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WRITING CENTER THEORY AND
THE IDEA OF ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

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Ph.D. degree in English

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Patricia Lambert Stock".

Major professor

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WRITING CENTER THEORY AND
THE IDEA OF ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

By

William W. McCall

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ABSTRACT

WRITING CENTER THEORY AND THE IDEA OF ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

By

William W. McCall

Recent critiques within the field of composition theory have been particularly attentive to the ways in which academic discourse silences or excludes students who have been denied access to its conventions by economic, political, or social realities beyond their control. Writing centers must carefully assess their relationship to these critiques in light of their typically ascribed charge to foster writing styles deemed appropriate by the larger academic community, which they are instituted to serve and to which they inevitably belong.

Drawing on current scholarship in composition and writing center theory, interviews with professors who teach college writing, interviews with undergraduate writing consultants and writing center clients, transcripts from actual consulting sessions, and a variety of electronic bulletin board messages posted to the WCenter Pre/Text newsgroups, this dissertation situates writing center theory and practice within the current debate about teaching the values of academic discourse.

Chapter One, "Academic Discourse: Tradition, Challenge, and Destabilization," takes up the problem of defining "academic discourse," traces ongoing critiques to which the notion is subject, and examines how academic writing has been redefined in light of expressivist, social-constructionist, feminist, and postmodern conceptions of discourse. Chapter Two, "The Dynamics of Writing Center Theory: Shifting Sites and Questions of Authority," tracks parallel developments in writing center theory and reveals how unstable notions of academic discourse have been paralleled by changes in writing center theory, some of which have led to the view that writing centers are well positioned to provide a critique of institutionally sanctioned discourse practices. Chapter Three, "Writing Center Practice: Views from the Inside," explores the ways student clients and writing center consultants negotiate what are often competing demands for personal meaningfulness and academic rigor. Chapter Four, "New Directions: Implementing a Politics of Respect," discusses two educational strategies used by Michigan State University's writing center which allow and encourage a reconceptualization of academic discourse. Chapter Five, *Redefining Our Work: The Power of Conversation*, argues that writing centers at their best provide opportunities for transformative conversations about the aims and expectations of academic discourse, and in so doing, they change that discourse.

To my father and the memory of my mother
for sharing with me their love of language

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INTRODUCTION

Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. (Foucault, History 100-101)

Any system of education is a political way of maintaining or modifying the appropriation of discourses, along with the knowledges and powers which they carry. (Foucault, "Order" 64)

As the idea of literacy has been intensely scrutinized by composition and cultural theorists, it becomes increasingly clear that it is no longer plausible, if it ever was, to speak of literacy in the singular. Multiple conceptions of literacy abound, challenging traditional views of the role writing can and should play in the social and political lives of students in the academy (Chiseri-Strater). Recent developments in composition theory have been particularly attentive to the ways in which academic discourse silences or excludes students who have been denied access to its conventions by economic, political, or social realities beyond

their control (Miller). Other critiques have questioned of whether the link between academic discourse and critical consciousness is strong enough to justify the teaching of academic literacy (to the exclusion of other types of literacy) in the hopes of instilling within students a critical awareness of the ways institutions, including the academy and the type of discourse it values, work against their best interests (Bizzell). At a roundtable discussion at the 1989 Conference on College Composition and Communication in Seattle, Joseph Harris introduced the session entitled "Writing Within and Against the Academy: What Do We Really Want Our Students to Do?" with these remarks:

The roundtable was set up to look at the tensions between two ways of imagining how we might try to empower our students as writers. The first of these ways we might think of as teaching students how to write *within* the academy, as helping them become more aware of and adept at the kinds of talk and thinking that characterize the various branches of the university. Such teaching tries to empower students by making them, in effect, insiders at the university, familiar with the conventions, commonplaces, and habitual turns of argument that make up the talk of our disciplines.

The problems with such teaching are the same as with any whose aim is acculturation. In trying to get students to learn certain habits or practices of mind, we may also discourage them from criticizing those practices, from trying out (or holding on to) other ways of thinking and writing about the world. And so a second way of imagining our goals as teachers is to see our task as helping students write *against* the academy, resist its accepted forms of thought and discourse. But simply to oppose is to remain always an outsider, and thus powerless. To allow students simply to ignore or transgress the conventions of academic writing would be to teach them to fail. (15-16)¹

No other members of an academic discipline of which I am aware have taken upon themselves the enormous democratizing role these critiques represent as have composition specialists. This mission is made more complex by the extent to which academic discourse is embedded in institutional assumptions and values.

Writing centers must carefully assess their relationship to these recent critiques of academic literacy and discourse in light of their typically ascribed charge to foster writing styles deemed appropriate by the larger academic community, which they are instituted to serve and to which they inevitably belong. With these premises as background, I began research for this dissertation with the following questions:

1. What kind of commitment to the ideologies inherent in academic discourse should writing centers have? Can writing centers work against some of the values attached to academic discourse? Which ones and why? What would such work look like?
2. What are some of the ways pairs of client-writers and writing center consultants explicitly and implicitly identify audience and authority? How do they negotiate and modify differing conceptions of the values of the audience they identify?
3. What do these findings tell us about how a writing center might position itself in relation to academic discourses? How might this positioning affect its status and effectiveness within the larger academic community?

Drawing on current scholarship in composition and writing center theory, interviews with professors who teach college writing, interviews with undergraduate writing consultants and writing center clients, transcripts from actual consulting sessions, and a variety of electronic bulletin board messages posted in response to these and other questions, my dissertation

situates writing center theory and practice within the current debate about teaching the values of academic literacy.

Chapter One, "Academic Discourse: Tradition, Challenge, and Destabilization," takes up the problem of defining "academic discourse," traces ongoing critiques to which the notion is subject, and examines how academic writing has been redefined in light of expressivist, social-constructionist, feminist, and postmodern conceptions of discourse. Chapter Two, "The Dynamics of Writing Center Theory: Shifting Sites and Questions of Authority," tracks parallel developments in writing center theory and reveals how unstable notions of academic discourse have been paralleled by changes in writing center theory, some of which have led to the view that writing centers are well positioned to provide a critique of institutionally sanctioned discourse practices. Chapter Three, "Writing Center Practice: Views from the Inside," explores the ways student clients and writing center consultants negotiate what are often competing demands for personal meaningfulness and academic rigor. Chapter Four, "New Directions: Implementing a Politics of Respect," discusses two educational strategies used by Michigan State University's writing center which allow and encourage a reconceptualization of academic discourse. Chapter Five, *Redefining Our Work: The Power of Conversation*, argues that writing centers at their best provide opportunities for transformative conversations about the aims and expectations of academic discourse, and in so doing, they change that discourse.

Note

¹ See also Chase; Harris, "The Idea of Community"; Mortensen and Kirsch; Trimbur, "Consensus and Difference."

CHAPTER ONE

Academic Discourse: Tradition, Challenge, and Destabilization

Introduction

Although as college teachers of composition we spend a large portion of our professional lives reading, writing, and teaching “academic discourse,” it is not at all clear that we share an understanding of the term with one another. When I mentioned the subject of my dissertation to one tenured faculty member, her response, for instance, was that writing centers should have no relationship to academic discourse because too much emphasis was already placed on it in the firstyear writing program in which she taught. Another colleague who teaches at a community college opposed academic discourse to creative writing and argued that it took students away from themselves and their original voices. On electronic bulletin boards and in conversation it seems, in fact, that the value of teaching academic discourse is everywhere under scrutiny—from those who tout the benefits of expressivist or personal writing, to those who agitate for a more radical pedagogy and who ask the question about whom it serves, to those who see it as a male-dominated discourse built on competition and argument. Others see what they typically call

“academic prose” as the worst kind of writing: pompous, stuffy, esoteric, virtually unreadable. This animosity toward academic discourse by many of those most deeply immersed in it reflects a growing and genuine dissatisfaction with the ability of academic discourse to effect any real change either in the individual student or within society at large.

This scene of dissatisfaction is complicated by the fact that the term “academic discourse” is so widely used in a variety of contexts and with so many attendant implications that it has almost lost specificity of meaning. While it is most often defined as the writing done by intellectuals in the academy for other intellectuals or as a style of writing we have traditionally wanted first-year college students to learn (if they have not done so in their secondary education), these definitions tell us little. Surprisingly, full-scale definitions of academic discourse are hard to find. Even such books as Academic Literacies: The Public and Private Discourse of University Students (Chiseri-Strater), Academic Writing as Social Practice (Brodkey), and Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness (Bizzell) offer only scattered and incomplete definitions. Part of the problem with defining academic discourse stems from the difficulty of sorting out the subtle distinctions among closely related terms such as “college writing,” “scholarly writing,” “good writing,” and “academic literacy.” Furthermore, it is hard, perhaps impossible, to separate specific instruction in academic discourse from general instruction in writing.

A good portion of what I have to say about academic discourse will of necessity, then, cover familiar territory and be based on broader conceptions, theories, histories, and critiques of composition which have affected contemporary thinking about academic discourse. The purpose of this chapter, consequently, is first to examine the meaning of academic discourse in its traditional sense and then to describe how its underlying epistemology, structure and style, purposes, and pedagogy have been destabilized during the past thirty years. This examination seems worthwhile because the teaching of academic discourse, however ill-defined or mercurial, has been and continues to be a cornerstone of undergraduate education and all that it promises to the individual learner and to society. More importantly, because writing centers are charged, at least partially, with responsibility for helping students learn the discourse conventions they are expected to know as they make their way toward an undergraduate degree, it is imperative that writing center personnel examine their practices in light of the genres of writing that students are expected to compose.

Traditional/Conventional Values of Academic Discourse

Structure and Style

Despite basic complications in the term's use, teachers of composition and the academy at large have historically agreed, and to some extent still do agree, that academic discourse typically displays the following conventions: it is written in Standard English and observes

commonly accepted rules for grammar, punctuation, and mechanics; it employs longer and more complex sentences than other discourses; it uses the specialized lexicons of academic disciplines; it addresses a well-defined problem and marshals evidence in support of a position taken in reference to the problem; it is usually thesis-driven, argumentative, and persuasive in tone; it situates itself in reference to an ongoing debate (like the one underway in the Burkean parlor)¹ and recognizes its intellectual heritage, especially through well-researched documentation; it shuns the personal and presents itself as disengaged, objective, and “author-evacuated” rather than “author-saturated” (Elbow 145); it is highly structured, often relying on a predetermined pattern of argumentation, and follows a linear logic (introduction, development, conclusion). More subtle characteristics of academic discourse might include: reliance on common (usually historical) knowledge that has transcended the domain of discipline-specific knowledge and entered the realm of shared intellectual knowledge (the work of Shakespeare, Freud, or Marx, for instance); a sense of fairness to or accurate representation of competing positions.²

Underlying Epistemology

James Berlin, Albert Kitzhaber, Richard Fulkerson, C. H. Knoblauch and others have provided ample evidence that until at least the 1960s (some would say still today) an objectivist and positivist epistemology dominated college and secondary writing. In this view, truth is found in

unbiased observation of nature or the external world, and language should strive to reflect this perceived truth as objectively as possible. Although truth and reality are discovered independently of rhetorical considerations, writers must be attentive to preciseness, usage, and clarity because language has a tendency to distort observations made of the material world. In the positivist view truth exists prior to language, culture, and even perception. Knowledge is gained through scientific methodologies which demand the stripping away of all prejudices: truth is knowable, largely unproblematic, and communicable, but it is susceptible to distortion because of faulty perception, inaccurate language, or both.

Methods of Teaching

Current-traditional pedagogy, with its emphasis on product and correctness, has become almost synonymous with positivist or objectivist epistemology, and, as Berlin notes, “current-traditional rhetoric has been the dominant form of college writing instruction in the twentieth century” (Rhetoric and Reality 36). There are probably few people born in this century in the United States who do not have some experience or familiarity with this form of teaching writing. Following the conception of writing that is laid out in objectivist epistemology—first the thinking or perceiving is done, and then the observed is translated or transcribed into language which must render thought or experience as faithfully as possible—the teaching of academic discourse has been traditionally seen

as a matter of inculcating in students a concern with surface errors, grammar, and mechanics, since these represent the “dress of thought.” John Warriner’s textbook English Grammar and Composition, which was first published in the late 1940s, is probably the best example of current-traditional pedagogy. Prescriptive, rule driven, and decidedly middleclass right down to its “thank-you” note section, this popular and ubiquitous text defined composition and what it meant to teach writing for at least three decades. Ignoring the process of writing completely, it led students through discrete exercises in mechanics, usage, sentence structure, punctuation, paragraph development, and organization which were intended to make them better writers. The culmination of this approach, the final test of true writing ability, is the production of academic discourse in the form of a “research paper.”

Purposes

Reasons for teaching academic discourse have been argued primarily in terms of “initiation” into the dominant and culturally significant mode of thinking, speaking, and writing which leads to the student’s “empowerment,” which is often defined in terms of individual financial success. At other times, such empowerment refers to social knowledge which allows the individual to become critically aware of the ways social constructs can act as limiting or repressive forces. This knowledge gained on the individual level can then be employed on the social level in service to democracy and greater egalitarianism. These

reasons, of course, parallel reasons typically given for literacy education, but there is little doubt that the type of analytical writing represented in academic discourse, a discourse which might be said to represent the height of literacy, has traditionally been viewed as playing an important role in the strengthening of both the individual and the country. The belief that there is some direct connection between writing academic prose and clear thinking or critical consciousness is persistent. Such writing, it is thought, encourages one to stand at a distance from life's events—including but by no means limited to mass media, political claims, art, and personal experiences—and to analyze them in such a way as to gain some control over or insight into them.

While I have presented some commonly held notions of academic discourse and its purposes in generic, familiar, and uncontested terms, William Perry in Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme focuses specifically on what initiation into academic culture, and especially its discourse patterns, might achieve for the individual. Perry describes the ethical and intellectual development of individual college students in terms of three world views that they hold largely in succession (although the categories are not necessarily discrete), "Dualism," "Relativism," and "Commitment in Relativism."

In the initial world view, "Dualism," students view events in absolute terms of right or wrong, good or bad—there is no middle ground, no recognition of worthwhile counter positions. These absolute stances are determined by authorities (teachers, parents) who know the correct

answers and whose job it is to convey these answers to the student. The second world view, "Relativism," is marked by a disordering loss of confidence in absolutes and a realization that there are no correct answers and no authorities who can honestly convey them. Meaning derives from the student's self without regard for others, and the notions of right and wrong give way to one's own power to persuade. In this stage, the student might, for instance, stop waiting to find out what a poem really means and devise a persuasive interpretation of his own. The final stage, "Commitment in Relativism," is characterized by the student's journey from a simple self-interested relativism to an understanding of the need to make conscious choices (commitments) based on values derived from a personal knowledge of ethical and intellectual traditions by which one has been shaped, while holding to the realization that others, with other experiences and interests, may make equally valid choices.

Perry's point is not that this process takes place automatically, but that it occurs most often as a student is initiated into the modes of thinking valued in higher education. While he does not make a direct connection between these developmental stages and the type of essay a student might write, he does equate this movement with the purposes of liberal education, and many writing teachers see themselves as facilitators of a developmentally based educational process akin to Perry's scheme.

Less consciously, academic discourse has also been viewed as a way to socialize or "clean up" students through attention to their writing in order to make them presentable in a well-scrubbed, aspiring, middle-

class culture. Susan Miller uses this cleansing metaphor to describe the hidden purposes of writing instruction over a century ago (56-57), but clearly Warriner's program of instruction is directed toward these ends as well. At the college level, William Strunk and E. B. White's The Elements of Style has served a similar purpose. Knoblauch and Brannon say this about it:

[T]he intent is not to produce a handbook for writers but rather a catechism of the values of high Literacy. What emerges, then, and what is intended to emerge, is an image of linguistic good breeding, including beliefs about rationality and objectivity, about what it is to be natural, modest, and plainspoken, about the properly austere communicative function of discourse, about the inappropriateness of personalized, expressive, or imaginative writing in daily affairs. (106-107)

College instructors who assign and use the book to teach writing probably do not think of their intent the way Knoblauch and Brannon describe, but the idea that it represents the discourse values Knoblauch and Brannon ascribe to it are not easily disputed.

Challenge and Destabilization

As is now recognized, what is called the current-traditional paradigm of writing instruction by Berlin, Knoblauch, and other compositionists, which cradled at its center the idea of academic discourse as "correct" writing and toward which all of its pedagogy was finally directed, met with important opposition during the late 1960s and early 1970s. This period was, of course, a time of great social upheaval in

the United States as traditionally held beliefs were challenged from nearly every angle. Beat poets and writers such as Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and Gary Snyder worked to undermine commonly held notions of what constituted literature; rock and folk music blended to create protest songs which objected to social injustice and war; popularizations of Eastern religions by Alan Watts, D. T. Suzuki, and others led to a questioning of Christian values and epistemology; the women's movement analyzed American culture and worked to give women more control over their bodies, relationships, and work environments; the civil rights movement—both radical and mainstream—confronted racism and worked to combat it; Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) protested against ROTC and educational policies that ignored relevant issues; “gonzo” journalists like Hunter S. Thompson redefined the parameters of news reporting; a third wave of psychology introduced the idea of encounter groups as a replacement for traditional psychiatric notions of individual therapy; drugs and ideas of “free love” attacked the traditional 50s notions of family values; and people from all walks of life challenged the government's policy in Vietnam. This pervasive spirit of political activism, anti-authoritarianism, and emancipation did not leave composition teachers and theorists untouched.

Lester Faigley, citing Edgar Z. Friedenberg's Coming of Age in America, whose controlling image is of school and college as a prison, has described American education in the 1950s and early 1960s as “based on conformity and order rather than individualism and creativity” (56).

Recognizing a need for educational reform, in the summer of 1966 British and American educators gathered at an MLA and NCTE conference on the teaching of English held at Dartmouth College. The Dartmouth conference severely criticized both the British and American educational systems for their stifling emphasis on conformity, control, and prescriptive pedagogy, and it urged educators to adopt a more dynamic process of education whereby students would be encouraged to express themselves freely in their writing as individuals rather than to express themselves in prefigured conventions of academic discourse.

Expressivism, along with the emphasis on the process of writing rather than on the product, has had the single most powerful influence on changing traditional conceptions of academic discourse.

Expressivism

Describing expressivism as “The first wave of innovative composition pedagogy,” Bizzell continues by noting that it “simply rejected the academic community’s discourse expectations. Instead, the goal became the liberation from academic trammels of each student’s ‘authentic’ writing voice” (108-109). Faigley makes the point that professors who adopted expressivist views of writing were highly dissatisfied with the political, social, and educational practices in the United States, and one of their purposes for teaching expressivist writing was to “aid students in resisting authoritarian institutional structures by offering students experiences that challenged official versions of reality”

(57-8). This radical intent was rapidly replaced by moderate expressivists (Faigley singles out Peter Elbow) who focused on individual self expression as a means of gaining control over inner rather than outer worlds.³

Berlin and Knoblauch describe the epistemology underlying expressivism as “subjective.” According to Berlin, expressivism locates “truth either within the individual or within a realm that is accessible only through the individual’s internal apprehension” (Rhetoric and Reality 11). Expressivist pedagogy emphasizes personal writing that explores and gives voice to personal truths which “resist expression” and are most accurately conveyed through original metaphorical language that coincides first with the writer’s private vision and only incidentally with the outer world or the inner vision of others.

Gaining access to one’s personal voice—one’s personal truths—depends on plumbing the depths of personal response through such practices as meditation, free writing, journal entries, and peer responses to drafts and—at least at the outset—largely ignoring the role scholars and other “authorities” might play in developing an understanding of a topic. Teachers are not authorities in this view but facilitators, aiding students in processes of self-discovery that can not really be taught but only encouraged by a supportive environment and generative promptings.

The classroom emphasis on the process of writing—invention strategies and other preliminaries, however important—shifted attention and time spent away from finished products and thus away from the

traditional goal of academic discourse. In expressivist classrooms, then, evaluation of student performance often consisted of crediting students for having demonstrably gone through various processes of developing texts—such as generating ideas through freewriting and journal entries, completing drafts, getting and giving peer responses, and crafting revisions of work-in-progress. Cognitive theorists contributed to this emphasis on process by researching how successful writers went about writing. Janet Emig’s influential work, The Composing Process of Twelfth Graders (1971), divided writing assignments into two categories—*extensive* or formal writing meant to convey information to an audience (much like academic prose) and *reflexive* writing on an informal, personal, exploratory nature meant primarily for the writer (much like expressivist writing). She argued that students, like professional writers, need to spend time writing reflexively in preparation for writing extensively.

Concurrent with this interest in the writing process and the internal workings of individual writers during the sixties was an open antagonism toward academic discourse which was variously described as insincere, dull, overly formal, emotionless, and passive. Ken Macrorie laid out his dissatisfaction with academic writing and how it was being taught in Telling Writing and Uptaught, both published in 1970. He named the writing college students were being taught “Engfish,” a serendipitous term coined by one of his students meaning the “bloated, pretentious language” invited in English classes. Earlier in 1966, Walker Gibson had published Tough, Sweet, and Stuffy: An Essay on Modern American

Styles in which he categorized academic discourse as “stuffy.” All three of these books had an immense influence on reconceptions of academic discourse.

Ideas of Correctness

In addition to these attacks, work in linguistics was questioning the idea of “correctness” and the moral implications of a concept like standard English. In 1970 William Labov’s The Study of Nonstandard English explained that nonstandard dialects were no less logical in their structure than standard English and urged teachers to respect the intellectual integrity of the language used by speakers of various dialects as they respect the language used by speakers of the privileged or sanctioned dialect. In 1972 the Executive Committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication drafted a resolution affirming “students’ right to their own patterns and varieties of language. . . The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans” (Tarvers 100). Building on this sentiment, in 1977 Geneva Smitherman argued in Talkin’ and Testifyin’ that teachers of English should not require speakers of Black English to adhere to the same speaking and writing patterns valued by the dominant white culture. Emig’s study of the composing process of writers led her to assert that the obsessive correction of surface errors in student writing was a “neurotic activity”

(99). In keeping with their larger aims, expressivists used this work in linguistics to support their position that mechanics and concerns with correctness should be taught at the last stages of students' composing processes.

