extensive case study and/or ethnographic research on writing assistants’ actual practices could determine if this is the case.

Conclusion

In researching and writing this history of OSU’s Writing Center, I have learned a good deal. Most importantly, this experience has reinforced my belief that it is both difficult and vital to understand events and circumstances in the richest possible context. Such an approach required me to draw upon a range of research sources, including in-person interviews, phone interviews, e-mails, Lisa Ede’s annual reports, the few remaining reports and correspondence from former CSC Director Lisa Pederson, archival material, and online and print studies. Working with such a wide range of materials was challenging. Another challenge grew out of my interviews with those connected with the Writing Center’s history. After all, peoples’ memories are fallible, especially when looking back over twenty-five or thirty years. In addition, what stands out is what was or is important to each individual. Thus, various perspectives on the same event

emerged. These diverse perspectives emphasized the impossibility of presenting a complete and objective history of OSU's Writing Center.

There are additional reasons why I could not tell a complete or objective history of OSU's Writing Center. As mentioned in Chapter One, I brought my own experiences and biases to this project. As a result, the temptation to depict writing centers—especially OSU's Writing Center—in the most positive light was strong. While I strove to be as objective as possible, my commitment to the work of writing centers undoubtedly influenced my analysis. Thus, while I would *like* to say that all problems experienced by the writing center and its staff and writing assistants and the students who visit it rest solely on the university or on those to whom the director reports and from whom she receives her budget, that would be both untrue and unrealistic. Still, I can honestly report that the OSU Writing Center has experienced no extreme internal struggles; that is, overall, the coordinators and directors have agreed on the approaches and philosophy of the Center even while negotiating other work-related issues. As seen in this thesis, disciplinary problems have been rare, student satisfaction has been high overall, and the experience by writing assistants has been positive. To present the thirty year history as all sunshine, however, would be false. Thus, I tried to maintain a balance in this history, one which acknowledges the problems and struggles without belaboring them. (Recommendations for changes are available in Appendix E.)

In so doing, I was strongly influenced by Carino's cultural approach and by my own background in anthropology and social work, all of which strive to account for or explain the context of that which is being studied. In regard to Carino's cultural model, I encouraged readers to consider the institution in which the OSU Writing Center exists, the way the Center is staffed and directed, its goals, philosophy, and pedagogy, and its particular struggles through the years.

And though I ran up against some of the limitations of this model to which Carino alludes—that is impossible to fully understand or convey a writing center’s complete culture—this model enabled me to provide a fuller picture of the OSU Writing Center than I might otherwise have been able to do. In sum, then, I’ve learned how difficult it can be to negotiate the various cultures and contexts of histories, and how important it is to understand as much of these contexts as we can when presenting these histories.

I encourage other scholars to examine individual writing centers’ histories in similarly contextually rich ways and to share these histories with others in the writing center community. Doing so will encourage the dissemination of facts, not myths. It will also help both scholars and practitioners to identify the tensions and themes which seem to be a part of every writing center’s culture.