Mina Shaughnessy takes up the issue of mechanical errors in Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing and makes a different case for enlightened response to student writing errors.

Shaughnessy's concern with finding the best methods of teaching basic writers how to succeed in the academy leads her to reject the mechanical drills that were prevalent in much of current-traditional teaching.

Acknowledging "the damage that has been done to students in the name of correct writing" (9) and the need "to understand the logic of their mistakes in order to determine at what point or points along the developmental path error should or can become a subject of instruction" (13), she nevertheless chooses to focus on errors because "a person who does not control the dominant code of literacy in a society that generates more writing than any society in history is likely to be pitched against more obstacles than are apparent to those who have already mastered that code" (13). Because she openly supports the notion and value of academic discourse, writing at one point that too much concentration on expressivist writing "inhibits students from joining in the academic contest" ("Needed" 319), it might be said that Shaughnessy straddles two positions. On the one side, she is obviously dissatisfied with traditional teaching's disregard toward students as evidenced in its failure to address

problems marginalized students have in learning to write for the academy. Although Shaughnessey joins the expressivists in advancing a student-centered pedagogy, her research and writing clearly support teaching students “the rituals and ways of winning arguments in academia” (“Needed” 319).

Insiders/Outsiders

In the last chapter of Errors and Expectations, Shaughnessey addresses what has become a central question for many composition teachers—how to balance and negotiate between the discursive practices students bring with them to college and the discursive practices demanded of academic writing. Shaughnessey writes that

we are learning to look at ourselves and at the academic culture we are helping [students] to assimilate with more critical eyes. Neglected by the dominant society, they have nonetheless had their own worlds to grow up in and they arrive on our campuses as young adults, with opinions and languages and plans already in their minds. College both beckons and threatens them, offering to teach them useful ways of thinking and talking about the world, promising even to improve the quality of their lives, but threatening at the same time to take from them their distinctive ways of interpreting the world, to assimilate them into the culture of academia without acknowledging their experience as outsiders. (292)

This perception of an academic culture which both “beckons” and “threatens” students complicates too easily held reasons for teaching academic discourse in much the same way discussions of “home versus school” dialects complicate traditional ideas of standard English. When

current-traditional models and purposes hold sway, it is naturally assumed that the values inherent in generally held understandings of academic writing and thinking are superior to all others because of the perceived values and logic which defines them. Before the sixties, few composition instructors publicly doubted the value of teaching the dominant discursive patterns or gave voice to the possibility that in so doing they were asking students to relinquish a part of themselves and their heritage in order that they might join a “culturally superior” group. Shaughnessy, Smitherman, Labov, and others, including some expressivists, openly addressed the dilemma which confronts teachers who respect the various home cultures of students but who nevertheless are charged with moving them into a more privileged culture represented by the academy. In so doing, these scholars raised a set of questions that researchers in language and rhetoric have been exploring ever since. In a college setting where academic discourse and its values are dominant, sensitivity to the potential conflict between two discourse communities—the academic and the non-academic—may well lead some teachers to “conclude that even to try to teach a dominant discourse to students who are members of a non-dominant, oppressed group would be to oppress them further” (Delpit 298).

That an outcome of teaching academic discourse may well be an affirmation of one particular social class at the expense of others is now quite widely recognized. Knoblauch and Brannon address this issue in their discussion of The Elements of Style, writing that

By telling people about language Strunk and White tell them what sort of people they should wish to be. Inevitably, this view of literacy—an amalgam of privileged cultural inheritance and verbal decorum, colored with ever present threats to its well-being—also stipulates quite clearly what people should not wish to be. It offers a portrait of insiders—the culturally literate—and therefore, by implication at least, a portrait of outsiders as well. (106-7)

Bizzell takes up Shaughnessy's point and speaks of the dilemma facing college writing programs (and composition teachers) this way:

On the one hand, we know that most institutions support these programs in order to initiate students into the academic discourse community, to "prepare" them for all the other written work they will do in school. Many of us can assent to this goal insofar as we would like to help our students stay in school. But, on the other hand, we do not always assume that social justice will be adequately served merely by the students' staying in school. . . . We don't want students to forget the insights into inequality that many of them bring to school, from experience in other communities. In short, our dilemma is that we want to empower students to succeed in the dominant culture so that they can transform it from within; but we fear that if they do succeed, their thinking will be changed in such a way that they will no longer want to transform it. (228)

This perception that any discourse carries with it political values, and that academic discourse has served as a means of excluding people at least as much as it has served to admit people, problematizes the teaching of academic discourse in a way that it has not been problematized before and calls for a critical pedagogy which recognizes its schizophrenic role in student literacy learning.

Social Constructionism, Discourse Communities, and Collaboration

The expressivists seemed to mount an attack on academic discourse on several fronts: its structure and style, its underlying epistemology, its pedagogy, and its purposes. Bizzell, Shaughnessy (as we have seen), and Bartholomae, by noting the disparities that separate discourse communities and that give some social classes an advantage in the “academic contest,” take issue with the expressivist positions on epistemology and purposes—that is, that writing and the knowledge it represents originates almost solely within the mind of the writer, and that writing should primarily be a presentation of an individual’s voice and perception and that good writing is simply a matter of speaking personal perceptions honestly. Furthermore, it is clear that unlike the expressivists, Shaughnessy, Bizzell, and Bartholomae support the idea that academic discourse is valuable in and of itself. In “Writing Assignments: Where Writing Begins,” Bartholomae asserts that the “struggle of the student writer is not the struggle to bring out that which is within; it is the struggle to carry out those ritual activities that grant one entrance into a closed society” (300). Later, in Facts, Artifacts and Counterfacts he writes that “The student has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community” (134). In her early work, Bizzell attempts to couple the ability to write academic discourse with the development of critical consciousness as defined by her self-identified “liberal-leftist” point of view. Her hope was

that if compositionists “were able to analyze academic discourse conventions in such a way as to demystify them for students, we would be contributing, if not to a political revolution, at least to the groundwork for major social change through preparing previously marginalized students to speak with powerful voices against the mainstream” (9).

Not surprisingly, Bizzell’s epistemological position differs significantly from the expressivist. Although she argues—like the expressivists—against the positivist view that academic writing is largely a matter of matching language to external/perceived reality, instead of turning inward for knowledge as recommended by the expressivist, she advocates a social constructionist vision of knowledge which recognizes “truth” as rhetorical construction sanctioned by influential discourse communities. Bizzell garners support for this position from an eclectic group of scholars including Clifford Geertz, Stanley Fish, Thomas Kuhn, Richard Rorty, Michel Foucault, Lev Vygotsky, Kenneth Burke, and Mikhail Bakhtin. Vygotsky, a Soviet psychologist, understands language, thought, and, hence, knowledge to be determined by social activity rather than by individual cognition; the anthropologist Geertz explains that what a culture perceives as reality—that which gives structure and meaning to its lives—is based on shared interpretations of “local” and particular experience; Fish argues that meaning does not reside in texts but is determined by “interpretive communities” which adhere to particular and limited interpretive conventions as they study texts; Kuhn points out that even scientific truth depends on historically situated

communities who agree to accept a prevailing paradigm until a more persuasive rendering of experience establishes—through language—a different criteria for agreement; Rorty believes that philosophy is an enterprise which needs to admit to itself that “truth” is not an “accurate representation of reality” (10) but a communally-constructed phenomenon contingent on social and practical consensus. Bakhtin finds meaning in the dialogic interchange between writer and reader, between speaker and listener, between utterance and understanding, and this shared meaning can only be understood in terms of the historical and social context in which it occurs. These epistemological positions which undermine both the expressivist and the traditional positions on academic discourse have been taken up not only by Bizzell but also by other compositionists such as Linda Brodkey, Marilyn Cooper, Michael Holzman, Karen Burke LeFevre, James Berlin, Carolyn Miller, and Gregory Clark, all of whom share a social-constructionist view of knowledge and writing.

If social constructionism undermines the epistemological foundations of both the traditional and expressivist notions about academic discourse, ideas about collaboration build on a social-constructionist epistemology while seeming to support the pedagogical practices of expressivism. This view is most clearly expressed in Kenneth Bruffee’s ideas on collaborative learning and conversation. Thought, according to Bruffee, is not an “essential attribute” of humans but is a “social artifact” generated by conversation. For any deepening of thought

to occur, the conversation which first originated the thought must be maintained and cultivated through contact and interaction with the discourse communities for which it is meaningful. Writing is resocialized, internal conversation, shaped collaboratively by the writer and others who have participated in the conversation, either orally or discursively.

Writing In the Disciplines

Consideration of discourse communities and the different ways they render knowledge has affected conceptions of academic discourse by feeding into writing across the curriculum initiatives. The writing across the curriculum movement has been influential in American universities for some time, although not necessarily by that name as David Russell points out. As commonly practiced, there are two distinctive approaches to the use of WAC efforts: writing as a way of learning basic concepts within a discipline, and more or less formal instruction in writing in a particular disciplinary style. While the two goals are not unrelated, the first could be said to deemphasize academic discourse conventions as commonly known in favor of more expressivist (non-transactional) practices such as the keeping of journals and reading logs, writing to explore and test the limits of personal understanding, and writing as a process. The second approach is a response to recent calls for more analysis of the conventions of academic discourse as they are practiced in particular disciplines, and it calls into question the idea that it is possible

to talk about one, cohesive academic community. This approach, which overtly affirms or at least does not question the value of academic writing, analyzes the rhetorical conventions that characterize and distinguish separate disciplines within the academy.⁴

Feminism

Feminist critiques of academic discourse—its pedagogy, purpose, epistemology, and structure and content—began with the radicalism of the sixties and have progressed steadily since. Like the other challenges to academic discourse, feminist critiques are enmeshed in a wider critique, which includes not only discursive practices but the academy's structure in general. Interest in feminist critiques of contemporary culture originally coalesced during the 1970s around the fields of literary theory and canonical formation, speech communication (including nonverbal communication), and linguistics. Composition as an identifiable field was still in its formative stages at this time and although important work was being done by women in composition, few of them addressed feminist issues. Out of the work that was being done in the three fields that did address feminist issues during the 1970s, the analysis of the role language played in supporting patriarchal values at the expense of women was the first to enter into and inform composition studies in a substantial way. Books such as Robin Lakoff's Language and Woman's Place and Thorne and Henley's Language and Sex: Difference and Dominance, both published in 1975, along with Dale Spender's Man

made Language (1980), made inroads into composition studies and made clear the sexism inherent in language. This insight, that at base women are forced by the conventions of language to express their thoughts in terms which obviously esteem male over female, serves, it seems to me, as the immovable foundation on which other feminist critiques rest, at least implicitly.

In addition to the general critique of patriarchal control of language as explained by linguists, feminists eventually aligned themselves with expressivist challenges to conventional academic discourse. Feminist scholars base their remarks on familiar characterizations of academic discourse—its reliance on argument, rationality, and author-evacuated style. Cynthia Caywood and Gillian Overing summarize this position in their introduction to Teaching Writing: Pedagogy, Gender, and Equity, noting that in the academy

certain forms of discourse and language are privileged: the expository essay is valued over the exploratory; the argumentative essay set above the autobiographical; the clear evocation of a thesis preferred to a more organic exploration of a topic; the impersonal, rational voice ranked more highly than the intimate, subjective one. (xii)

These values represent not only academic discourse but a decidedly male, hierarchical, and authoritarian view of language, logic, and writing which devalues women's ways of knowing and presenting. In contrast, feminist scholarship, like expressivism, advocates a discourse and pedagogy that is nurturing rather than confrontational, engaged rather than disengaged.

Part of the feminist position builds on research that describes the differences in the way many men and women write. If academic discourse calls for a type of writing that the culture has better prepared men to do, then women (and their voices and perceptions) are at a disadvantage because of their gender in much the same way others are disadvantaged because of their race and class. In a 1988 survey of "feminist research on gender differences in social and psychological development" ("Composing" 425), Elizabeth A. Flynn finds evidence that men and women do develop differently and that these differences probably affect the way they write. Nancy Chodorow, for instance, describes the identification processes of boys and girls with their mothers and concludes that whereas male "identification processes stress differentiation from others, the denial of affective relation," female "identification processes are relational" and lead girls to "develop through and stress particularistic and affective relationships to others" (426). And Carol Gilligan, Flynn explains, finds that "women tend to define morality in terms of conflicting responsibilities . . . requiring for their resolution a mode of thinking that is contextual and narrative rather than formal and abstract," whereas "Men equate morality and fairness and tie moral development to the understanding of rights and rules" (426). When Flynn examined narrative writings of her male and female students in light of these gender-based distinctions, she discovered parallel differences. Female students wrote "stories of interaction, of

connection, or of frustrated connection” while male students wrote “stories of achievement, of separation, or of frustrated achievement” (428).

The significance of studies like this and others which describe differences in how men and women perceive the world and write about their experiences in it is that they present convincing evidence that academic discourse—which values formality, rules, and detachment—is more closely aligned with male patterns of representation rather than with female patterns. And if this is the case, which I believe it is, then academic discourse as designed has the effect of marginalizing women.

By far the most persistent and ubiquitous critique of academic discourse by feminists centers on the use of argument as a key characteristic of academic discourse. Flynn explains that “classical rhetoric has a decidedly masculinist orientation and an emphasis on language that serves combative purposes” and that “contemporary rhetoric . . . is androcentric because it . . . continues the rhetorical tradition” (“Composition” 144–45). Sally Miller Gearhart is more forceful in her criticism, claiming that “any intent to persuade is an act of violence” (195) and that persuasion itself belies a masculine desire to dominate the voices and minds of others. Patrocínio P. Schweickart notes that argumentation is based on notions of rationality, reasonableness, and validity that while supposedly neutral and beyond considerations of gender are actually based on “man-to-man” relationships which typically ignore the affective domain (Flynn “Composition” 146). In light of these perceptions about argument, many feminists propose a discourse based in negotiation rather

than argumentation; in conversation and dialogic rather than persuasion and monologic; in expressive narrative rather than logic-driven argument; in exploratory writing rather than thesis-driven writing; in provisional, flexible, and open-ended rather than conclusive and definitive thinking.⁵

Feminist conceptions of composition obviously have theoretical alliances with expressivists and with social constructionists. They also have drawn from postmodern conceptions of discourse, especially in formulations of French feminism or *écriture féminine*. Both postmodernism and *écriture féminine* share a strong skepticism about the ability of language to represent reality. Luce Irigaray opposes her feminist conception of writing against what she calls “phallogentric discourse,” by which she means the logical, linear, coherent, and non-contradictory discourse of the academy. Against this type of writing which esteems unity and coherence and tends toward stasis, she posits a discourse which is “continuous” and “diffusible” (78), one in which “if ‘she’ says something, it is not, it is already no longer, identical with what she means. What she says is never identical with anything, moreover; rather it is contiguous” (29). Hélène Cixous, in her essay “The Laugh of the Medusa,” describes the power of laughter to undermine the pretentious seriousness and certainty of academic language, and in “Rethinking” she examines the very idea of “concept” and its original meaning of something that seizes, grips, and limits movement. Because academic discourse relies so heavily on concepts, it constrains thought, whereas *écriture féminine* is a “spreading-overflowing. It spills out, it is limitless, it

has nothing to do with limits" ("Rethinking" 74). . Julia Kristeva draws heavily on postmodernism for her critique of academic discourse, arguing for a style of writing that disturbs conventional notions of discourse with "transgressions from the grammatical rules of language that ensure meaning and communication" and which "achieves its effects through contradiction, rhythm, disruption of syntax, and absences or gaps of meaning" (Worsham 91).

Postmodernism

The term "postmodernism" has been applied to almost every contemporary event—including Madonna, the Internet, and David Koresh—and because of this varied application it resists definition. Lester Faigley, however, drawing on "The Culture of Postmodernism" by Ihab Hassan, provides a simple—yet convincing—portrait of it by opposing its tendencies against those of modernism. He notes the following oppositions: form and chaos, coherence and fragmentation, determinacy and indeterminacy, purpose and play, design and chance, hierarchy and anarchy, finished work and process, art object and performance (14), where the last item of each pair represents postmodernism. To this list must be added the modern notion of the individual (usually stable and self-constructed) and the postmodern notion of the "subject" (unstable and socially-constructed). Given this framework for understanding the postmodern sensibility, it is hard to see how postmodern thought could have a significant impact on conceptions of how academic discourse

might best be taught: what composition teacher, for instance could make a meaningful case for chaos, fragmentation, and anarchy in student writing? Even in the two areas where it appears that postmodern theory has the greatest practical connection to contemporary composition theory—its emphases on process and social construction—Faigley finds disparity. Of the product versus process opposition, he says that “composition tilts toward modernism because while composition studies has professed to value process, it is not process for its own sake but rather the process of teleological development toward a product.” And of the individual versus subject opposition, Faigley notes that “even at a time when extensive group collaboration is practiced in many writing classrooms,” composition still has not “surrender[ed] its belief in the writer as an autonomous self” and that college writing teachers are still “heavily invested in the stability of the self and the attendant beliefs that writing can be a means of self-discovery and intellectual self-realization” (15).

Despite the obvious difficulties with incorporating postmodern ideas into composition studies in the interest of reformulating academic discourse, postmodern values have challenged academic discourse in other ways. As we have already seen, French feminist theory is indebted to postmodernism, and there is some convergence of what Berlin calls “social-epistemic rhetoric”⁶ and the postmodern emphasis on indeterminacy or what Bizzell calls “anti-foundationalism.” Most responses to postmodern challenges to academic discourse call for

basically the same pedagogical practices—to help students become aware of historical and social influences on their notions of truth and selfhood with special attention to the ways rhetoric constructs rather than discovers meaning.

Another challenge to traditional conceptions of what constitutes academic discourse which is often coupled with postmodernism stems from the practice of electronic discourse. At present this seems a marginal area, but it will undoubtedly increase in stature and influence. In a recent interchange on “Re/Inter/Views,” one of the electronic discussion groups created and run by the journal Pre/Text, Lester Faigley defends himself against Geoff S. and Victor Vitanza’s charges that in his The Fragments of Rationality he has not written a postmodern book by replying that the claim is “meaningless”: “Either a postmodern book is an impossibility within the modernist academy or else they are all postmodern if you’ve given up any notion of knowledge advancing and they’re nothing more than conversational turns. . . . [T]he postmodern academic book isn’t going to happen” (Electronic mail). Vitanza and Geoff disagree. Geoff says it has already happened and points to “Cage’s Silence; books by the October folks (Krauss and Crimp); anything edited by Brian Wallis; Cixous; Cool Memories; those Zone collections; not to mention Bataille,” and in answer to the self-posed question “What’s postmodern academics?” he writes:

That’s a wonderful question for a bunch more posts, but for now let’s broadly say that it seems to have certain threads we

can talk about: does exciting things with form, privileges a wider array of content, interdisciplinary (or adisciplinary), global & civic concern, more use of traditionally degraded sources.

Vitanza argues “that there is a postmodern academic text, and it is a singular one. And the Pre/Text cycle, like all other electronic texts that can be potentially webbed together, is part of that text. The postmodern academic text is characterized by its electronic and hypertextual characteristics—different in form, content, and context from anything else.”

The impact of electronic texts on academic discourse is not yet clear, but based on my experience reading several different academic bulletin boards, academic writing done on electronic forums differs in significant ways from printed academic prose: it places a greater value on personally engaged prose; does not adhere to the same ideas of politeness; employs more creative images and draws on a wider array of icons in popular culture; is more fragmentary and prone to short, intense, examination of subtle but significant distinctions; and pays less attention to mechanical conventions and citation rules.

Remarks

Virtually all of these critiques of academic discourse utilize some form of academic discourse to make their points. In the quotation that opens this chapter, Foucault declares that “discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-

block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy.” And if anything is clear from the challenges that have been made to traditional ideas about academic discourse, it is that it is not so firmly ensconced that it is incapable of change: it is malleable and subject to revision as people use it to accomplish their intellectual goals. During the last thirty years, broad reinterpretations of the epistemology, structure and style, purposes, and pedagogy usually connected with “academic discourse” have led to destabilization of the meaning and practices we associate with the term.

In reviewing some of the most salient critiques of academic discourse, they appear to run along two lines—the rhetorical and the political. The rhetorical stance presents challenges primarily on an epistemological level, insisting that knowledge and authority are socially constructed and that language is the medium if not the originator of both. In this view, truth is contingent and resides neither inside the individual, as the expressivists would have it, nor merely in objective perception, as our scientific tradition would have it. Since what passes for truth, clarity, and reasonableness is socially constructed, it is conceived differently by groups, by different discourse communities. Consequently, this position promotes an examination of various discourse communities. In the case of the academic community, its discourse has been explicated in ways that not only reveal its arbitrariness in terms of style and structure but that also reveal its ability to include or exclude based on differences in race, class, and gender.

The political line develops from here and examines notions of authority as expressed not only in traditional views of the appropriateness of certain structures and styles (or genres) within academic discourse but also as evidenced in traditional classroom procedures which invest the teacher with complete control. Practicing theorists such as Ira Shor and Paulo Freire contest a pedagogy that diminishes student knowledge or that fails to build on the perceptions and experiences students bring to the classroom; feminists, with a few notable exceptions, dispute a pedagogy (and a discourse) that places a premium on argument rather than negotiation. Giving students a voice in class—and in their writing—is one way for teachers of composition to combat and, perhaps, change an oppressive educational system.

These two lines of change obviously draw strength from one another, but this is not to say that their goals necessarily coincide. While no teaching can be non-political—even the traditionalists and expressivists can be seen to have liberatory goals—some is more self-consciously political than others. As we have seen, the political goal of the traditionalists has been to raise the disenfranchised classes to the level where they can be socially sanctioned citizens—upstanding and productive—by teaching them the discourse conventions of the academy and the marketplace. The expressivists, questioning the validity of this goal, teach a type of discourse which would lead students to a sense of themselves as individuals rather than as yea-saying members of the middle-class. Theorists such as Bizzell emphasize the connections

between academic discourse and critical consciousness in the hopes that greater critical awareness will naturally lead to greater concern with social justice. Bizzell eventually backs away from this position, arguing instead that no type of rhetoric, however enlightened, will lead necessarily to social justice. For this to happen, teachers must, she says, openly use their authority in the classroom to promote social justice and democratic values (283). In effect, then, she and others such as John Trimbur argue against the anti-foundationalism that seems to permeate the rhetorical line of thinking and that, because of its skeptical epistemology, allows no firm ground on which agitation for change can legitimately take place.

As expressed in the works of Shor and Freire, composition pedagogy should combine an awareness of the rhetorical contingency of knowledge and authority with ideas of social justice and democratic values by designing courses of instruction that make explicit the connections between oppressive institutions and the rhetoric on which they are built. This is often accomplished by inviting students to explore individually and collaboratively, in speech and writing, some aspect of their lives which they already know something about—adolescence, work, leisure, education, gender distinctions—and then by asking them to read what others have had to say about the same topic. The final step in this process is typically the production of a text which is “academic” in that it weaves together various voices and perspectives and examines something of importance. The difference between this type of academic discourse and traditional academic discourse, however, is that students are able to

see themselves as participants in the production of knowledge rather than mere vessels in need of filling, to use Freire's language.

While such courses continue to increase in number, there is still little agreement about what constitutes meaningful and appropriate academic discourse among most college teachers of composition, not to mention most college teachers in other disciplines who require some sort of writing from their students. The abundance of new critiques and the lasting influence of both traditional and expressivist views are quite capable of confusing or at least locking in place even seasoned teachers of composition. Students are also likely to be disoriented: what counted in high school as good writing may not count in their first year English course, and what counts in the English course may not count in their history course. Although students have always had to adjust to varying demands made by different readers, today knowledgeable accommodation is made much more difficult because even within specific departments and fields of study, the values and practices of writing academic discourse are contested.

Writing centers have historically acted as guides to students as they write their way through college and university requirements, and doing so was easier when there was some consensus within the academy as to what counted as sound academic writing. Currently, writing center administrators and consultants are challenged by competing and sometimes contradictory writing requirements, and the next chapter

explores how writing centers have participated in and responded to changing conceptions of academic discourse.

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Notes

¹ In The Philosophy of Literary Form, Kenneth Burke provides the following anecdote to explain the social context of writing and audience:

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. (110-111)

² This definition is indebted to the works of Chiseri-Strater, Bizzell, Fulwiler, Brodkey, and Elbow.

³ Faigley mentions Leonard Greenbaum and Rudolph Schmerl as radical expressivists (57); Berlin, who traces expressivist pedagogy in more detail than Faigley, points to essays by Charles Deemer, William D. Lutz, and Leo Hamalian and James V. Hatch as representative of the political wing of expressivist theory (Rhetoric and Reality 148-49).

⁴ See, for example, Bazerman and MacDonald.

⁵ See Jarratt for an important feminist defense of argument and conflict.

⁶ Berlin defines his term when he writes that "For social-epistemic rhetoric, the real is located in a relationship that involves the dialectical interaction of the observer, the discourse community (social group) in which the observer is functioning, and the material conditions of existence. Knowledge is never found in any one of these but can only be posited as a product of the dialectic in which all three come together. . . . Most important, this dialectic is grounded in language: the observer, the discourse community, and the material conditions of existence are all verbal constructs." ("Rhetoric and Ideology" 488).

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CHAPTER TWO

The Dynamics of Writing Center Theory: Shifting Sites and Questions of Authority

Introduction

Since their proliferation beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s in response to increased student enrollments, lower test scores, and the media-purported literacy “crisis,” writing centers have reflected and contributed to the shifting perspectives on academic discourse. Because writing center administrators have most often come from the ranks of composition specialists or, at least, from those English department members interested in composition, it is not surprising that writing center theory parallels developments in composition theory. More than this, however, writing centers have participated in and contributed to these developments in ways that are not yet clearly understood: the relationship between centers and composition is sufficiently intertwined to defy cause/effect descriptions of one’s influence on the other.¹ Clearly a dialogic movement back and forth between composition and writing center theory has taken place. At the core of this interchange are shifting appraisals of the role and character of authority in academic discourse—

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Shifting Sites

The Rhetoric of Remediation

A history of writing centers has yet to be written,² but a 1950 survey by Robert Moore “of one hundred and twenty leading universities and colleges” indicated that at that time “writing clinics and writing laboratories [were] becoming increasingly popular among American universities and colleges as remedial agencies for removing students’ deficiencies in composition” (388). Moore’s article, which examines differences between writing clinics and writing laboratories, provides a good starting point from which to examine the complex and problematic relationship between writing centers and academic discourse as it is defined, valued, authorized by English departments and teachers of composition.

As Moore describes the activities of the clinics and labs he polled, their purpose is clearly one of remediation and inculcation, and he notes that the “two devices [the clinic and lab] are sufficiently successful to enable thirteen universities to depend on the clinic or the laboratory for all remedial work” undertaken to solve the “students’ writing difficulties” (388). While he notes some differences in how clinics and labs go about their business (the clinic is more apt to work with individual students, for instance), these differences are minor, allowing him to write that “As the

methods of the clinic and the laboratory overlap, so does the terminology. . . . In practice the terms are almost interchangeable" (389). The language used to describe the work of clinics and labs is both striking and revealing. The "clinician" is responsible for the "diagnosis and prescription" which will lead to "the removal of specific deficiencies." An initial interview "may in itself disclose the basic weakness," whether it is one of "spelling or punctuation" or one more baffling such as "the tendency to write vague, telescoped, or garbled sentences rather than concise and specific ones." If the interview does not uncover the basic problem, an "analysis. . . of specimens of the writing" that the student has actually done may be necessary.

Once discovered, mechanical problems may be remedied by "private tutoring," "specialized study groups," or "remedial texts dealing particularly with their problems." Moore mentions that a "single publisher provides a convenient, inexpensive, and, on the whole, admirable series of remedial pamphlets, of whose existence most students are completely unaware." He admits that difficulties in the "organization and development of material are more complex," but these can often be quickly remedied: "Frequently, little more is necessary than a demonstration of the technique of phrasing a thesis and constructing a scratch outline which permits winnowing and rearranging ideas. Practice at such preliminary planning of subject matter . . . can do wonders for the student." When the writer's problem is "garbled information or habitually confused thinking," it may be necessary to send the student to

“psychological clinics” which are “equipped to assist in removing writing difficulties which stem from reading deficiencies or from complex personality disorders.”

Andrea Lunsford assigns the name of Storehouse Center to the type of lab Moore describes, noting that they held that knowledge is “exterior” and “directly accessible” to the learner. And she explains that they operate “as information stations or storehouses, prescribing and handing out skills and strategies to individual learners” and use “‘modules’ or other kinds of individualized learning materials” (110). The assumption driving labs and clinics is consonant with the values of academic discourse as traditionally defined. The same positivist epistemology which assumes that knowledge is unproblematic although susceptible to distortion because it may be stated in inaccurate or imprecise language underlies both; the same prescriptive pedagogy that focuses on grammar and mechanics and the discrete workbook exercises by which they may be corrected characterize both; the same lack of attention to invention strategies and the process of writing dictate the pedagogies of both; and the same reliance on the idea of impersonal and unassailable authority dominates both. For the most part, the purpose of labs and clinics was to ferret out writing deficiencies and submit the student to a program of exercises by which these deficiencies would be expunged. Once cured, the student was prepared to produce a final product which was error-free and more closely resembled the surface characteristics of academic writing. As Peter Carino writes, clinic pedagogy did not “consider that learning is

a negotiation of new habits, values, expectations, turns of mind, strategies of representation, and the like” (35).

The open admissions policies instituted during the late 1960s and early 1970s led to an increase in the number of writing labs established at that time. As variously prepared students flooded into the colleges across the country, the perceived need for remediation grew since many of the entering students were not prepared to write in the ways traditionally prescribed in the academy. Labs were often, if unconsciously, instituted as places deficient writers could go to have their “sick” prose diagnosed and analyzed by experts who would then prescribe remedies designed to treat the illness and ready the student writer to engage in the discourse of the academy. Like other labs across campuses, writing labs were seen as supplemental to normally required courses. And just as science labs were staffed not by professors but by graduate students, writing labs were frequently staffed by graduate students and part-time employees. So constructed, labs were simply marginalized places where students were required to go for remediation.

From Lab to Center

On the other hand, in some cases, the metaphor of lab opened up possibilities for innovation and research. One thing that was certain—with the paradigm shift heralded by the 1967 Dartmouth conference, research into the cognitive elements of writing processes, the new emphasis placed on the process of writing, and on student as individual

learner rather than generic case—practices changed in writing labs: more time was given over to talk, more attention was paid to the individual student, and more intervention strategies were used while actual writing was taking place. Nevertheless, I think Carino is right when he remarks that for “most writing programs” the writing lab was still “the place to do the dirty work of grammar that would free classroom teachers to concentrate on the new process pedagogy” (35).

The introduction of writing *center* marked an important shift in how writing center personnel thought of themselves and, potentially, how they were perceived by others in the larger academic community. Jim Addison and Henry L. Wilson assert that the rejection of *lab* and the “metaphorical baggage” associated with it represented “dramatic alterations in the underlying philosophy, role, and functions of a writing center in the academic community” (56). Certainly, this change in terminology which began in the eighties and continues today indicates that writing centers saw an expanding role for themselves in colleges and universities. Probably the major change associated with the transformation from *lab* to *center* is these units’ conception of their clients. Centers, more than labs, attend to a greater variety of student writers, and are prepared to deal with writers at all levels of abilities rather than only with first-year students or those in need of remediation. The emphasis of writing centers is clearly on serving a wider range of students than labs ever did, including students from a wide range of disciplines—science, history, business—and from all levels of instruction, undergraduate through graduate. This

rippling movement outward from the writing center to attract more clients also extends to writing across the discipline efforts designed to engage teachers of disciplines not traditionally involved in discussions about student writing.

The term *center* also indicates a turn away from a skills approach to writing and its emphasis on product rather than process. *Center* connotes a middle point, a place of equal proximity to both the start and the finish. As such, writing center personnel are at least as interested in invention strategies as they are in ensuring that their clients know the rules which govern the outer appearance and forms of academic discourse. This shift, born out of expressivism, process theory, and a student-centered pedagogy, places writing center people mid-way between two distinct but often overlapping voices: the personal voice of the student and the depersonalized, often sterile voice of the academy. Of course this is exactly where many composition teachers place themselves as well, but more often than not their students perceive them as representatives of the academy and its discourse demands in a way writing center workers are not. To a great extent, writing centers are sites of mediation, functioning between student and teacher, personal and academic discourse, and process and product.

The differences between lab and center were a topic of discussion during a session of the 1995 Michigan Writing Centers Summer Institute held at Michigan State University. When participants—fifteen lab/center coordinators from eleven different colleges and universities—were asked

to characterize the two words, the result suggests that at least to contemporary writing center people clear and important distinctions exist in the meanings associated with the two terms. The following list summarizes their discussion.

<u>Writing Lab</u>	<u>Writing Center</u>
1. Mechanistic, scientific	1. Holistic, humanistic
2. Prescriptive	2. Flexible, not prescriptive
3. Skills, grammar, mechanics	3. Integration of language arts
4. Diagnosis and treatment	4. Dialogue and engagement
5. Measurable outcomes	5. Uncertain outcomes
6. Remedial	6. Probing of large questions
7. Positivist theory	7. Social constructionist
8. Students acted on	8. Student as actor not pawn
9. Sterility	9. Friendly, inviting
10. Rigidity	10. Flexibility
11. Scientific objectivity	11. Affective interaction
12. Programmed learning	12. Talk and personal interaction
13. A static, dark, cramped place	13. Dynamic, open space
14. White coats/Dissection	14. Research/Unifying, integrated
15. Architecture of carrels and booths	15. Architecture of circles

The connotative significance of lab and center supports the change in terminology since center clearly better represents the type of place and assistance students are likely to experience when they visit an on-campus site for help with their writing.

Shifting Authority

Expressivism and Individual Authority

The impact of expressivism on writing center theory is difficult to gauge. One way to look at expressivism is to see it as a challenge to authority as traditionally defined. Because of its focus on an individual voice, unique and unfettered by the constraints imposed from without, expressivism downplayed the authority formerly invested in the teacher and in the discourse conventions of the academy which the teacher was thought to represent. Lunsford uses the term Garret Center to describe the use of expressivist practices in writing centers, writing that Garret Centers are “informed by a deep-seated belief in individual ‘genius,’ in the Romantic sense of the term” and by an “American brand of individualism” (110). Lunsford explains that

Unlike Storehouse Centers, Garret Centers don’t view knowledge as exterior, as information to be sought out or passed on mechanically. Rather they see knowledge as interior, as inside the student, and the writing center’s job as helping students get in touch with this knowledge, as a way to find their unique voices, their individual and unique powers. . . . [T]hey view knowledge as interiorized, solitary, individually derived, individually held. (110)

Expressivism encouraged the teacher to become a facilitator rather than an inflexible arbiter of textual values as defined by most academics. In their work with students and in their obvious involvement in the students' writing process, writing center personnel also play the role of facilitator rather than authority. In the writing center, authority is diffused so that it is no longer located in the tutor or in some abstract and loosely defined notion of academic discourse but in the students themselves.

A study that Sharon Thomas and I conducted at Michigan State University suggests that while expressionism may be undergoing a reappraisal by many theorists working in the field of composition studies, it remains influential in writing center work.³ Our survey of writing center staff and other professionals closely connected to writing center work and theory was designed to provide a "theoretical orientation profile" which would reveal our respondents' underlying assumptions about the practice and aims of composing. It revealed that they were equally committed to expressivist and social-constructionist views of writing instruction. As a group, for instance, they indicated that they were in agreement, and sometimes strong agreement, with statements such as "Good writing can be measured by its degree of sincerity—the closer to an actual presentation of the author's ideas, the better the writing is apt to be"; "Writing improves significantly when students are encouraged to find and use their personal voices"; and "Good writing depends less on knowing and following rules than it does on a creative imagination." In terms of writing center practice, expressivism makes its presence felt

through the attention paid to invention, reading aloud, peer response, and multiple drafts. The results of this survey indicate that despite the inroads made in recent composition theory by social constructionists, the expressivist view still speaks forcefully to many in the profession, a point I take up shortly.

Social Constructionism and Community Authority

Nevertheless, the staying power of expressivism does not attenuate the fact that social constructionist theory provides the most explicit theoretical grounding for work done in writing centers. One element pervasive in current-traditional and in lab/clinic notions about academic discourse is that academic writing is essentially produced by a solitary, isolated author who gains authority only by adhering to prescribed practices. As we know, some components of expressivist theory seem to work against this notion, especially its advocacy of peer response. Yet, as many scholars have pointed out, expressivism essentially posits a unified and romantic idea of an individual who is able, when writing in an authentic voice, to wrest authority away from institutional dictates and claim it as his own.⁴ In expressivism, knowledge and authority are thought to originate primarily within the unique and distinct mind of the writer (however this may have been socially constructed), and peer response helps hone the expression of these thoughts and make them ready for an audience. Expressivism, by giving to students a sense of the primacy of their own beliefs and values, does not specifically address

larger issues concerning the ways individual selves are socially determined or the ways knowledge is less discovered than spun out of the rhetoric and activities of different discourse communities.

Social constructionism does not so much replace expressivism in writing center theory as it does extend it by recognizing the inherently social foundation of knowledge and authority. While many have mined this ground, Kenneth Bruffee makes the most explicit links between social constructionism and writing center theory in his article "Peer Tutoring and the 'Conversation of Mankind.'" As in his earlier work, Bruffee argues that thought is a "social artifact" organically dependent on social conversation and writing is thought made public once again. "Writing is," Bruffee says, "at once both two steps away from conversation and a return to conversation. By writing, we re-immense conversation in its social medium" (7). In their conversations with students, writing consultants help students to externalize and make apparent the thoughts which were formerly internal conversations. More importantly, they bring to the conversations a knowledge, whether implicit or explicit, of the discourse community for which the student is writing: writing centers provide "a social context in which students can experience and practice the kinds of conversation that academics most value" (7).

Although providing a sound theoretical base for writing center *theory*, the ideas advanced in social constructionism seem, in many ways, to have had little impact on writing center *practice*. While offering an epistemological foundation at variance with both current-traditional and

expressivist views, it has not, nor does it appear that it will, change the dynamics of client and consultant interaction. In this regard, expressivism and the process movement more clearly inform writing center practice. There is no way to enact a social-constructionist theory in a one-on-one interaction without making expressivist moves: that is, since socially constructed knowledge is expressed by individuals (clients and consultants), the two types of knowledge merge in face-to-face encounters. When consultants elicit from clients the clients' thoughts on a topic or on possible rhetorical strategies for expressing these thoughts, the clients are responding with personal knowledge that they have gathered from social interaction with their teachers, other students, and the consultant.

Furthermore, it is not at all clear that social constructionist theory necessarily works against traditional conceptions of academic discourse. In Bruffee's article on peer tutoring, for instance, he equates peer tutoring conversation with "the kinds of conversation that academics most value," which he then goes on to describe as being "emotionally involved, intellectually and substantively focused, and personally disinterested" (7). Except for the emotional involvement (which somehow seems in contradiction to "personally disinterested"), Bruffee reveals a standard conception of academic discourse and the authority it carries. This same uncritical acceptance of academic discourse norms is evident in his discussion of "normal discourse," a term he borrows from Richard Rorty. Normal discourse is the discourse used by a "community of

knowledgeable peers," "a group of people who accept, and whose work is guided by, the same paradigms and the same code of values and assumptions" (8). Bruffee also writes that normal discourse

is pointed, explanatory, and argumentative. Its purpose is to justify belief to the satisfaction of other people within the author's community of knowledgeable peers. Much of what we teach today—or should be teaching—in composition and speech courses is the normal discourse of most academic, professional, and business communities. The "rhetoric" taught in our composition textbooks comprises—or should comprise—the conventions of normal discourse of those communities. (9)

Social constructionism as explained by Bruffee, then, does not attend to the ideology embedded in normative conceptions of academic discourse, nor does it explicitly challenge these conceptions.

In its recognition of the ways different communities shape and value discourse, however, social constructionism has clearly had an impact on writing center activity and its conception of the constitutive elements of academic discourse. It is now common for writing center professionals to function as writing across the curriculum (WAC) experts, and as writing centers move out into the larger academic community, knowledge of differences in disciplinary discourse patterns take on increasing importance for at least two reasons. First, consultants are better able to help client writers if they know something about the conventions of academic discourse expected in different disciplines. Writing geared for different audiences takes on different shapes, and while it is certainly possible for a consultant not well-acquainted with scientific writing to

assist someone writing a paper for a science class, knowing something about the conventions of scientific discourse and the issues under discussion may result in a more efficient interchange. At the very least, consultants working with a student and piece of writing from an unfamiliar discipline need to be aware that differences between disciplines exist, that knowing a generic form of academic writing will carry them and their observations only so far. Knowing this should prompt them to ask the client to sketch the form the discourse of that particular discipline usually takes.

The second reason awareness of differences between discourse communities is important to writing center activity is that such knowledge increases the influence writing centers can have on how writing is taught across the college or university. Writing centers generally do and should house the people most aware of writing pedagogy, but in order to have an impact on the writing assigned by teachers in other disciplines, some working knowledge of the disciplines' specific goals and values is helpful. Going in with an attitude of "here's how we do it and this is how you should do it" does not work for obvious reasons. On the other hand, a WAC program that is ready to learn about discipline specific discourse patterns, the products of habitual social practices, and willing to help faculty identify what these patterns are can do much to change the often negative attitudes initially expressed about WAC efforts.

Feminism

The most obvious impact of feminism on academic discourse is the change it has wrought on sexist language—we no longer are comfortable using a generic “he” or terms like “freshman,” “master discourse,” or “chairman.” These small but important changes in discourse conventions are, of course, commonly integrated into consulting sessions. More subtle but equally important contributions have been made by feminism in the area of pedagogy. In the essays compiled in books such as Teaching Writing: Pedagogy, Gender, and Equity (Caywood and Overing) and Gender in the Classroom: Power and Pedagogy (Gabriel and Smithson), feminists provide various models of instruction which represent shifts in authority. Chief among feminist values is a leveling out of the hierarchical structure of traditional education as commonly experienced by teacher and student. In its place, there should be an atmosphere of community, shared leadership, and trust in which teachers and students, and students and students, work in mutually supportive and cooperative fashion toward an agreed upon goal. Classroom discussions would not be grounded in argument or the authoritative voice of the teacher or in paternalism; instead they would be founded on negotiation, mediation, shared authority, and open-endedness.

Feminist approaches to authority are quite similar to those found in most writing centers. Consulting sessions are characterized by non-hierarchical interchanges between peers, working together toward a common and often negotiated goal. The tone of these sessions is

invariably one of care, trust, and respect. While there is a sense in which consultants are authorities on writing, so too are the clients authorities on the subject, class, and professor for which they write. The point is that for anything worthwhile to get accomplished, they both must listen well and speak freely, unconstrained by feelings of inferiority or powerlessness. Without a symmetrical sense of authority and knowledge, consulting sessions are apt to reenact the traditional monologism associated with current-traditional pedagogy.

Postmodernism and Electronic Mail

In its attacks on academic discourse, postmodernism arguably offers the most radical critique of authority yet launched. From one view, postmodernism seems almost nihilistic, undermining not only current structures of authority but also firmly entrenched notions about rationality, coherence, and the individual. With the aid of deconstructive moves, a postmodern critique can dismantle any hierarchy, challenge any claim to truth. While it is unlikely that postmodern theory will have much impact on conceptions of academic discourse any time soon because of its radical stance, the first place its unique characteristics have been most readily visible is in electronic discourse—on the Internet and electronic bulletin boards and discussion groups occupying cyberspace. While I do not wish to equate postmodernism with computer technology, there are obvious connections which became apparent to me as I worked with other

graduate students in Michigan State University's writing center to create a collaborative learning environment.

Writing Center Theory and the Politics of Accommodation and Resistance

Writing center consultants clearly reflect and contribute to changing notions of academic discourse as they talk with their clients. They are, as Bruffee has called them to be, "agents of change" ("Peer Tutors" 1).

Although most consultants in our universities and community colleges are undergraduates (Child and Ryan 2), they have been invested with the responsibility to help students negotiate between institutional demands and personal concerns in a way that often proves daunting even to the most seasoned teacher. Moreover, they work in a professional climate—composition theory in general and writing center theory specifically—which is undergoing a critical self-examination of its own goals and purposes. As noted in Chapter One, teachers of composition, for instance, often see themselves as having contradictory roles. On the one hand, they work to initiate students into the discourse conventions of the academy, but, on the other hand, they often define themselves in opposition to these very same discourse practices.

The same dilemma is faced by those who theorize about the work done in writing centers. When I posted a question about the connection between academic discourse and writing center practice to the WCenter bulletin board, the responses revealed a noteworthy concern with the roles

writing center professionals should take. Neal Lerner, a graduate student writing a dissertation on writing centers, addressed the question of whether we are “gatekeepers or gateopeners” and asked “Do we question the value of academic discourses or do we keep our mouths shut and help students to master those discourses? . . . To make explicit the conventions does seem to be my role. Once made explicit, the student and I can question the values of these discourses. Do we have any input in changing them? Hey, I’m only a grad student, preprofessional, on the other side of the gate.” Julie Bevins, an MSU graduate student working in the writing center, wrote that “It seems to me that academic discourse (as the privileged discourses that they are) are more likely to HURT those they exclude than Black or ‘Other’ discourses which are keeping them out of positions of power. So, if a WC operates, using (and valorizing) academic discourse, who are we excluding/hurting? . . . I really hate this question because I feel torn: we maintain the status quo (privileging academic discourse, which, in turn generally privileges white, middle-class, male) by using academic discourse, but if we DON’T operate with this sort of discourse, how can we be taken ‘seriously’ and how can we help marginalized non-academic-discourse-speakers to become people with some power (people who ‘speak the language’)?” In response to Julie’s post, Ed Lotto, a former editor of The Writing Center Journal, wrote that “Like you, I am torn by the status of academic discourse. It sure does hurt people, but on the other hand a discourse like ethnic cleansing—which is pretty popular in lots of the world—hurts even more people than

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academic discourse, although some followers of Foucault might disagree with even that. In any case, academic discourse is one of the few discourses that makes a plea for inclusion.” Jeanne Simpson, an editor of a book on writing centers, first writes in apparent support of academic discourse conventions by comparing them to social events: “You wouldn’t wear a black strapless evening gown to a barbecue. You wouldn’t wear overalls to the prom. . . . Discourse community is a pretty fancy phrase for describing a social dynamic. . . . Well, here’s a whole new dynamic. Granted, [academic discourse’s] conventions are complicated and sometimes without apparent logic, but they are no crazier or more rigid than any other set of conventions folks encounter elsewhere. We just need to stop pretending that they have greater ‘magic’ than other conventions. If you want to be a hit at the prom, you gotta dress right.” Simpson’s follow up post complicates (or contradicts) her first: “I am not sure that ‘no change’ is wrought on students struggling to duplicate academic discourse. If it makes them more resistant to writing, to using writing, if it makes them regard writing as worse than just hard work, if it makes them believe that the academy engages in a bizarre, inaccessible communication form that has few identifiable referents for them then they HAVE changed. For the worse. . . . As must be apparent, I have a, um, not altogether high opinion of academic discourse.” Others affirm academic discourse despite its limitations. Jon Olson, a writing center director, writes that

I'm simply trying to be conscious of my responsibilities as an academic when I teach my intro. classes and when I direct a writing center. As students enter the academy (or come closer to doing so), some of them enter my—our—proximity. . . . We represent the academy, and I for one want them to be part of the academy too (the alternative being that they drop out of school?). What I don't understand is how an academic who is in a discourse with other academics regarding topics of interest to the academy—how can that academic say she doesn't like academic discourse? . . . I see a danger in dumping on 'academic discourse.' That category is so broad. Students and teachers often end up dismissing a wide range of exciting academic possibility because their sample of 'a.d.' is boring, pretentious, vacuous, etc.

Jeanne Simpson comes back into the conversation to praise Olson's post:

"I think encouraging is preferable to actively discouraging students to examine academic discourse, perhaps practice it, possibly even embrace it and enter our hallowed siblinghood." And Lynne Belcher writes that "Language is power, isn't it? I don't think it's ours to give away, but we can certainly help our students develop the ability to take it if they want it. Maybe when we get that power, we don't always want others to have it. I don't mean just us as teachers, but all others. I think we as teachers are sometimes more willing to share that power or why else would we want to teach? I think we owe it to our students to show them something about the nature of this power, and then let them make their own decisions about whether or how they use it."

In short, the posts on WCenter in response to my initial questions display a great deal of interest in the questions but also a great deal of confusion about the aims and effects of teaching academic discourse in writing centers: does writing center work further an oppressive

institutional discourse or does it initiate students into a liberatory power discourse and thereby further democratic goals? Overall, it seems to me that writing center professionals accept the later view, albeit, perhaps, by adopting the view that “we have to use the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house.” So in a sense it is fair to say that writing center professionals have taken on a responsibility to reform the academy and the discourse on which it is based but to do so from the inside.

The idea that writing centers should simply accommodate institutional demands and academic discourse as it has been traditionally defined, however, has not been a significant part of writing center practice since at least the time of the change from lab to centers. As discussed earlier in this chapter, as the ideas of expressivism, social constructionism, collaboration, discourse communities, and process writing entered into the mainstream of composition theory, the emphasis on mere correctness fell away, not only in composition classrooms but also in writing center practice. This is not to say that some form of accommodation is not evident in today’s writing centers. As institutional structures, writing centers must work within the general confines and expectations of the academic communities to which they belong, despite a wariness of doing so. But they continue to participate in changing notions of academic discourse, especially in terms of pedagogy and, perhaps, in terms of writing across the curriculum and the emphasis on writing-to-learn assignments now being incorporated into traditionally non-writing courses. And writing centers and their consultants have acted as “agents

of institutional change” as they have interacted with their clients and, more importantly, with their clients’ teachers.

In recent years, however, a few writing center professionals have begun to encourage greater resistance to the prevailing sense of their mission as being one of initiating students into the conventions of academic discourse. The criticism of what might be called accommodationist practices in writing centers blends an attack on institutional expectations of teaching pedagogy with an attack on some of the conventions of academic discourse. So entwined are the two critiques that it is almost impossible to separate them. These critiques have arisen, I suspect, in part because of a growing sense of the ways in which writing centers participate in and augment a type of discourse that often is exclusionary, and in part because of writing center professionals’ greater confidence in their role within the institution. When writing center professionals thought of themselves as expendable add-ons to the university or college culture, it made little sense to work openly against that culture. But as writing center workers gain greater recognition as professionals in their own right, and as their centers become more thoroughly integrated into the academic community, they garner an influence and voice that they previously did not have.⁵

One of the first criticisms of accommodationist practices in writing centers came from Nancy Grimm in a 1992 Writing Lab Newsletter article. In this article, Grimm contests the most widely invoked article in writing center theory—Steven North’s “The Idea of a Writing Center,” first

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published in 1984. North's article served as the guiding light for centers, old and new. Grimm, after paying appropriate tribute to North's positive influence on writing centers, attacks the article on two major fronts, both of which deal with accommodationist elements in writing center theory and practice. North had written that "a writing center is an institutional response" to the needs of students, to which Grimm replies, "since when do institutions respond to such needs," (5) a reply which, she suggests, is meant to point out that the real mission of institutions is to "use literacy to classify and to exclude," a mission at odds with writing center work. The obvious problem with this critique, however, is that writing centers are supported by the institutions of which they are a part and their work is not primarily designed to "classify and exclude," whatever the institution may think. North also writes that writing center tutors should "support the teacher's position completely" when working with a student and then goes on to say that "We cannot change" the rhetorical context in which the student writes: "all we can do is help the writer learn how to operate in it and other contexts like it. In practice, this rule means that we never evaluate or second-guess any teacher's syllabus, assignments, comments, or grades" (441). Grimm claims that statements like these discourage "writing centers from producing research that questions institutional, pedagogical, or curricular practices," (6) though it is clear to me that she confuses writing center consultation with writing center research.⁶

Grimm wants to say that writing center work is more "politically and ideologically charged than North's essay indicates" (5). This may be true,

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but Grimm fails to distinguish between the interpersonal politics of tutoring—North’s focus—and institutional politics of pedagogy and research. To support the teacher’s position when talking with a student is, in fact, a political act, one which allows writing centers to continue to function free of the institutional censure that would surely follow if paid tutors began to criticize teachers openly. Furthermore, I find it troublesome that Grimm thinks that such critiques would actually help the student client: students would find it of small help that their tutor thought the assignment silly or the instructor misguided. As for North’s sense of writing center politics, it is fair to say that they are a politics of respect. The bargain he supports is this: “instructors must grant us the same respect we grant them” (441). Violating this principle could only lead to unnecessary animosity.

Also emblematic of the idea that writing centers should encourage a politics of resistance is Marilyn Cooper who, using Grimm as inspiration, argues for writing center consultations (not necessarily research) which actively pursue ways to subvert or at least change the type of writing that students are asked to complete. Speaking against the prevalent notion that clients must “own” their own writing, Cooper makes the case that “ownership” is more complex than this, that in important ways students are not owners of their classroom writings, nor do they act as free agents in the writing of the paper. Instead, students are confined by the assignment and by the expectation that they will complete it using the discourse conventions of the institution. In short, they act within a context

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not of their own making. Consequently, “tutors can best help students become agents of their own writing by helping them understand how and the extent to which they are *not* owners of their texts and *not* responsible for the shape of their texts, by helping them understand . . . how various institutional forces impinge on how and what they write and how they can negotiate a place for their own goals and needs when faced with these forces” (101). Instead of “supporting the teacher’s position completely” (North 441), tutors need to help students find the gaps, spaces, or cracks in the assignments “in which the institutional constraints on writing imposed by the dominant order can be made to respond to the lived experience and aspirations of students” (102). One way tutors might go about helping students find these openings is to engage with their clients in a “critical reading of the syllabuses and assignments” given to students (109). Cooper maintains that undergraduate tutors are uniquely situated to do this work—that is, “empower students as agents of their own writing” (106)—for a variety of reasons: they are in close contact with the students; they are familiar with composition theory; they “have little investment in disciplinary beliefs and practices, and they are thus less responsive to its standards and expectations than they are to the needs and experiences of their peers” (106).

Cooper is correct in her perception that most writing assignments offer students a variety of “subject positions”—a postmodern term referring to the self as a dynamic entity constructed largely through language rather than a self that is primarily rational, coherent, and static.

She wants consultants to help their clients see these spaces as a way of opening up academic discourse so that it might include and speak to meaningful experiences that students can bring to their academic writing. Students, she believes, must “learn how to challenge” productively the constraints imposed on them by academic writing (102). This is good advice and, when implemented, it can contribute to ongoing reconceptualizations of what constitutes acceptable academic discourse, but the method proposed by Cooper for achieving it seems naïve. There is a danger, for instance, in encouraging writing center consultants to critique with their clients syllabi and writing assignments designed by faculty. If done well—that is, with a focus on helping the student meet the course requirements in a personally meaningful way rather than on evaluating the assignment or course requirements—students can profit from a close examination of these documents. On the other hand, consultants should be advised that it is virtually impossible for even seasoned educators to evaluate any single assignment given to a student without knowing the context and classroom culture in which that assignment was made. In other words, consultant critiques of assignments should come closer to North’s suggestion that it is better to support the “teacher’s position completely” than it is to assess negatively without sufficient information. By positioning her remarks in opposition to North’s maxim, Cooper seems to suggest that consultants might best assist their clients by ignoring it completely, an act which might well lead

to an alienation of the student from the instructor, and to an alienation of the instructor from the writing center.

Also problematic is Cooper's assertion that undergraduate consultants are well prepared to engage their clients on the level she desires, a point she reiterates twice in her essay, perhaps anticipating that an objection will be raised concerning it. The characterization of consultants as being well versed in composition theory is probably more wrong than right. Sharon Wright reported in a 1994 survey that 43 percent of the writing center staff at large universities were drawn at least in part from departments outside of English and that only 49 percent of the institutions surveyed reported "orientation and training seminars that last at least one full day" (2). Of course a good portion of consultants at large universities come from the ranks of English majors and they may undergo extensive formal training in writing center theory and practice, but this is not the case for most people acting as writing center consultants. The two community college writing centers with which I have had experience used a combination of undergraduate and professional tutors. Neither of these centers subscribes to either The Writing Center Journal or The Writing Lab Newsletter (perhaps the best sources of writing center theory and practice), nor does either regularly participate in professional conferences. The community college at which I currently teach uses only full-time composition teachers to staff the writing center, but these people do not have a grasp of (nor show much interest in) contemporary composition theory. This lack of knowledge is

unfortunate, but understandable, perhaps, given the teaching loads of community college teachers. Cooper's characterization of those who staff writing centers, then, reflects the ideal rather than the actual situation.

But even granting the premise that at least some undergraduate tutors are well versed in composition theory, the statement that they "have little investment in disciplinary beliefs and practices" remains mistaken. Most tutors are drawn from the ranks of students who have learned their lessons well, who have themselves mastered the conventions of academic discourse. Most importantly, their mastery of this discourse has paid off for them—with good grades, with praise from their teachers, with a job at the writing center. To claim as Cooper does that these tutors will be less than responsive to the "standards and expectations" of the institution is to misapprehend the effect of personal experience on conceptions of value. Undergraduate consultants may, with time and exposure to the various types of discourse associated with writing center work, learn ways of expression which make use of the discursive gaps inherent in writing assignments, but I doubt whether this comes to them naturally.

Cooper concludes her article by providing five examples of "how writing centers can serve as a site of critique" and "how this is already happening in writing centers across the country" (106). Her examples, which depict consultants applying techniques drawn from readings of Bakhtin, Chinese culture, Julia Kristeva, and Paulo Freire, are a mix of weak and strong support for the practice she advocates. However, at least four of the five consulting sessions she uses as examples were not

conducted by undergraduates, a fact she nowhere makes apparent.⁷ After writing early in her essay that “I am thinking primarily about writing centers that are staffed by undergraduate students” (98) and then later writing “And, yes, I *am* thinking about undergraduate tutors” (103) (her emphasis), it is somewhat deceptive to use examples in support of her argument which are not drawn from undergraduate consulting sessions.

With Cooper, I believe that “writing centers are in a good position to serve as a site of critique of the institutionalized structure of writing instruction in college,” that writing centers might profitably be seen “as having the essential function of critiquing institutions” (98), and that undergraduate consultants can participate in significant ways to making educational institutions more democratic and inclusive. But I am not convinced that undergraduate consultants should be asked to play the leading role as institutional reformers, especially when writing center diversity and demographics are taken into account.

Remarks

As ideas about the characteristics, process, and aims of academic discourse change, so too do the theories and practices which drive writing center work. When academic discourse was described primarily in current-traditional terms, writing labs occupied a well-defined place, supplementing classroom learning with prescriptive exercises and advice designed to assist students in mastering the rules of writing. Eventually, coming under pressure by advocates of process writing, writing labs gave

way to writing centers with expanded but less clearly defined goals. The change in name from lab to center marks a significant shift in how writing centers define and carry out their missions. No longer are writing centers thought of primarily as places of remediation; nor are they thought of as skills centers or places which dispense fixed knowledge about writing without regard for the contexts in which that writing takes place. Rather than acting as auxiliary purveyors of unproblematic and long-accepted notions of academic discourse, writing centers attend to the more complex concerns inherent in the view of writing as a process—namely, invention strategies, collaborative learning, audience awareness, revision, and, broadly speaking, the context for the writing. In their incorporation of some feminist values and the ideas of social constructionism, writing centers have become active partners, along with composition theorists and instructors, in revisioning academic discourse.

Andrea Lunsford describes the ideal writing center as a Burkean Parlor Center which builds on social constructionist and collaborative theories of discourse and challenges traditionally held views of how academic discourse is produced and evaluated. "Such a center would," she writes, "place control, power, and authority not in the tutor or staff, not in the individual student, but in the negotiating group" (113). But in looking at writing centers past and present, Lunsford also voices her concerns about the issues of "control" and "authority." Her concern is that in the Storehouse Center authority rests too heavily in the tutors as representatives of the academy; in the Garret Center that it rests too

heavily with the individual student; and in centers based on collaboration that it may rest in “the lowest common denominator, that erases rather than values difference” (112). Others have also voiced concerns about collaboration and social-constructionist theory and its potential to enforce or, at least, lend weight to socially (or academically) accepted models of writing and thinking.⁸ So, while it is true that social constructionism may well be the broadest and most accurate term by which contemporary writing center theory and practice may be described, it remains problematic both in writing center theory and in critiques of academic discourse. While it certainly informs much of the work done in writing centers, it is itself a problematic theory in that it can easily lead to an esteem for consensus which disallows diversity as it acts to control academic writing through the advancement of social norms.

Furthermore, when student consultants are drawn from those thought most adept at learning and reproducing the forms of writing sanctioned by the academy, the danger of them unconsciously or consciously replicating rather than questioning the status-quo is great, a fact which Cooper’s analysis ignores. As I will argue in my final chapter, calling tutors consultants (a term which emphasizes shared authority) and using electronic mail (a means of promoting student-centered learning) may well attenuate some of the danger of which Lunsford and others speak. Nevertheless, despite efforts made in many writing centers to shift the locus of authority away from the tutor and away from the student as individual, the fact remains that most writing centers, despite

their making some inroads into academic expectations of discourse, often exert little influence over specific writing assignments made by teachers. Students are still rarely allowed or encouraged to write collaboratively and many teachers still look for and evaluate student writing based on quite traditional conceptions of academic discourse.

While different theories can help us to understand the work that goes on in writing centers, we would do well to consider Eric Hobson's caution against the acceptance of "totalizing paradigms" and "metanarratives" which attempt to explain the practices of writing center workers (7). The intersection at which ideas about academic discourse meet writing center theory is best illuminated by focusing on writing center practice—the point at which student, assignment, and consultant come together.

Notes

¹ This may be changing. Certainly calls for writing center theory to lead the way are frequently made with the idea that it can significantly change the institutional structure.

² In "Early Writing Centers: Toward a History," Peter Carino has begun an historical account of writing centers and labs which emphasizes their similarity and continuity with each other rather than their distinguishing features. In discussing the change from lab to center, I emphasize the differences, both in terms of practices and the metaphorical connotations associated with each site.

³ Sharon Thomas is the Acting Director of Michigan State University's Writing Center. This study was done in the fall of 1993 and presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in the spring of 1994.

⁴ See Faigley, Ede, Berlin, and Knoblauch.

⁵ It is interesting that as writing centers have entered into the mainstream of academic communities—into better buildings and facilities staffed by better paid people—objections to further integration into the larger community have been raised. For reasons of maintaining "critical consciousness," for instance, John and Tilly Warnock write that "While we do not suggest that centers must remain in condemned buildings or that staff salaries must remain low, it is probably a mistake for centers to seek integration into the established institution" (22). See also Riley who argues that "if those of us devoted to the writing center concept follow the example of other groups, seeking stability in professionalization, we will jeopardize the values that make our work meaningful" (21-22).

⁶ Woolbright rebuts Grimm on similar grounds.

⁷ Alice Gilliam makes clear in her article that she is a graduate student; Kate Latterell was a graduate student at the time she joined the writing center staff at Michigan Technological University; Nancy Welch is an Assistant Professor and Associate Director of the Writing Center at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln; Tom Fox runs the tutor training program at Chico State University; Lucy Chang may be an undergraduate.

⁸ See Trimbur's "Consensus and Difference."

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CHAPTER THREE

Writing Center Practice: Views from the Inside

Introduction

This chapter presents research that I conducted at Michigan State University's Writing Center beginning in 1993. Studying for and then taking my comprehensive exam in composition theory the previous year had highlighted the arguments some compositionists make against academic discourse. At the same time, my deep involvement in writing center practice and theory—and my teaching—seemed to be work done largely in support of the very discourse that was being questioned. This tension, or the apparent contradiction between some contemporary composition theory and writing center practice, attracted my attention and prompted this dissertation, an attempt at coming to terms personally and professionally with two apparently disparate views both of which, while I knew them to be in opposition, I intuitively thought correct. In the first two chapters, I laid out the interplay between writing center theory and the idea of academic discourse and pointed out some of the ways writing center theories have responded to critiques of academic discourse. In this chapter I examine academic discourse as a component of the discussions

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which occur between writing center consultants and their clients at Michigan State University's Writing Center as they work on writing assignments for three different first-year classes with a strong writing requirement.

Initially I intended to limit my focus entirely to the interaction of the consultant and client and what this interaction has to say about the role of academic discourse in writing center practice. But after observing just one session, I saw that a more expansive view would need to be taken if I wanted to provide firmer grounding and context for my comments. My research for this part of my work, therefore, consists of an analysis of three video- and audio-taped consulting sessions between clients and consultants; audio-taped interviews with consultants, clients, and teachers involved in the project; and written documents including client and consultant response sheets, consultants' analyses of their video-taped sessions, and drafts of the student paper being discussed. Altogether, I interviewed nine people—three consultants, three clients, and three teachers for whom the clients were writing. I chose to work with consultants whom, based on my formal and informal interaction with them, I thought would constitute a relatively representative group of undergraduate writing center workers. In choosing faculty members to work with, I also looked for some diversity in the courses they were teaching and in the kind of student they might encourage to participate. Clients volunteered for the project, and I selected several from each faculty member's class to participate. After video taping the sessions (nine

sessions altogether), I narrowed the client base further by selecting one from each of the three classes to interview. I worked, then, with three groups of people, and each group has three members—the professor who set the assignment, the student who was to complete the assignment, and the writing center consultant who worked with the student client. I think of these three groups as the American Thought and Language group, the James Madison College group, and the Lyman Briggs School group, names based on the department, college, and school of the university within which the student-clients were writing.

American Thought and Language

American Thought and Language (ATL) is a department within the College of Arts and Letters and Michigan State University that is primarily responsible for teaching writing to first-year students. ATL courses vary widely in both content and structure, but all are designed to promote sound writing practices in students (including drafting, revising, and editing compositions) as they hone their skill in narration, persuasion, analysis, and documentation. ATL courses focus on a particular topic within American culture or history for the entire semester—Radical Thought, Science and Technology, Ethnic and Racial Experience, for instance.

Kenosha was a student in Professor Laura Julier's Women in America course (ATL 140). Professor Julier came to MSU in 1988 with a Doctorate in English from Iowa, and she has a firm background in

rhetoric as well as literature. She is recognized by her colleagues as a well-informed and dedicated teacher, and she has demonstrated a willingness to try new approaches to teaching, including making the use of e-mail an integral part of her courses. She is knowledgeable about contemporary composition theory, presenting her work regularly at the Conference on College Composition and Communications. Kenosha was a second-semester, first-year student who came to East Lansing from Oakland Catholic high School in Pontiac, Michigan. Her high-school grade point average was 2.9, about the same as her first semester grade point average at MSU. At the time, Kenosha was majoring in elementary education, but said that she eventually wanted to go to law school to become a corporate lawyer. John was the consultant who worked with Kenosha on a paper she was writing for Professor Julier's class. A senior, John had been working at the Writing Center for a full year at the time of my research. John, who is in his middle twenties, married, and a father, was one of the most mature of our consultants. He is sensitive, thoughtful, and well read. During our interview he talked about a paper he was in the process of writing which looked at the novel Native Son through a lens provided by Foucault. Majoring in political science, John hoped to get a job teaching in an inner city school before going on to get an advanced degree.

James Madison College

James Madison College (JMC) is a small residential college in MSU with around 1000 students enrolled in a program of study concerned with political science and public policy debates in the United States and abroad. Students enrolled in JMC are exempt from taking the ATL writing course but must, instead, complete two writing courses taught by JMC college faculty. The first of these courses focuses on “identity and community in American society,” and the second course, *The Individual in American Society: An Approach to Writing II* (MC 112), takes up the ideas of individuality and community in a specific historical era—for example, in the 1920s or 1930s or 1940s. In this second course, writing instruction centers on techniques involved in persuasive and research-based writing.

The MC 112 course taught by Professor Colleen Tremonte dealt with the 1950s. Professor Tremonte came to MSU in 1993 as a tenure track professor in James Madison College with a Ph.D. from Texas Christian University in modern American literature, composition pedagogy, and rhetoric. Like Professor Julier, Professor Tremonte’s practice is solidly based in contemporary composition theories. She teaches first-year writing courses primarily, and presents regularly at the Conference on College Composition and Communications. Her student, Shannon, said that she “always liked writing” and got A’s in English all the way through high school in a Detroit suburb. She planned to major in international relations and felt that the James Madison courses and

community offered her the best preparation for a career. Colleen Patterson, the consultant who worked with Shannon on her paper for Professor Tremonte, had been working in the Writing Center for a year and was in her sophomore year. Always friendly, Colleen got along well with everyone and was willing to take on new challenges whenever the opportunity arose. When the Center invited a few of our consultants to present at a conference, Colleen was one of the first to volunteer, and her professionalism and knowledge about writing came through both in the way she presented her material and in what she had to say. Colleen took her commitment to writing center work seriously, perhaps because she was majoring in English education and saw the immediate connection between what she was doing and what she hoped to do.

Lyman Briggs School

Lyman Briggs School (LBS) is a residential program within the College of Natural Science which provides its students a foundation in mathematics and basic sciences. LBS students take introductory writing courses taught by LBS faculty rather than ATL faculty in preparation for concentrated study in a variety of science-related careers—medicine, dentistry, secondary or post-secondary teaching, and so on. The first writing course LBS students take is Introduction to Science and Technology Studies (LBS 133). This course, which is usually taught by people with backgrounds in English and composition rather than science but which is open only to LBS students, requires students to write

expository essays on topics drawn from general readings about science and technology not geared to a specialized audience. After completing LBS 133, most students take Biology I: Organismal Biology (LBS 144). Although not specifically identified as a writing course, LBS 144 introduces students to formal scientific writing—to the format of a scientific journal article—through experimentation and readings in the basic principles of evolution, ecology, and genetics.

Professor Maria Davis, who has her Ph.D. in biology (entomology) from MSU, often teaches LBS 144. A recent student herself, Professor Davis is well aware of the challenges scientific writing poses for her students. In addition, she understands the genre of professional science writing since she regularly publishes such articles. Perhaps because she is a woman in a field dominated by men, Professor Davis seems particularly knowledgeable about scientific contributions made by women and to the challenges women in her field face. Shawn, Professor Davis's student, was a first-year student interested in teaching science (biology and earth science) and English in high school at the time of my study. Shawn attended a high school in a Detroit suburb where he did well in English, taking Advanced Placement English in his senior year (though he said he "flat out bombed" the placement test). During his visit to the Writing Center, Shawn worked on his LBS 144 paper with Aimee, a sophomore who was in her second semester as a Writing Center consultant. With a major in chemistry and a minor in biology (one reason I assigned her to work with Shawn on his paper), Aimee planned to teach

high school. Aimee had attended high school in Mount Clemens, Michigan, where she took the regular English courses—no Advanced Placement—because she “never did really well at writing.” My experience working with Aimee had taught me that she is more accomplished than she lets on, tending to downplay her talents.

Consultation and the “Collaborative” Construction of Texts

Expanding student choices during the writing process is the key to writing center consultations. The dynamics of a consulting session are complex and often chaotic—suggestions about what to say and how to say it seem to tumble out of thin air. Transcripts of consulting sessions often make for difficult and confusing reading, in part because they reflect neither tone of voice nor body language. But even when I view the video tapes of the sessions and am privy to the subtleties of voice and gesture, I am continually conscious of myself as an outsider, one who can perhaps see, hear, and analyze but who is also incapable of completely understanding or entering into the special dynamic that client and consultant establish as they work dialogically to generate and shape ideas for a paper. When people ask me about what goes on during a writing center conference, I simply tell them “it’s two students talking to one another about writing.” And when I’m asked what a school gains if it has a writing center, I answer that “it provides an opportunity for students to talk with one another about writing.” It’s hard for me as a writing teacher to imagine any greater achievement than this alone. It gives me the same

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pleasure as when I overhear a couple of my literature students discussing a reading assignment as they sit around a cafeteria table outside of class.

The view that writing is at base a social activity rather than a solitary one informs writing center work. This view is not radical: most academics who publish know that a good reader is to what they write. We usually talk our ideas through, if not with a colleague then at least with our classes, and most of us have at least one or two people read and respond to our articles before we send them out for formal evaluation. Writing centers provide students with the same type of opportunities. In their discussion with another student, clients are encouraged to deepen their engagement with their subject, with academic discourse, and with their writing process. Before I examine in more detail the ways students work together in the sessions I taped, it might be helpful to read what the clients wrote about their conversations with their consultants immediately after their sessions ended.¹

Kenosha after working with John

I really enjoyed the conference. At first, I didn't want to come because Akers (an MSU dorm) is so far from Brody (the location of the writing center), but I must admit it was worth it. John really helped me express my ideas and shared ways of explaining it to the reader on paper. It has made me more confident of my ideas and not just use what the author says to make the paper sound good. I've changed my introduction, explained what I'm going to argue about. I learned how to put quotes in the right place, clarify. Now all I have to do is try to clear up my handwriting. I'm very happy I came and hope my paper shows the difference. Thank you.

Shannon after working with Colleen:

Colleen helped in a number of ways. It was helpful to see what she believed the focus of my paper was. Now I will be able to expand and strengthen the focus. She also answered some questions I had on points in the paper where I thought it was weak or not understandable. I had some general questions about writing a paper on an interview, and she was able to show me where it would be good to give more background information on the interviewee. She also helped with questions on transitions between paragraphs. I often have that problem, along with keeping tense the same, and Colleen was able to clear up those questions.

I feel this meeting was very helpful. I can now go on and fix my paper keeping in mind the suggestions made by Colleen. I had questions about certain topics and whether it would be relevant to include them in my paper, and after discussing the topics with her, I feel I can now go and include these.

Shawn after working with Aimee

I feel that this conference was very helpful in shaping my ideas about my genetics paper for LBS 144. It is always helpful for someone else to read through your work and offer ideas on how to strengthen the points and arguments in the paper. Aimee gave me many ideas and directions on where to go with my writing. She reinforced many of my ideas, and really helped me extend a few of my more important points. Aimee asked a lot of questions and made me think a lot about what I was trying to say in my paper. With her help, I was able to clearly think of all the different angles at which I could approach the report form. I feel that she did an excellent job, considering how little of my actual paper I had done. Aimee helped put the different parts of the paper together in a logical manner. I know that this conference will greatly improve my paper and thus my grade for this assignment.

These brief and quickly written remarks give a good, general sense of what occurs in a typical consulting session—brainstorming for ideas, organizing, and refining. More than anything else, however, I think these comments convey the feeling of support and goodwill that is invariably

part of the consultative process. Reading through the transcriptions reveals a wealth of supportive murmurs and exclamations, from “Yeah,” “Un huh,” “Okay,” and “I see” to “Wow,” “That’s great,” and “Oh. That’s really interesting.”

In today’s writing courses, collaboration is often built into the classes. Professors Julier and Tremonte’s classes include collaborative learning and writing strategies, and, of course, those of their students who use the writing center benefit even more from collaboration when they attend the writing center. Despite the wide use of collaborative practices in education today, a common question often posed to writing center people is “When you have two undergraduates working together, isn’t it a case of the ‘blind leading the blind?’” In other words, the sentiment being expressed is that neither the client nor the consultant really knows enough to accomplish anything of much value since neither one is a trained specialist; or that while the consultants know something about writing, unless they are a specialist in the subject about which the client is writing, they will have little of significance to contribute. This apprehension or objection, however, is misplaced. It is not a case of the blind leading the blind, but a case of two people, one of whom is quite adept at reading and writing, working in a rather natural way (a way recognized, for instance, in almost all publishing) to clarify a writer’s ideas as they take shape in the mind and on paper.

The lack of specific subject-matter knowledge in the consultant is not necessarily—nor, I would argue, is it likely to be—a problem. It can, in

fact, be an asset. Part of John's strength in his work with Kenosha may have stemmed from his *not* having read The Awakening about which Kenosha was writing. I remember sitting close enough to them during their session to overhear some of their conversation. I also remember my sense of frustration at not being able to interject my interpretations of the novel into the discussion or to at least influence Kenosha in her interpretation by posing a leading set of questions "to get her on the right track"—my track. John, on the other hand, was able to approach Kenosha's thoughts on the novel without preconceptions. One of his roles was to listen to Kenosha and to see where her thinking broke down of its own accord, where it had internal conflicts, or where more support might be needed. Had he known more about the novel, taking this type of "objective" stance undoubtedly would have been harder.

The session between Aimee and Shawn provides another example of successful consultation marked by a lack of discipline-specific knowledge. Shawn was writing a paper on experiments he had done pertaining to genetics. Beyond a passing acquaintance with the subject, Aimee knew little about genetics. I asked Shawn during my interview with him about Aimee's lack of knowledge of genetics. Here is how the conversation went:²

Bill: Do you think it would have helped more if she'd known more about genetics?

Shawn: I don't know. I'm really, it's hard to say. It might've helped if she could have cleared things up, you know, maybe an idea I didn't understand. But not in the most part, I don't think so because it would have seemed more

like lecture. It might have helped. I really didn't understand the whole concept at that time.

Bill: Okay.

Shawn: And I was still understanding. I mean I knew the basics, but I was still learning a lot and through doing this paper I learned more. You know. It was more reassuring to have somebody in my situation. You know, who still really didn't know the whole genetics thing.

Bill: Right.

Shawn: So it was easier to talk to her and easier to go through . . . , you know, talk back and forth and get ideas. I mean if she was just telling me all about what I should do, most likely it'd probably go in one ear and out the other.

In addition to Shawn's recognition that if Aimee had known his subject of genetics well, the dynamics of the session would certainly have changed (become "more like lecture"), it is also worth noting the responsibility he accepts for knowing the subject—he does not expect her to know it as well as he does.

In part, the role of consultants as collaborators is simply to be a good audience—to be an active listener and to ask the right questions. Knowing something about the general expectations of an academic audience and about how arguments are made and supported helps. Midway through John and Kenosha's session, John listens to a point Kenosha makes about Edna being Leonce's "house trophy" in The Awakening, and then he restates her point back to her. In his written analysis of his session, John demonstrates that he understands his practical move (repeating what he has heard a client say for the client's review) as an enactment of a rhetorical construct (audience):

Here is a good example of how a client can benefit by having the consultant restate to them what it is the client is saying.

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Kenosha is discussing a complex insight which the book seems to offer concerning men's view of women as objects, as something which can belong to a man. I have Kenosha explain to me what she is getting at (since I initially have no idea), and then I tell her how I understand what she has just told me. This process works to clarify in the client's mind what it is they are saying. It increases the client's sense of audience by allowing them to be an audience of the audience; they see their thoughts presented to them as the reader sees them presented to him.

As clients work to make themselves understood to the consultant, they are able to make adjustments and refinements in their writing. To a certain extent, all of us who are successful writers are able to stand outside of our writing and to judge it as someone else might. We learn to become objective and critical readers of our own writing, to have what Bruffee calls an "internal conversation" with ourselves ("Peer Tutoring" 7). In writing centers, clients learn how to stand outside of their writing in memorable dialogic interactions with consultants. (We—in turn—ask client and consultant to summarize and theorize these interchanges. Our intention, of course, is that a lesson learned in one exchange will be carried away for use in others.)

When the professor or the student explicitly defines an audience for a paper, it is the responsibility of the consultant to play that particular role. Shawn's assignment sheet, for instance, said that the audience for his report was supposed to be someone who new a bit about biology but not specifically about genetics or his lab project. Knowing this, Aimee asks Shawn for some clarification of some of the terms he used:

Aimee: Like, what are the Laws of Segregation and Assortment? For me, I have no clue what that is, but do you think in your paper the reader will need to know what these are?

Shawn: I don't know . . . I'll probably put them in somewhere.

Aimee: Cause I remember it saying somewhere that the audience was someone familiar with biology but who did not know about what your experiment was about.

Shawn: Right. And what I may have to do is go back and state, in the introduction what the laws of . . . what the laws are. Let me write that down. Okay. So I think if I . . . if I, in the introduction . . . I should be able to state the objective easier.

"Who do you see as your audience?" is a question clients and consultants should probably ask more often, but the fact is that most often the audience is simply an academic audience, with no specific characteristics other than being generally well-educated.

Talking about Surface Errors

It is a mistake to think of the type of collaboration that consultants and clients engage in as "co-writing." Consultants rarely say "you should" do this or that, nor are they apt to take pen in hand and write sentences. They are, for the most, non-directive, even when it comes to what are largely surface errors. Primarily, they act as a responsive audience by asking questions and making affirming comments. In Colleen's session, for instance, she spoke a total of 95 times, and 35 of these times she asked Shannon a question. She made brief, affirming comments 19 times. Aimee and John's sessions reflect a similar ratio (though they are longer), with John being a bit more directive and Aimee a

bit more affirming. Often clients make corrections themselves in their writing with no prompting from the consultant other than the suggestion that they read the paper aloud. When Colleen had Shannon read her paper aloud, for instance, part of the session went as follows:

Shannon (reading): "The education and employment opportunities available for woman now are clearly more plentiful than they were in the 1950s. Life in this time was geared towards families, which offered much wanted security after the war, and women were a vital component of this. It was assumed that woman as wives and homemakers was letting the woman reach her full potential." That doesn't make sense. (Revising aloud now, my emphasis) "It was assumed that *women acting as* ...?"

Colleen: That's good.

Shannon: "It was assumed that women acting as wives and homemakers allowed women to reach their full potential."

Colleen: Good.

This kind of spontaneous revision of surface error goes on all the time with clients who read their papers aloud.

Sometimes the revision is prompted by the consultant with simply a "raised eyebrow" remark. Here is Shannon again reading from her rough draft:

Shannon: "Few young ladies ventured away from this place in life. In cases in which women did pursue a career of some sort, it was a career trapped in the label of a 'woman's job,' such as teaching, nursing and secretary."

Colleen: Secretary?

Shannon: Secretaries? Teachers, nurses, and secretaries?

Colleen: Good.

With good writers like Shannon, there is usually little need to go into full descriptions and explanations of mechanical difficulties such as parallel constructions. Their ear and intuitive understanding of the language does a lot of the work a consultant might do. (This, by the way, is not true for non-native speakers of English.) Nevertheless, consultants often do find themselves talking about mechanics for at least part of the session, and they need to know some of the rules followed in academic discourse.

Shannon, for instance, needed some help with tenses. Her paper relied on the interview she did with her mother, and she rather inconsistently introduced her mother as having *said*, *agreed*, or *offered* rather than using the present tense of *says*, *agrees*, or *offers*. In one place in her rough draft she writes that “Mary Reed *offered* some valuable information concerning this topic. As a young woman open to the influences of the attitudes towards women, she *proves* to be a reliable source of information.” Colleen picked up on this error and, during a lull in their conversation, tells Shannon that “You probably need to put your interview in the present. In the first paragraph, instead of saying she *offered* say she *offers*. She *offers*, you know, because the rest of it seems to be present, like *proves* is. She’s offering this now.” Later, when Shannon reads “However, Mary was an exception to this case,” she is able to make the correction from *was* to *is* without any prompting from Colleen.

Kenosha also needed help with mechanics, but John made a decision that many consultants make on a regular basis—ignore the mechanical problems until there is almost nothing else to talk about or

until specifically asked to address them by the client. The writing center at MSU encourages consultants to keep attention on more important issues since it recognizes that too great an emphasis on grammatically correct writing can become its own prison. This technique reflects the continuing influence of expressivists and others such as Mina Shaughnessy who point to the futility of a pedagogy which emphasizes correctness too early in the composing process. Kenosha, somewhat naively, told me during our talk that “Basically my problem is mechanics,” a claim that is not uncommon in writers who, like Kenosha, clearly have more significant problems with clarity and depth of response, problems which are more difficult for students to recognize, correct, or admit. Pointing to grammar and punctuation as an important problem is also understandable given the type of emphasis many teachers place on it. Kenosha came closer to the truth when she said—still talking about mechanics—that “I’ve got a little better at expressing myself on paper, which is still somewhat confusing because if you write as you talk, what you’re writing the other person might not understand. But you understand. So you have to rewrite it where the other person is not confused.” This statement obviously shows that Kenosha is thinking about the relationship between surface error, presentation of ideas, and audience response. Kenosha also showed a growing awareness of her own writing in her response to the question I asked her after she said “Basically my problem is mechanics.” I asked her whether she wished that she and John had talked more about mechanics during their consulting session. Her response was first

“Yeah,” which then quickly changed to “Maybe. I wasn’t thinking about that though. I was thinking more of going in depth, because that was my real problem.”

As do nearly all teachers of writing that I know, Professors Julier and Tremonte both pay some attention to ideas of mechanical correctness. Professor Julier feels compelled to do so, in part, because of the kinds of students she gets, the resources available (a writing center that does not put mechanics first), and the expectations of the ATL department, but she finds herself “responding to student papers in ways I really hate.” If she were working in a more ideal situation, she would do it differently: “I would spend far more time with individual papers, with drafts, to work their way around to a paper that really let them take a position. Spend far more time where they had to deal with each other’s positions. So that there would come a time in the semester when I would say, ‘okay, so you’ve really worked this stuff out, now let’s talk about sentences and mechanics.’” Professor Tremonte also works with students on mechanics as it affects their style, going over sentence structure, looking at ways to change meaning by subordinating clauses, in a way similar to the “new stylistics” movement. And, though she “hates grammar and mechanics,” she does have, she says, something of a reputation as “grammar queen.”

Working with Argument

The traditional emphasis on mechanics in academic writing has not completely disappeared, either in classrooms or in writing centers,

though the approach to error has certainly changed. It certainly no longer receives the same attention—either in emphasis or treatment—that it once did. The place of argument in academic discourse, however, is still strong, though there are new twists on the old form. Above all, teachers, students, and consultants all seem to have an awareness of the limitations and arbitrariness of academic discourse. Partly this arises out of a renewed focus on the role played by audience, partly out of a sense that academic discourse can exclude certain types of understanding. Still, clients, consultants, and teachers all exhibit and voice quite deep respect for the type of oppositional and positional thinking demanded in academic prose.

The term “argument” and its variations (“main point,” “claim,” “thesis,” “assertion”) is used freely by clients, consultants, and teachers to describe the writing projects in which they engage, and Kenosha’s and Shannon’s papers were both argumentative. Shawn’s paper on an experiment in genetics was less obviously “argumentative” in the way we normally use the term. Before talking about Kenosha and Shannon’s papers and their consulting sessions, however, I want to compare and contrast responses from their teachers to a question I asked them about how they conceive the relationship between academic discourse and their teaching objectives: both seem to me to offer new ways of thinking about argument.

Professor Tremonte readily says that academic discourse is “argumentative or, at least, persuasive” and that students “need to know

that it will be expected of them.” On the other hand, she makes a useful distinction between writing that is “thesis-statement driven” and “thesis driven,” and defines “thesis” for her students “as a reasoned response that’s stated or unstated as an assertion or claim to an issue at hand—so it’s immediately argumentative.” The problem she sees with a formal thesis statement is that such statements often control and limit exploration before it is time to do so. As she says, “At some point in your writing you need to have an assertion, but you can’t begin with a closed inquiry.”

Professor Tremonte’s concern that academic writing address an “issue”—a term she used repeatedly to describe the subject matter of writing—is another way of saying that it will address a contested or arguable subject. I think Professor Julier gets at the same idea in a different way when she says that academic discourse “means you’re dealing with ideas and conversing with other thinkers.” As you enter this “academic and intellectual conversation,” you move “beyond summary” to an awareness “that other people have thought about this issue. The work of the university is to deal with ideas.” And as a writer sorts through different voices competing for a satisfying analysis, interpretation, or resolution, a position is staked out that becomes the writer’s own argument.

Professor Julier’s student, Kenosha, went through this process in developing her argument about Edna’s relative strength and weakness in The Awakening. Based on the ideas presented during class discussion

and her own understanding, Kenosha was aware that Edna could be viewed as either weak or strong. The dilemma that arose as she wrote her paper and consulted with John was to find a way to reconcile these two apparently disparate ideas. Kenosha's first sentence of her rough draft stated that "Edna was internally weak more than anything," but, later in her first paragraph, Kenosha had written that "Edna began to show her strength in resistance" (to Leonce and cultural expectations). That she could say both of these things confused her, prompting her to ask John very early in the session "How can both things be right?" John first replies quite simply by saying that "On questions like this it's not just all on way or all the other, and so I think that it's good that you kind of, that you address this fact. How can you put it so it doesn't appear to be a contradiction?" Kenosha's response is "I don't know. I have a problem." In William Perry's terms, her problem seems to be that she is caught in the web of dualism—a state of thinking marked by the conviction that there must be a "right" answer with no complicating counter arguments. John's task during the session was to move Kenosha from a position of absolutes to one of "relativism" (she was already half way there), and finally to a stage, to use Perry again, of "commitment in relativism." She needed to become more aware of her own power to persuade the reader to her point of view despite the possible alternative interpretations.

Throughout the consulting session, Kenosha had a difficult time reconciling the strength/weakness issue raised in the novel despite her personal belief that Edna was weak. Using John's questions as a prompt,

however, she was able to at least combine the two ideas into a thesis sentence which immediately notified the reader that she was dealing with both issues and that she came out on the side which claimed Edna was primarily weak: "Edna was internally weak, but [she] had [a] little strength to resist." This is the beginning of a complex argument imperfectly stated, but it does provide Kenosha with a way to control her line of thought and the organization of her paper. And it is a claim that represents much of what we expect in academic discourse.

One way of looking at the arguments made in both Kenosha and Shannon's papers is through the lens provided by David Bartholomae in "Inventing the University." In his attempt to initiate students into academic discourse, one of the ideas proposed by Bartholomae is that good papers often work off of an opposing idea. So that a thesis might take a form like this: "While many people believe X, actually Y is the case" or "While there is some evidence for X, a closer reading actually supports Y." This is essentially the form Kenosha is trying to master. Her thesis might be restated to read that "While Edna showed some strength in her outward resistance to Leonce and cultural expectations for women, she was constrained by an internal weakness." In the case of Shannon, who was writing in response to Elaine Tyler May's book Homeward Bound which examines the place of women in the 1950s and claims that women's roles during that decade were assigned rather than chosen, she was more readily able to set her argument up in a way that academic writing traditionally requires. This ease was partly due to her maturity as

a writer, but it was also helped by the fact that May had provided the alternative perspective: Shannon's point was that while May's thesis may be true, it is also true that many women accepted and ultimately succeeded within the confines of an ideology of "confinement." The titles of Shannon's second rough draft— "Oppressing or Challenging?"— and of her final draft— "Another Look at History"—indicate not only her growing certainty of her position but also her awareness of the need to stake out a position in relation to an opposing idea. Both of these papers, then, exhibit an essential component of academic discourse as traditionally conceived.

Emphasizing Analysis

Clients and consultants are more apt to talk about "analysis" rather than argument as a key distinguishing feature of academic discourse, often positioning analytical writing in contrast to summary writing, a type of writing these students identified as the major mode expected of them in their high-school classes. Kenosha drew this distinction when she talked about her struggle to deal with her assignment on The Awakening: When she wrote research papers for high school, she said that "I would just go and look up the person in the dictionary or encyclopedia and write down the information that's in there. Rearrange the words." When she had to write on a book, she said that she would "just summarize." Now, in college, it is different. Now, Kenosha says, she must "go more in depth. It's more thinking." In her sessions with students like Kenosha, Colleen

says that she “is always trying to get students away from summaries,” that she wants them to write “not what they’ve read, but what they’ve learned.”

Colleen reflected on how she might write about a character in a book in. In high school, she says, she would have said that

Charles was good, and then you’d explain good. But now it seems like I have to analyze more, and like, say “by this he realized this, and then talk about what changes this person went through instead of just saying what they are. You have to go into more depth . . . explain why you use a quote. What does it show, why is it important? Instead of just summarizing, you have to explain what relevance it has to the rest of the paper.

John’s thinking on the importance of analysis is more emphatic:

Academic discourse has some elements that are pretty well set—it’s simply emphasis on analysis. And that’s, I think, one of the hardest things for the clients to pick up on. That when they read an article or an essay, that this person is making a specific argument. . . I think that a lot of times students come to think that these arguments are historical facts, that the writer is just telling about what really is, and then they summarize those ideas. But when you look at a writer, you don’t just reiterate what the writer is saying, you want to identify what it means, what significance it has. Analysis is making sense. It’s one of the foundations of academic discourse.

Combining Analysis with Personal Response

One interesting way this emphasis on analysis rather than summary plays out both in student papers and in the consulting sessions is that it takes on a personal tone and meaning that was, perhaps, not

always a recognized part of traditional academic discourse, nor is it adequately accounted for in social-constructionist theory. For consultants and clients, analysis does not always or even usually mean a denial of personal response. Talking about his own writing, John comments that

I think to be good at analysis, you have to realize that the way I'm reacting isn't just, you know, the way that my brain works. It's also the way I live, who I am. Where I've been, what I've done and stuff, and what my past is. What my morals are. And so I think that like, it can be a very personal thing. Analysis can, if it, if you can get into it the right way. It would be ideal if you could get to the point where people kind of felt like analyzing things, or working through problems was a really personal thing.

When Kenosha drew her distinction between writing for high school and writing for college, she also pointed to the close connection between academic writing and personal response, saying that in college writing "it's more of your own, you know, what you feel and what the book tells you. It's what do you get out of what the book tells you. So, I guess its value is your own true expression. . . I guess I want to say that, you know, you just value more of your own opinions."

Not surprisingly, Kenosha's analysis of The Awakening draws quite heavily on her sense of who she is. Kenosha feels that Edna Pontillier is "internally weak" but that she was able to show some resistance to a culture and life she found oppressive. Kenosha, on the other hand, sees herself as internally strong. Here's how Kenosha speaks about Edna and herself:

I can see myself being in her spot as maybe the way a woman is supposed to act around men. I mean, like, of course we have our women's rights, and we became more equal, and we can do this and do that, but you still have the stereotype that you're supposed to be ladylike, you know, and you're supposed to cross your legs, supposed to wear certain clothing, et cetera, and being the type of person I am, I'm very bold, and just say what I feel, so a lot of men are scared of it, they're not used to a woman speaking, you know, what she wants to speak. In other words, if my husband was to hit me, I could honestly say, I probably would knock his teeth out. You know? Most men would like to see a woman actually go heads up with a man. You know, if a woman are getting stronger, where I can see, being like Edna, because sometimes I don't want to say anything, I don't want to speak, because I feel that my voice is going to be too, you know, powerful, I'm gonna intimidate the men. Cause he's a strong man, and he definitely going to be intimidated by me because I try to be a strong woman. So, you know . . . She was trying, she just didn't, I guess she had everything against her. I mean, everybody felt different than she did. She was the only one that felt that way. At least, I can say, you want to be strong now, that you have people backing you up. You know what I'm saying? I have people that's like me that say, you know, go, don't worry about it, do. . . that feminist books, you have all these other things. Back then she had no one but herself. Nobody thought the same way she thought. You know?

This type of alliance between academic subject matter and personal experience is not uncommon in clients who participate in consulting sessions, in part because some contemporary writing assignments allow if not encourage such co-mingling. Shannon's assignment for James Madison was to write a paper on some cultural aspect of the 1950s. After reading Homeward Bound about women during this repressive decade, Shannon decided to interview a woman who was coming of age during the fifties to get a clear view of the culture from one who lived through it—she interviewed her mother. Shannon speaks of the connection between

her academic understanding of the fifties and her personal relationship with her parents:

My mom told me a lot of personal stories and stuff like that, and you never, I mean, in my case, I don't, that kind of opportunity just to talk to my parents on how they used to be and how they are, as people outside of just being parents doesn't come along very often. And so, like, with my research paper, I interviewed my dad too, just, you know, just for the heck of it, just to see what was going on with him and that puts a lot more meaning to the 50s for me, just because my parents grew up then, and . . . that, that's really where I'm getting my meaning for the class, is just because, now I can relate to my parents in this way.

Neither Kenosha nor Shannon included these personal connections to their subject matter in their formal analysis, though the connections were obviously important in the way they framed their papers. Interestingly, these personal views did not surface during the consulting sessions either. While there was much affective interaction between John and Kenosha, and Colleen and Shannon, especially while they adjusted to each other at the beginning of the session, I saw no evidence in transcripts of their interactions that personal responses to the subjects being analyzed played any significant role. My guess is that because the personal is obscured from view in the paper, it plays little or no role in these sessions, which were clearly task oriented.³

On the other hand, I was surprised that Shawn, who was writing a scientific analysis of Mendelain genetics using fruit flies as subjects, worked hard to personalize his paper. During his session with Aimee, he twice (to her consternation because she saw more important elements to

address) struggled over a sentence that he wanted to get just right, once saying to Aimee, "I'll just say something like, uh . . . trying to find a nice catchy sentence like 'in the following' or, you know, 'in the following report' or—you know what I'm trying to say?" About half an hour later he was back to the same sentence saying "it's all jumbled up there. All right. I need to think of something better than that. I've written enough papers. I should know what to say to make it sound good. I'll just say 'in the following' right now. 'In the following report,' for right now." None of this talk would have drawn my attention had not Shawn later said to me that "every paper I write is part of me. I see as part of how I write. I have my own style." And when I asked him what Professor Davis would be looking for in his paper, one of the several things he mentioned was that she would be looking for "an interest in the subject, that you're actually interested in it." He went on to say that

She can't really, I guess, she can't really grade on interest because I can totally think that this is a dumb topic but still write a great paper. But still, in some ways your interest is displayed in a paper like this. I can be—wow!—interested and really. . . I could write all this, all this stuff and I could include 15 quotes and that would probably show that I'm interested, you know? Or I could even put a personal connection in there but the format probably wouldn't allow it. Or something along that line, but definitely if you're not interested sometimes, a lot of times, you can tell in the paper. There's just no life in the paper basically.

In other words, Shawn feels that even in a scientific paper which follows a strict format, he is able to instill it with a part of his personality, in this case his "interest" and attention to word choice.

At my request, Shawn identified nine places in his ten-page paper where he thought he was displaying his interest in genetics without violating the required format. Several of these displays simply concerned his willingness to meet all of the requirements for the paper; several others pointed to his smooth integration of personal and familial genetic characteristics. At another place, Shawn found and paraphrased a statement from a secondary source which, in his words, said that "The physicist Johann Christian Dopple encourage Mendel to learn science through experimentation." His idea is that by using this information he conveyed his own *bona fide* interest in experimentation and, by extension, his interest in the class which attempts to teach scientific concepts by having students conduct their own experiments. At yet another place, Shawn makes the statement that "Continuing to research genetics allows us to one day obtain cures capable of killing (or at least disabling) diseases like colon and breast cancer, Alzheimer's, diabetes, depression, and multiple sclerosis." This, he says, shows his interest because "If we're going to cure these diseases that's very interesting to me because if there's something I'll be getting out of this paper, it's that. This genetics concept isn't just history, it's the future also."

In being attentive to these elements in his writing, Shawn is weaving his personal response (and interest) into a decidedly analytical piece of writing. When I asked his instructor, Professor Davis, whether there was room in a scientific paper for personal expression, she responded by saying that there is "creativity in framing the problem, but

our students don't have that avenue open to them because they're told what to do . . . But I think I can tell from the students' writing, especially in the discussion section, whether they have an enthusiasm for the material or at least a commitment to understand it. Did they make an attempt to actually understand it and weave it together in their own way? I'm not, I certainly don't expect the students to give me carbon copy papers of each other." In her own writing and reading of science articles, Professor Davis has recently become aware of the desirability of personal expression. Sometimes when she's reading an article she says that she gets a feeling for whether she would like to meet this person, or whether the person would be enjoyable to work with, "just by their writing style and the way they put sentences together." One recent reviewer of an article she wrote for publication told her that "there's nothing wrong with the material you've presented, but I think you could liven up your writing a bit." So even in a formally structured science essay, there is an element of the personal that improves it in subtle ways.

Finding the "Truth"

Clients and consultants appear to be aware that the positions taken in their discourse are, to a degree, arbitrary. Earlier I wrote that the underlying epistemology of academic discourse as traditionally viewed was objectivist and positivist—that truth is certain and knowable despite the shortcomings by which it is conveyed—but that social constructionism and postmodernism had undermined the certainty

which accompanies a positivist stance. This important but difficult-to-grasp epistemological shift might seem to have influence at only the higher levels of academic conversation. But when I asked Kenosha, for instance, who was right—those who said Edna was weak or those who said she was strong—her reply was “Nobody knows. There’s no, all I can do is take evidence and explain why I feel that way. And you can take evidence and explain why you feel the other way. But there’s no right or wrong answer to it. You need to be able to clarify why you feel that way.” Professor Julier, Kenosha’s teacher, offers a more controlled view of truth in argument: “I love when they leave my class and say, she had no rules. Nothing is right and nothing is wrong. No, that’s not what I said. I said there are many possibilities.” What Professor Julier wants to see in a paper is not “truth” but “a sense in which you hear the person thinking. That can mean raising questions, posing the kind of complexities you see in Kenosha’s paper, that it’s not just one way or the other, but that there’s a complexity here and there’s a way to negotiate that and then work out your own position.” The consultants also seem comfortable with the idea that there is no “correct” answer, perhaps because they must work with clients who are taking sides on issues different from those they themselves would take. In working with clients, Aimee tells them not to worry about being right or wrong, saying “It can’t be wrong what you think, as long as you can back it up with support and it’s understandable.” Colleen admits that “You can have a totally wrong opinion. There are some right and wrong answers,” but she also says that “if you are writing about

something abstract and not fact, you can prove it if you have the argument."

I suppose the idea of arbitrariness can be taken too far, that it might be seen as undermining certainty and leading to relativism, causing some to experience a postmodern panic. In its most favorable light, however, it indicates an awareness of the power of rhetoric and writing to shape feelings, responses, and interpretations, depending on the choices the writer makes. It is a way of refocusing on the persuasive power of discourse. And, at least as presented by Professor Julier, it provides a way of talking about the *choices* available to writers as they compose rather than the *dictates* they must follow. One technique she uses to get her students thinking about choices they make as writers is to require a "reflective commentary" with each piece of writing students turn in. In these pieces students reflect on their writing processes—what difficulties they encountered, how they felt about the piece, and the choices they made and rejected as they wrote. Professor Julier is trying to develop in her students a particular type of literacy: "the ability to talk about oneself as a writer, going through a process, making discoveries, becoming aware that as a writer you have decisions about how to conclude a paragraph, for instance." Some students, she says, look at her as if she has "just said there is no God" when she suggests to them that they might want to conclude their paper without restating what they said in the beginning. (I imagine Professor Tremonte may get the same look from her students when she tells them that they do not need a thesis.) Professor Julier

considers it a success when by the end of a semester a student becomes aware that "there are different ways of concluding, of making closure." Writing center consultations are one way of helping students see that they have choices to make as they write which will either solidify their position or weaken it.

Acknowledging Authority

During my earlier discussion about consultants acting as active listeners and in so doing dramatizing the theoretical construct of audience for their clients, I perceived consultants acting as "an audience of one," one individual reader speaking honestly and informatively to the writer and, as in part of Aimee and Shawn's session, acting the role of the audience specified by the professor or the student. In all three instances these enactments clearly benefit the client's writing. In addition, writing center consultants often act as representatives of "the academy" and convey the standards most commonly thought to be valued in that community. This comes naturally to those hired to be consultants: they have usually demonstrated in their interviews, in their writing, and in their course work that they have successfully learned to produce the kind of writing expected of undergraduates. This learning confers on consultants a degree of authority when talking with their clients. In terms of their authority, then, consultants occupy a nexus of subject positions: they represent the institution and its values; they interpret assignments defined (sometimes well, sometimes not so well) by professors for their

students who have chosen to become consultants' clients; and they work for clients as clients try to convey their thinking on a particular subject matter.

The values held by the institution and its administrators, the individual professor, and the individual client are not always in agreement. Add to this mix the consultant's own values, and the context in which a consultant must work becomes more unstable and complex. Most of the knowledge consultants have about how to negotiate successfully what often take shape as competing demands comes from their own experiences as students of the academy, and this knowledge may actually be taught to them in their introductory writing courses. Professor Julier does a unit for her students on writing in-class essay exams and the need for writers to carefully assess the writing situation, purpose, and audience, and to tailor their writing to these variables. Professor Tremonte also addresses this issue directly with her students, telling them that must be "aware that it's a reality that oftentimes they are writing for a particular teacher" and if that teacher wants them to use an obvious thesis statement in their writing—and if they want to succeed in that teacher's course—they should do so. She makes a point of asking her students to write for different audiences as a way of teaching them rhetorical strategies they can use for a variety of situations, including those they will encounter in the university.

As students of the academy, consultants have learned well how to negotiate competing values and authorial claims. Thus, John, who is

taking a literature class from a feminist professor, says that he is writing a paper on Foucault and Richard Wright's Native Son "because I know that my analysis of how those two fit together is going to be pretty close to how the professor's fits together, how she reads them. Now, if I did, like, let's say, a comparison of how Foucault fits in with feminism, I wouldn't do that. I wouldn't write that paper for that class because I think that feminists misread Foucault a lot." Whereas John avoided a potential area of conflict by choosing a less volatile subject, Colleen faced a situation where choosing a different topic on which to write would not help. She was in a class where the teacher was trying to teach her "a new way to write," a "different way to think about writing." Colleen could not get above a 2.0 on her papers because the way the teacher approached writing was so foreign to her—a problem statement with a thesis that includes a "how, what, and why," no concluding paragraph, and so on. "First," Colleen says, "I was really angry. This guy's a jerk." But after talking to him, she decided that "I am willing to learn different ways." If it is not a good way to write, she will "discard it after this course. I'm just doing it to show him that I learned it. It's a challenge for me. I'm willing to learn it, I'm willing to do what he wants me to do."

In their different ways, both Colleen and John made a conscious decision to comply with the authority of their teacher, in part because their grades might suffer if they did not. This tack carries over into the consulting work in which they often address similar conflicts between the

values or requirements of academic writing and the values or discourse patterns of the clients they work with. Here is John on this topic:

I had a Hispanic woman come in, and I consulted with her, and she was very, like a very creative writer, and she used her words well, but full of slang, and, in one part she was talking, she said, basically, guys are all bastards in the story. She was very good with her words, but I also knew that, you know, that's probably not going to make the grade, depending on what, you know, what prof she has. Some profs allow more talk than others. But when I consult, I don't . . . the way I approach that is, a lot of times they're really self-conscious of it, like that client, the last example I gave. She was like, "yeah, I should probably take that out, shouldn't I?" And, what I said is well, personally, I like it, but you're right, there may, your prof may not like it, so you, it may affect your grade. And I just tell them, it's up to you. It's what you think is more important.

In this same part of the interview, John goes on to say that as a consultant he lets the student know that institutional demands differ from what clients may want to do personally and that there is a "tension there, between getting the grade, and doing what you want."

Aimee tells similar stories about her sense of authority. Aimee worked with quite a few non-native speakers of English, for example, and often thought that the requirements for these writers had been set too high by their teachers. They were failing all of their papers because "they couldn't get the grammar down." But as Aimee says, "You know all I can do is help them. I can't go to the teacher and say 'you know this is wrong. You shouldn't do that.'" Aimee also recalls working with clients who tell her that they know their teacher disagrees with the stance they are taking in a paper and they are worried about the grade they will be given. Aimee

says her advice is that if they are really adamant about their position “they should always take the risk of going against the teacher. But as a consultant I try to make them aware of what the consequences might be, that if their grade is the most important thing right now, then you probably don’t want to do that.”

Sometimes a consultant is faced with a client whose position on a subject may not involve disagreement with the teacher or with institutional values but with the consultant’s own values. This situation does not always involve an issue as volatile as racism, sexism, or religion, issues which often can be addressed by the client in terms of the general expectations of academic discourse. Colleen recalls working with a client who was writing a paper for a Women’s Studies course and who was rather stridently taking the position that women should never sacrifice a career for motherhood. Colleen, on the other hand, had recently come to the conclusion that while she would continue to pursue her career for a while, she would eventually give it up when she began to raise children. She would stay home and give full attention to her role as mother. Colleen says that she remembers “reading it [the client’s paper] and going, no way. This person is unreal. But I just had to help her make it clear, get it organized.” Colleen spent little time trying to convince her client that her thinking on this issue was wrong. In this case, and in others like it, the authority and values of the client finally hold sway, as they ultimately should, over those of the consultant.

Remarks

In the first chapter I talked about traditional and conventional values of academic discourse in terms of structure and style, underlying epistemology, methods of teaching, and purposes. The transcripts of sessions and interviews that I discuss in this chapter reveal an ongoing concern among students, faculty, and writing center consultants with the structure and style of academic discourse as traditionally defined in terms of argument and mechanical correctness, though the latter gets attention rather late in the process. There is a sense, too, in which argument becomes more exploratory as exemplified in the examples I have provided which focus on de-emphasizing the thesis statement in Professor Tremonte's classes. Session transcripts and interviews also reveal a traditional belief in the purpose of academic discourse, if "purpose" is defined as the promotion and refinement of critical or analytical thinking. Critical thinking is, of course, an essential element of argument, and clients and consultants are taken with "analysis" and its superiority to mere summary. It is also worth noting that even though the final product of student writing most often appears to adhere to the traditional dictate of "author-evacuated" prose, clients and consultants typically have a personal connection with the topic of their writing, or, as in the case of Shawn, they attempt to insert a sense of themselves into their writing. Furthermore, while the writer's personal connection to the writing is not always apparent in the final writing, the transcripts of my interviews with

the clients demonstrate the personal involvement of the writer occurred even if it isn't "visible" in the paper.

Major conceptual and practical changes are evident in the other two areas—underlying epistemology and methods of teaching. Writing centers and instructors are obviously more concerned than previously with the writing process and with intervening during this process. Collaborative strategies within the classroom and writing center consultations allow and encourage students to explore not only their own thinking on a topic but also the thinking of others. Writers are seen as members of interpretive and thought-generating communities but also as individuals plumbing the depths of their own thinking. Expressivist ideas contribute significantly to writing center practice by encouraging consultants to be sensitive readers of their clients' work—that is, readers who respond honestly and who can suggest places where clarification is needed. Clearly, the ideas of the social construction of knowledge and expressivist pedagogical practice overlap in important ways since both entail an appreciation for audience that was largely absent in traditional views of academic discourse.

Postmodernist and feminist values make their way into contemporary writing practices in terms of the arbitrariness of truth and authority. Rather than a fixed and pre-existing truth ready to be uncovered by a perceptive thinker, there is a sense of truth as arising out of a social and rhetorical epistemic. In other words, clients and consultants are aware that through writing they create or arrive at *a* truth rather than

the truth, as John and Kenosha's comments make clear. And even in writing as concrete as Shawn's lab report on genetics, there is a sense that the "telling" makes all the difference, though the facts must be right. The feminist case against argument does not seem to have had a great deal of influence, although the call for a pedagogy and writing process founded on negotiation and shared authority is consonant with writing center practice. While it is true that writing center consultants most often defer what authority they do have to either the teacher (as representative of the institution) or to the client, it is also true that authority has been dispersed among more players—teachers, classroom peers, clients, and consultants.

The extent to which writing centers and the consultants they employ can reasonably extend the critique of conventional discourse patterns is a question I take up in the next chapter in a discussion of two contributions MSU's writing center has made to writing center practice since its establishment in 1992.

Notes

¹ Inviting clients and consultants to write about their consulting session when they are over is common practice at MSU's writing center. These writings help our clients solidify and remember important points discussed during the session and they serve as pedagogical records for our consultants who are encouraged to reflect regularly on their practice.

² Because the transcriptions of these interviews are of most interest for their content rather than their mode of expression, the length of the pauses are all noted by ellipses whatever their duration.

³ I think it is likely that in writing centers which encourage clients and consultants to work together over the course of a semester or longer, as MSU's Writing Center does not (though it does not frown on this either), the interaction between client and consultant would deal more openly with personal matters which help to inform the writing.

CHAPTER FOUR

New Directions: Implementing a Politics of Respect

Introduction

Writing centers obviously have an opportunity to affirm and advance more open and egalitarian discourse in the institutions to which they belong. And rather than accepting a choice between a politics of accommodation or resistance, writing centers can foster a politics of respect—toward ourselves, the student-clients we serve, their professors, and the institutions in which we work. Furthermore, it is possible to change conventional assumptions about academic discourse while taking advantage of the freedom and support that already exists—in whatever measure and diversity—in the universities and colleges with which we are affiliated. We may sometimes feel constrained by the fiscal and attitudinal constraints that we face, but just as students must learn to negotiate between the demands of the writing assignment and the desire to say something personally meaningful, we must look for the openings and opportunities which will allow us to effect a type of discourse which is at once liberatory, enabling, and persuasive. Because writing centers everywhere are searching for, developing, and implementing strategies

that will contribute to an academic literacy which is more inclusive than exclusive, I now focus attention on two contributions based on the work done by Michigan State University's Writing Center which work toward achieving this goal.

Naming Ourselves

Writing centers participate in the reconceptualizing of academic discourse primarily by restructuring how it is produced and who participates in its making. As client and consultant work together to arrive at a piece of writing acceptable to the academy, they become part of the equation through which academic discourse is defined. While it may be possible to argue that any participation at all in the production of academic discourse has the potential to contribute to its reconceptualization, undergraduates acting alone have, for all intents and purposes, little power to change the forms of the discourse they are expected to write. With the decentering of authority that occurs with collaboration, however, the potential for change increases. But this change can be thwarted if the people consulting with the student writers see themselves not as allies of the students but as representatives of the institution—in other words, as “little teachers,” to use a designation coined by Bruffee.

In light of this concern, writing center theorists have noted the problem associated with the term *tutor* and with the attempt to qualify it by placing the word *peer* in front of it. John Trimbur, for instance, notes

that the title *peer tutor* is a contradiction in terms. Reflecting the educational hierarchy that they have been immersed in since their schooling began, tutors are likely to see themselves, at least initially, as authorities passing down state-of-the-art knowledge about writing to those less informed; the adjective *peer*, however, suggest that the tutor is not really an expert but a co-learner engaged collaboratively with the tutee in a way that works against the hierarchical structure of traditional education. Trimbur's way out of this apparent impasse is to discard neither designation but to argue that the training of tutors should take place at two different levels and at two different times. Initially, tutors need, with one hand, to be cleansed of the "apprentice model" of writing workshop support which emphasizes their roles as authorities; and with the other hand to be immersed in a "co-learner model" of support which emphasizes collaboration and co-authority. Later, when and if tutors have made a commitment to composition as a field of study, it may be beneficial to acquaint them with and expect them to exercise the theory-driven practices of professional teachers of composition.

While I appreciate Trimbur's point that our undergraduate staff needs first to understand the concept of collaboration before knowing the intricacies and professional debates about teaching writing, it seems to me that much of the confusion tutors have about defining their roles stems from their already conceived associations with *tutor*. If we named them something else, might they more easily shed the "little teacher" mentality that works against the notion of collaboration? Neither Trimbur nor

Kenneth Bruffee, who argues for an emphasis on the *peer* of peer tutoring in the belief that peer tutors can “act as agents of institutional change” by helping to forge a new educational system based on collaboration, considers the effects of *tutor* on the activity it is meant to describe.

The ubiquitous preference for *tutor* in our professional publications and conferences undermines the potential for change that writing centers represent, and its persistence may well encourage others in academia to continue in their perception of writing center work as prescriptive lab work. It also may distort the vision our undergraduate staff has of its own work. As Lex Runciman explains:

We recruit students to staff our writing centers, and we call these students tutors; we call the writers they work with tutees. Then in our first training session we find ourselves obligated to very carefully spell out the roles that writing assistants play. *We find ourselves explaining why writing assistants aren't tutors and why student writers aren't really tutees.*
(31)

How writing consultants see themselves is, of course, of paramount importance to the success of a writing center, and a couple of training sessions may suffice in getting them to think of themselves as something other than what they normally associate with their title of tutor. On the other hand, it might reasonably be argued that as long as we call them tutors, they will, despite their efforts not to, eventually slip back into the authoritarian role designated by their title. But even if such training successfully washes the notion of tutor out of our consultants' minds, the wider perception held by others in the community we wish to serve remains largely outside of our reach and control.

Because tutor is problematic, attempts have been made to re-title students working in writing centers in a way that better describes their roles. In research conducted at Michigan State University's writing center, for instance, several groups of undergraduate writing consultants and faculty were asked to list and then discuss the practices and values they associated with the terms *tutor* and *consultant*. The accumulated results reveal much about what each term connotes in terms of authority, as the following list of typical associations suggests.

<u>Tutor</u>	<u>Consultant</u>
1. Asymmetrical/hierarchical relationship	1. Symmetrical/evenly balanced relationship
2. Older/traditional	2. Newer/technocratic
3. Lower pay and prestige	3. Higher pay and prestige
4. Gives correct answers/prescriptive	4. Suggests options/dialogic
5. Needed to bring someone up to speed/remedial	5. Needed to advance beyond an already strong position
6. Sent to	6. Sought out
7. For kids/students	7. For adults/emerging professionals
8. Solve a problem	8. Avoid a problem
9. Better educated	9. Equally educated
1. Ongoing and more personal relationship	10. One time and less personal relationship
10. Individual	11. Collective and collaborative
11. Works more broadly on larger topic/subject based	12. Works on particular topic/problem based

As this list of associations people have with *tutor* shows, it is a title which, for the most part, affirms traditional, and lab-related notions of authority. *Consultant*, on the other hand, connotes shared authority.

Whereas tutors are expected to know the correct answers and to prescribe the proper and rigid structures into which the student's thought must fit, consultants are perceived as supportive listeners who work flexibly with clients to help them achieve what they have identified as their goal. And as the title of consultant implies, those who work in a writing center must consciously avoid becoming final authorities on papers brought to them. As Tilly and John Warnock explain, "the best and perhaps the only way to change student writing is to help students revise their attitudes towards themselves as writers and towards writing. A crucial part of the change is to restore to students the sense of their own authority and responsibility" (19). Thinking like a consultant rather than a tutor is one step toward this goal because, unlike the tutor/tutee relationship, the consultant/client relationship connotes a symmetrical interchange between equals rather than a hierarchical interchange between unequals. The consultant advises and suggests; the client decides whether or not to act on the consultant's advice.

In terms of having students take primary responsibility for their work, there is another benefit to *consultant*. Consultants are most often sought out through the client's own initiative, unlike tutors to whom one is most often sent for remediation after failing at some academic task. And even if a student is sent to a consultant, as sometimes happens at our writing center though we discourage it, they generally come in with a better attitude because there is simply less stigma attached to seeing a consultant than there is to seeing a tutor. Tutors are for failures and

consultants are for those who want to improve, a subtle but important difference when attitude often determines a student's success or failure in academic writing.

Consultant is not without its problems, nor *tutor* devoid of its merits. Because tutors are associated with education rather than with business, they seem to connote a warmth and a personal concern for the student's success that consultants may lack. Consultants, who are most noticeable in business settings, seem colder, more interested in the problem clients are either experiencing or trying to avoid than in the people or person who faces the problem. Part of this conceptual difference stems from the fact that tutors most often establish ongoing relationships with their tutees that may last a whole semester or even years. I am still friends with a Japanese student whom I tutored through four years of college, not a surprising development since I met with him, on average, once a week. Consultants, on the other hand, are typically contacted for help on a particular problem, and while they may be called on again and again, it is always with a specific idea or piece of writing in hand. Another likely origin for the "cold" and "warm" connotations of *consultant* and *tutor* is that tutors are often integrally bound up in the success or failure of the student in a particular course or subject, and they are usually hired specifically to help a student achieve a passing grade. Since consultants have historically not been part of the educational landscape known to students, they are associated more with general efficiency and success than with graded evaluation, and this is true even while their focus

remains on a specific task or topic. For writing consultants working in writing centers, this attitude is best reflected in Stephen North's axiom that "Our job is to produce better writers, not better writing" (438).

That business is the best known site for consulting practices should not be allowed to dominate how we think about the term. There are, after all, political consultants, educational consultants, computer consultants, architectural consultants, environmental consultants, and a host of others. And despite the contemporary associations *consultant* has with late capitalism and technocratic societies, it has a rich history of its own, appearing as a verb in English at about the same time, 1565, as *tutor*. *Tutor* as a verb first appeared in 1592, but still carried with it the earlier (1377) noun sense of *tutor* as a guardian, protector, or defender. *Consult* is, of course, related to *counsel* and carries with it the attendant meanings of advice, discussion, confer, and deliberate, all of which describe common practices of writing center personnel. More importantly, the literature on consulting produced by and for people in business and the professions includes some very sound information useful to writing center activities. One much-used book on professional consulting, for instance, begins this way: "Consultation is fundamentally the act of helping. As such, it holds the dramatic vibrance and reality which characterizes life itself. Consultation is not simply the mechanical tossing of expertise toward a painful client; it is an experience in shared resources... [I]t is the substance and spirit in the helping process which gives consultation its unique humanness" (Bell and Nadler 1). Besides the obvious emphasis

here on collaboration, I am more struck by the tone of the statement, its sensitivity toward the client and its clear recognition of consulting as a dynamic, human process. This is not an isolated occurrence. Chapter two of Bell and Nadler's book consists of an essay by the psychotherapist Carl Rogers that discusses the "helping relationship" and how one can best promote "growth, development, [and] maturity" in an individual (22). Another book on consulting discusses the reasons clients seek consultants in terms of bafflement, uneasy feelings, and changing standards of evaluation (Blake and Mouton 2-3), all familiar scenarios to writing center consultants who help writers understand the assignment, allay their fears, and clarify the grading standards expected of college writers. Other books on professional consulting discuss topics such as establishing rapport, accessing the client's needs, negotiating a plan of action, keeping the responsibility on the client, choosing appropriate intervention strategies, and disengaging gracefully (Schein; Margerison). These examples from the literature written by professional consultants are not meant to suggest that they, the people who have been working with the notion of consulting for the past twenty-five years, have already covered the ground we have recently entered, but the examples should at least make us more aware of how the current use of *consultant* does, in fact, describe much of the work we do.

No designation for writing center staff is without its shortcomings, and this is as true of *writing consultant* as it is of *tutor*, *writing fellow*, or *writing assistant*. But we might ask ourselves which term offers the best

and most complete description of our work not only in the center but also out of the center, and in this regard, the consultancy model also has much to recommend it. Most writing centers, for instance, function as either official or unofficial information houses for writing-across-the-curriculum efforts, and as faculty associated with the center, we are often called upon to act as consultants to faculty from other disciplines who want to incorporate more writing into their courses. Although we have expertise in writing and in designing writing assignments, we engage our colleagues as equals in a symmetrical relationship. They feel no stigma in seeking us out, and we feel no sense of superiority in assisting them in articulating and accomplishing the goals they have set for themselves. Because this is essentially the same situation present with our undergraduates who work in and visit writing centers, it makes sense to describe the activity in the same terms, especially since faculty who have drawn on the expertise of faculty writing consultants are probably less likely to raise the question of whether or not the student who has visited the center has actually "done his own work," an otherwise common reason given by some for not sending students our way. While we have often heard of the tutor who steps over the line between assistance and ghostwriting, it is less common to hear of a consultant who confuses her role with that of the client. Additionally, as it becomes more common for writing centers to send student consultants into classes for presentations or writing group support, it seems reasonable to strive for coherence and

clarity in describing our services by referring to writing center consultants, faculty consultants, and classroom consultants.

Expanding Boundaries

Another way writing centers can effect change in discursive patterns of the institution is by expanding their reach beyond the walls of the writing center, beyond the face-to-face encounter between client and consultant. Writing-across-the-curriculum programs, for instance, provide one means of increasing the influence that writing centers have over the ways academic discourse is conceived by the various disciplines within the institution. Innovative writing centers often develop programs that work on several fronts at once, and MSU's writing center is no exception. In addition to running an intensive semester-long course for new writing center consultants called the "The Writing Consultancy," the Center has also developed the "Portfolio Project," a university-wide program which traces and records the writing experiences of a group of students from the time of their entrance into the university until they graduate. At regular intervals, these students are invited to the writing center to talk and reflect about the boundaries between personal and academic writing, the use of writing to increase critical awareness, and the opportunities to take on new roles that writing provides.

Another such project developed in MSU's writing center connected ATL faculty who teach first-year writing courses with English Department faculty who teach an education course entitled Writing Workshop for

Teachers (ENG 313). Students enrolled in this English education course served as writing consultants in the classrooms of ATL faculty as partial fulfillment of class requirements. These links led to an expanded appreciation for the contributions writing centers can make to establishing an institutional climate which encourages and affirms student participation in educational discourse.

Several teaching assistants coordinated and supported the students completing this field experience, which left us, therefore, in the sensitive and complex position of satisfying diverse expectations while orchestrating interactions that would meet everyone's needs. The directors of the Writing Center entrusted us with the responsibility of coordinating and providing the most immediate supervision of this pre-service teaching program. And because faculty members and students relied on us for information regarding placements and English 313 course objectives, our position lent us an added measure of authority. In an orientation meeting that we hosted at the beginning of each semester, students and faculty participating in the program got acquainted and discussed their expectations for the semester, while we ironed out scheduling conflicts, explained course outlines, clarified consulting procedures, and provided narratives about previous consulting experiences for participants. Our role as facilitators helped us in several ways: we were neither teacher nor student; we were not "in charge" of the situation but neither were we uninvolved observers. We were, instead, participants in an exchange of resources that benefited everyone while

dispersing responsibility and authority among us all—ATL faculty, Writing Center staff, English faculty, and English 313 students.

More substantially, we were also responsible for the quality of the field experience. When we began the program in the fall of 1992, we knew that we could not simply coordinate the field experience placements and then relinquish responsibility for ensuring a positive experience for the students and faculty involved. To this end, we asked the classroom consultants to fill out weekly reports and to attend biweekly “crosstalks” in the writing center, where we discussed writing center pedagogy and ideas of collaboration and addressed instructional issues students were facing such as how to cope with difficult students or how to ask faculty to invest them with some teaching responsibility.¹

While our intentions were good, the crosstalks and weekly reports led to a palpable feeling of resentment in the classroom consultants. Partly this problem was due to the students feeling that they were being asked to participate in still another class: not only did they have to attend their English education classes and their assigned ATL sections, they also were required to come to our crosstalk and, occasionally, to read articles we gave them. They regarded the crosstalks as overload work. And because the schedules of undergraduate English education majors were packed with the courses they need to complete their five-year degree program, we were forced to hold most of the crosstalks in the evening, and we even had one on Sunday. Add to this the fact that MSU’s writing center was at the time situated at the far western edge of a rather large

campus, and it is not hard to understand their resentment. In addition, the classroom-like atmosphere of the crosstalks—with TAs leading discussions and answering student questions—was at odds with our desire to promote student-centered/student-directed discourse.

Nevertheless, we stuck to our plan for three semesters while we constantly sought to make the crosstalk sessions more valuable and interesting for them. We diligently read their weekly reports and responded to them, we listened when they complained and praised them when they succeeded, and we always encouraged them to share with each other what they were learning both in a practical sense (getting along, planning activities) and a theoretical sense (making connections between their education course and classroom consulting). Nothing we did really worked, and we were not surprised to read in their final evaluations of the program that the crosstalks had largely been perceived, rightly or wrongly, as “a waste of time.”

This negative reaction was particularly dismaying to us because in virtually all of our other writing center activities, the response had been overwhelmingly positive. Students and faculty appreciated our goal of providing a space for learning which is different from the traditional, hierarchical structure of the university, a place and opportunity for concerned writers to discuss ideas openly within a supportive environment. Although we were, in fact, supervisors of their field experience, we did not want to be perceived as oppressive authority figures in the lives of students, another institutional body dispensing

rules, regulations, procedures, and “knowledge.” We believed, along with the staff of most writing centers, that students were as much responsible for the making of knowledge as we were, and we wanted to give them room to engage in that knowledge-making. The crosstalks fell far short of our goals in light of these principles, and we knew it. In our fourth semester of operation, spring of 1994, we finally tried an approach that solved what we had come to call our “crosstalk problem”: we began communicating with classroom consultants via electronic mail.

We noticed a couple of changes in the attitudes of the classroom consultants immediately: consultants expressed relief at not having to make the trek over to the writing center on a regular basis and excitement about using e-mail, even though some of them were as new to it as were we. From the start, then, the tone of our interaction with the students was positive. They did not have to make special arrangements in their work and academic schedules to accommodate us, and they had a chance to participate in a cutting-edge technology—electronic mail.

Most importantly, students found comfortable speaking voices in their e-mail communications in a way they had not in the crosstalks.² Jeanne Simpson, in a posting on the WCenter electronic forum, addresses this dynamic of e-mail correspondence when she writes:

Remember how hard it is in a group discussion to get your say in? Without interruptions? Most of us usually say much less than we want to. While the protocol of e-mail is that you don't go on TOO long, we still get to say more. And without the body signals that sometimes cut off our conversations as effectively as words. No impatient sighs or rolling eyes, no one frantically fidgeting with anticipation of rebuttal. (11)

Unlike the crosstalks, where despite our efforts to the contrary students looked to us as final authorities on every issue and problem, the e-mail conversations provided a “free space” where students felt free to gripe about, rejoice over, analyze, and question their classroom experiences without our really “being there” to stimulate, regulate, or evaluate their comments. As Lester Faigley notes when writing about his own experiences with students using electronic communication, “the teacher’s role as guarantor of authority—providing the ‘metanarrative’ that gives coherence—is disrupted when a class makes extensive use of electronic written discussions. Electronic discussions both invite participation and seriously limit a teacher’s ability to control the direction they take” (185). This sense of freedom, of uncontrolled (though not unfocused) interaction, was what we had hoped to create in the crosstalks, but it was not until we stepped back, until we set the conversation in motion and then faded from the picture, that we really became the supportive but non-authoritarian players we had always envisioned ourselves to be.

While we occasionally entered into the conversations in order to comment on ideas which interested us or to ask questions about strategies consultants were employing in classrooms, the student postings outweighed ours by about ten to one. We did not dictate topics or evaluate the conversation in any way. The only requirement for students was that they post a message at least once a week, and students frequently exceeded this requirement. It has been our experience that in e-mail, students give one another encouragement and praise, ask each other for

assistance on particular problems, suggest ways to improve interaction with students in the classroom, provide information, describe and reflect upon their experiences, refer to course readings and discussions, and share their nervousness about teaching and consulting situations more openly and frequently than they did in face-to-face conversation. In short, their e-mail conversations were remarkably lively and filled with a real exchange of practical ideas and theoretical debates. The following excerpts represent a sample of their postings:

Fear:

Well, this was the big day: my first teaching experience. It went so-so, I guess. I gave a small lecture on ambiguous language. . . . I found my brow and back were covered with sweat and I thought everyone was just staring at the perspiration dripping down into my eyes like Moses Malone after three quarters (large sweaty basketball player for those excluded from professional basketball discourse). What I was trying to say somehow disappeared when I began speaking. .
.(Jim)

Frustration:

This week was dull, dull, dull, dull. This week was one of those weeks where a professor lectures. He is probably setting up a huge writing project. I can smell it in the air like an old guy feels a storm coming in his corns. (Alexander)

I am becoming rather annoyed with my placement experience. [In my classroom, students are not] comfortable talking about their writing. The students do not share much input with one another when they peer edit. I think that they are not very comfortable with one another. Perhaps I will suggest that they play a few introductory ice-breaking games so that they are more comfortable as a class. My prof is usually open to any suggestions I offer. (Mary)

Respect and Authority:

One thing I would like to mention is how I am trying to be perceived by the class. Everyone is probably within two years of my age, and probably 50% are older than I. How am I to get any respect? I don't know, just a little tangential info for thought and response. (Brodie)

Brodie, don't worry so much about things like respect because over time you will earn it. I'm sure that as long as you stay positive and maintain your zealous good nature, it will all work out. (Craig)

Brodie, respect—that's a tough thing, sometimes I feel like I'm really close in age to my kids and can only imagine how you feel. I think the most important thing is to be honest, let them know who you are and what you're doing in the class. (Jim)

Issues/Dialect:

Hello Again Everyone. First things first. Essie and Marcie, I wanted to comment on your little discussion about what dialect should be allowed in the classroom. This is something I have thought about for a long time, it seems to come up in several of my classes. It would be great if everyone spoke like I did, this way I would never have to struggle to understand. I know this is a fantasy though. In my TE 301 class I work with three second graders every week, one is a little Afro-American girl. I know this girl is rather smart, but sometimes I just can't understand what she is saying to me. I feel stupid asking her to repeat herself. In no way do I think less of her. Actually I think a bit less of myself for not being able to understand her. (Brian)

Issues/Pronouns:

Another thing that disturbed me was the fact that the author used the word "he" to represent both sexes. To me, this is something that helps promote a gender stereotype. I would never use this term in my own paper, and I was compelled to tell the author that she might want to think about the use of the word. . . . However, in this particular instance, I decided that it might not be my place to say anything, no matter how

strongly I felt about the issue. This was a hard decision to make because I am usually offended when I come across the use of "he" anywhere to represent both male and female. (Jennie)

I sometimes wish we had a neutral gender like they do in German, but even that is imperfect because they usually use that article to talk about unmarried women. I have found that, for me, it is best to remember who one is talking about and use that gender, or if it is ambiguous, use the one people aren't expecting (translation: she). (Valerie)

I personally have no problem with using the word "he" in my writing—this is not to offend you, Jen. But I use it because I see it as being more convenient than always writing he and she. . . . But what really bothers me is the person who may sound politically correct in his reference to women, per se, but in reality has no real respect for them. Then it becomes a superficial thing. (Han)

These postings and a host of others like them reveal classroom consultants who are thoughtful, engaged, supportive, and outspoken. And while we anticipated some of their concerns, several issues, such as the rather lengthy discussion they had about dialects, took us by surprise. E-mail allowed them to set their own agenda and to pursue the pedagogical and academic issues most important to them.

An added attraction to the use of an electronic forum in our discussions with classroom consultants was their frequent use of metaphorical language to describe their experiences. Alexander, for instance, can smell a writing assignment "in the air like an old guy feels a storm coming in his corns," and Jim says that while teaching for the first time he perspired "like Moses Malone after three quarters." Such

descriptions were rarely—if ever—heard in our crosstalks or read in weekly reports. We contend that this play with language appears in e-mail not only because students have more time to reflect on what they wish to say before saying it, but also because there are no authorities (teachers) lurking over their written discourse with red pens. The lack of intervention from traditional authority figures opens up discussions and allows for greater exploration of ideas and more experimentation in the writing of academic prose.

Faigley, among others, has highlighted the postmodernity of electronic discourse, pointing out the deconstruction of dichotomies and hierarchies and the lack of closure which it produces, along with the decentering of the authority of the teacher, the text, and the subject. Our consultants seemed especially frustrated by the lack of closure in their e-mail conversations, as was evidenced by several of the evaluation comments we received from them at the end of the semester. Explaining that they did not have enough time “to respond in depth to each person” and suggesting that e-mail groups be smaller or that we mandate particular topics of discussion, students were frustrated at their inability to keep up with the fast-paced, ever-changing e-mail discussions. This uneasiness, however, may be one of the most beneficial elements of electronic discourse. As Faigley explains, in an electronic environment “classes do not come to a definitive end because each comment always raises the potential for another response. By sharing experiences of interpretation over a semester, most students come to acknowledge that

the terms in which we understand experience are not fixed but vary according to our personal histories and are always open to new possibilities for creating meaning" (184).

Such discourse allowed our classroom consultants to participate in a joint construction of knowledge that rested on no particular, identifiable authority. Students recognized that there were no definitive answers that could be found for the questions they raised about their consulting—among themselves or from their instructors. As one of our consultants put it in a final e-mail message, "Instead of getting the ol' experts' opinions, we get to work things out for ourselves." In our attempts as a writing center to provide a space for students to become the authors of their own educations, getting rid of "the ol' experts" was not such a bad idea.³

Giving writing center workers the title of consultant and using electronic mail are not very grandiose schemes for exerting a change in academic discourse, but they do suggest that writing center theory and practice can lead students to a better understanding of the choices offered to them by academic discourse and do so without adopting a politics of either accommodation or resistance. At their best, both the idea of consultancy and the classroom consultancy model advance a politics of respect for undergraduate writing consultants, student expression, and teacher expectations which builds on the idea that students eagerly take advantage of opportunities the university offers if they feel that their concerns and insights are important and meaningful. As students are encouraged to participate more fully in their own educations, as their

voices receive more attention in academic writing, and as writing centers continue to integrate themselves into the institutions of which they are a part, academic discourse will increasingly reflect the democratic ideals of society.

Notes

¹ The faculty were all volunteers and interested in the project, but a few were at a loss about how best to use the field placement students.

² At least two different studies have concluded that e-mail discussions result in participation from those who are reluctant to speak in face-to-face situations. See Dubrovsky, Kiesler, and Sethna; and Sproull and Kiesler.

³ Parts of this discussion on electronic mail were written collaboratively with Julie Galvin Bevins.

CHAPTER FIVE

Redefining Our Work: The Power of Conversation

Writing centers to a large extent remain sites whose primary purpose is to initiate students into the academic culture and the discourses it esteems. Most writing center workers perceive themselves as advocating for students' personal knowledge. They focus on helping students to enter the somewhat narrow door leading to the academic community and, once inside, to remain in the room for as long as they wish. In another way, however, writing centers work for the institution rather than the student. The forms for academic discourse are set by the academic community, and as long as these forms go unchallenged by writing centers, as they usually do, the hegemony of academic discourse patterns remain largely intact, and students either sink or swim depending on how well they have mastered those rules.

Many educators see no problem with this state of affairs and wonder why there is any need or desire to open the door wider, to admit those who have not learned the discursive practices of the community they wish to join. And if the task of writing centers is not to initiate students into the discourse and discursive practices of the privileged and

powerful, they ask, what is it? I have talked with many writing center workers who would not even think of questioning the goals and values inherent in academic discourse. In fact, most feel this way. They may raise objections to certain assignments and question the pedagogical soundness of certain teaching practices, but they would not dispute the overall goals or contributions of academic discourse. This is the sentiment which prevailed in the statements made by long-time writing center professionals in their posts to the WCenter discussion group. Similarly, the majority of articles published in The Writing Center Journal and The Writing Lab Newsletter address issues of consulting which have more to do with successful initiation than with questioning the merit or worthiness of the initiation process itself.

This scene of apparent accommodation to institutional expectations is made less tidy, however, by theorists who have uncovered the exclusionary nature of the academic community and the discourse it has developed.⁹ They contend that while academic discourse appears to be value-neutral, it is actually laden with ways of perceiving and talking that represent the concerns of the dominant culture—white, educated, middle to upper class, and often male—at the expense of less privileged groups. The teaching of this discourse and the use of its conventions as a prerequisite for entrance into the dominant culture seems inherently unfair to those who have not had equal access to the cultural lifestyles and educational opportunities where by it is acquired. It is impossible to deny the power and substance of this critique, and those involved in

contemporary institutions of learning need to examine seriously their response to the dilemma it poses.

Writing centers, because they have been so clearly established to act as support for the discursive practices of the institution, must be especially sensitive to the role they choose to play in the educational scene. To the question of whether they should attempt to act against the exclusionary discourse patterns of the academy, I think the answer is a resounding "yes." How this can be accomplished without doing a disservice to students who want nothing more than to be accepted into the academic community, or without alienating colleagues who support the status quo, or without losing the institutional funding on which we rely for our existence, or without sacrificing the quality of scholarship the current discourse supports yields no simple answer. As a first step, we might better articulate our mission, as Nancy Grimm does in a recent College Composition and Communication article, in terms of democratic goals. Grimm writes that writing centers should situate their work "within the democratic desire to understand and negotiate difference, to work within heterogeneity rather than to manage or eliminate it" ("Rearticulating 524). She is concerned that writing centers too often act to erase or ignore differences in our clients that are based on race, gender, and class instead of addressing—with them, ourselves and others—the ways institutions and the conventions of academic discourse work to exclude and control voices and views outside of the mainstream.

Articulating the goals of writing centers in terms of democratic principles points us beyond the politics of accommodation and resistance and allows us to see our mission in more expansive ways. Because our work is most often described as a politics of accommodation or a politics of resistance, we might do well to adopt a politics of respect which transcends this either/or dilemma and aligns us not with one camp or another but with democratic principles of inclusion. I would argue that as a theoretical construct a politics of respect accounts more accurately and more generatively not only for the work done in the MSU Writing Center but also for work done in most writing centers across the United States. This politics of respect directs our attention in multiple directions: to the accomplishments represented by academic as it is currently recognized; to those who rightfully question the conventions of academic discourse that are exclusionary; to those who prize the perceptions and values represented by other discourses; to those who willingly struggle to learn its conventions; and to those who help newcomers achieve fluency within it. Heterogeneity resides within the membership of the established academy as well as in those who wish to enter its doors.

In forging a stance in relationship to academic discourse, writing centers might also do well to remember the openings Foucault's analysis of language and discourse provides to us in the epigraph which sets the theme for this dissertation:

Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must

make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. (History 100-101)

Any system of education is a political way of maintaining or modifying the appropriation of discourses, along with the knowledges and powers which they carry. ("Order" 64)

Because writing centers are to a large extent situated at a midpoint between those who hold power and those who are separated from it, and because our job entails both the teaching and critiquing of discourse, we are afforded a unique position within the academy from which we can effect significant change.

The change to a more inclusive, egalitarian, and democratic form of academic discourse depends, at least in part, on the culture created within writing centers and on the relationships and discursive practices that they generate. The types of inter-personal and inter-institutional conversations initiated by writing centers will change the context for academic writing and, by so doing, change the expectations for what it may include. When Stephen North wrote that writing centers cannot change the rhetorical context within which students write, he was saying that consultants must help the client negotiate the assignment as conceived by the instructor—that the rhetorical context cannot be altered because it has been predetermined by the instructor. Marilyn Cooper, on the other hand, argues that good consultants "cannot, as Stephen North advises them to

do, simply help students operate within the existing context without trying to change it" (103). Furthermore, she believes that the rhetorical context is susceptible to change by consulting practices which help clients find and take subject positions available to them but which are not readily apparent in the assignment. Both of these positions seem correct because North and Cooper use the word "context" differently in their respective essays. North is correct to say that consultants cannot directly change the rhetorical context as imposed by the instructor, and this is true even if consultants act to open up assignments by alerting clients to the choices embedded within them because they are still teaching clients how to "operate within the existing context," albeit in more meaningful ways. But North is articulating a very narrow definition of context. Cooper, in contrast, is using "context" in a more expansive way which focuses not on the assignment as much as on the client's relationship to the assignment. When clients are led to understand that they have choices in how they respond to the assignment (and to the context as put forth by the instructor), the context for their writing clearly expands.

By creating and nurturing a space and context for students to talk about their writing, writing centers help students understand and negotiate an expanded and more meaningful relationship to academic discourse. As Kenosha talked about her understanding of The Awakening, for instance, she had the opportunity to explore how her life contributed to her assessment of Edna's failed attempt at gaining independence from the confines of society. And when Shannon's research

on the 1950s leads her to talk with Colleen about her changing relationship with her parents, her conception of academic discourse took on new and more significant meaning. In fact, the analysis of the consulting sessions in Chapter Three presents a revealing picture of student writers who, through conversation with a writing center consultant, find ways to navigate among the multiple subject positions and identities that they have available to them.

The ability of the consultant to assist in this process of renegotiation and identity derives in large part from the culture of the writing center itself, which encourages talk about and engagement with various types of academic discourse at multiple levels. While writing center consultants certainly bring with them some knowledge about how to write for the academy, and while they often receive training in strategies which they can use when talking with clients about writing, much of their expertise comes from their immersion in an environment whose constant focus is the relationship between writing and the academy. Their ability to talk knowingly about writing comes by virtue of their being in a place that encourages critical reflection of discourse practices through attention to multiple voices, multiple writing tasks, multiple writing occasions, and through repeated self-study. Student consultants who engage in talk about writing, who struggle to make sense of language about different disciplines and subject matter, and who are asked to reflect on their own practice in writings done for a newsletter, a web page, an electronic mail discussion forum, and conference proposals, will begin to ask important

questions of themselves and the academy; they will begin to have to account for difference in language practices; and they will find ways to connect writing with their personal goals and experiences.

Consultant knowledge is conveyed to clients who often come to the writing center with a limited sense of academic writing, who may just ask to have their grammar checked, or who may want to know how to write an introduction. But through conversation with writing consultants who are wrestling with the questions of multiple discourses and engaged in writing and talking about writing for multiple audiences and purposes, they come to have a sense that their own relationship to language and their writing task may change, that they may actively choose different relationships to academic discourse. The important work of the writing center is the talk that goes on there, not just between clients and consultants, but between consultant and consultant—undergraduate and graduate—and between faculty and consultants. This talk enables consultants to ask the kinds of informed questions of clients that they do, and it gives them ways to begin to articulate the disciplinary knowledge they have. Working in the writing center is akin to taking a class for ten to fifteen hours a week with a required practicum as an essential part of it. The ways in which consultants are able to articulate various approaches to academic discourses—even to articulate the existence of and options within academic discourses—are transforming them and their conversations with clients. And by asking certain questions of clients, consultants influence the questions those clients come to ask of

themselves. Students who work with writing center consultants deepen their understanding of writing in ways that move them beyond the notion that all writing is the same to more complicated attitudes which are also more authentic, more tested in real writing and talking and listening practices.

This dissertation serves as an example of the way writing center conversation shapes and begets academic discourse. I got to know Aimee, Colleen, and John as we read and discussed writing center articles; my conversations with Aimee and Colleen led them to design a presentation on the differences they saw between writing for high school and writing for college; and this led to my asking them to work with me on my research for this dissertation. John wrote an article about his involvement in my research for the writing center newsletter. Concurrently, my conversations with Professor Stock and others then working in the writing center led me to write an article on the idea of consultancy for The Writing Center Journal and to present my findings at writing center conferences; Professor Thomas and I conducted research into the theoretical orientations of undergraduate writing consultants which we presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication. Meanwhile, Julie Bevins and I were conducting, without great success, face-to-face conversations with English education students about their classroom consulting experiences. When these interns voiced their concerns about these sessions, we switched to using the electronic mail discussions which I presented in Chapter Four and which informed the questions I

consequently asked during my interviews with clients, consultants, and professors. Drafts of this dissertation have been discussed by faculty and graduate students now working in the writing center, and Professor Julier contributed to some of the ideas presented in this last chapter. My point in talking about the creation of this dissertation is to demonstrate as clearly as possible how writing center conversations promote a climate and culture that engender critical reflection on academic discourse.¹

So far I have been talking about how writing centers act internally to question and modify student understanding of and response to academic discourse. Of equal importance are the ways writing centers can broaden the context for their work by extending their boundaries to include the larger academic community. Because of our history as sites of remediation and as adjunct service providers to English departments, writing centers need to establish themselves as *bona fide* sites of original and generative intellectual work, to become actual centers for the study of writing. Redefining ourselves as centers rather than labs, and as consultants rather than tutors, are two important first steps we can take in this project. More importantly, we can reposition ourselves within the university community by becoming reflective practitioners who not only refine the work we do through reflection but who also conduct research into our practice which is pedagogically useful to our colleagues. We are uniquely situated, for instance, to examine and understand different discursive practices connected with academic work and to assess which of these practices encourage rather than retard the development of literacy

in students. We can certainly explore the idea of student motivation in learning how to write, and we can make contributions to theories of language which explain cognitive development in terms of social interactions.

Producing useful scholarship is one way writing centers might better position themselves in relation to the larger academic community. Another way for writing centers to influence and change restrictive conceptions of academic discourse within the institutions which support them is to “decenter” their work, to initiate and engage in conversations which extend beyond the walls which physically mark their boundaries. I talked at length in the last chapter about one way MSU’s writing center has extended its borders by establishing electronic discussion groups which link its work with ATL writing courses and English education internships. This center has, however, developed several other projects which have already changed the context of academic writing and will continue to do so. These projects are worth describing because they represent a progressive and enlightened conception of the work writing centers can achieve when they define their task broadly. Working through a practice named Consultative Teaching, the MSU Writing Center, under the direction of Professor Stock with assistance from Professors Thomas and Julier, has instituted this theoretically sound structure:

The Faculty Writing Consultancy in which MSU faculty from across disciplinary boundaries engage in conversations which support their own writing and the integration of writing instruction into the courses they teach

The Teacher Writing Consultancy in which teachers of all educational levels (K–16+) engage in the development of language arts curricula and teaching strategies

The Writing Centers Consultancy in which writing professionals from around the state meet to discuss their approaches to writing center work and research, coordinate presentations on writing center work at local, state, and regional conferences, and work to assist in the establishment of writing centers in secondary schools

The Service-Learning Writing Consultancy in which ATL faculty and students, Undergraduate Writing Consultants, and Graduate Writing Consultants have helped in the development of written material used by service organizations in Michigan

The Technology Consultancy which provides assistance to students and faculty who wish to use the Internet to extend classroom discussions, conduct research, and publish student work as part of a web-based course

The Graduate Student Writing Consultancy which brings together graduate students in a wide range of disciplines to form writing groups to support their research and professional writing projects.²

What I hope to contribute to the developing discussion and the discourse under discussion is that the day-to-day conversation between and among consultants, clients, and faculty in person, online, and in print invites—as surely as this theoretically sound infrastructure—transformative conversations about the aims and expectations of academic discourse, and in so doing, intentionally or not, they change that discourse. In the interactions I observed, they did so usefully and generatively, in no small measure because they did so respectfully.

Notes

- ¹ In writing to me about the impact the interviews and conversations I engaged in have had on MSU's writing center, Professor Julier reports that the "conversation continues":

There are multiple ways in which what you noticed two years ago continues to go on, only more so, and I wish you had the opportunity to even briefly see that, because I think it might help you better understand the significance of those interviews you had with clients and consultants and faculty. Those conversations have become more regular, a bit more frequent, and one might even say a bit more institutionalized. Now, all students in 491 interview experienced UWCs [undergraduate writing consultants]; they observe and then talk with experienced UWCs. The UWCs say that those conversations are often among the most useful they have. They like them. The UWCForum is a more lively and ongoing venue for conversation about consulting issues.

- ² See Stock for a fuller description of these programs.

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