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DEMOCRATIC RELATIONSHIPS:  
AN INSTITUTIONAL WAY OF LIFE WITH/IN THE WRITING CENTER

by

Katie Hupp Stahlnecker

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska  
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DEMOCRATIC RELATIONSHIPS:  
AN INSTITUTIONAL WAY OF LIFE WITH/IN THE WRITING CENTER

Katie Hupp Stahlnecker, Ph. D.

University of Nebraska, 2007

Adviser: Chris W. Gallagher

In this dissertation, I build upon the notion that for writing centers to thrive in the twenty-first century, they must reposition themselves not as marginal but as central to alliance building within the institution (Brannon and North). I tell the story of establishing one writing center's mission that thrives on building democratic relationships within the institution and dissolving traditional academic hierarchies. At the core of our mission is the dialogical exchange that allows for student writers to be heard. The true work of establishing and preserving the integrity of the open forum we have created for student writers involves making democracy an institutional way of life not only within consultations but also with each other as writing center professionals, with the faculty, and with administration.

The main goal of this dissertation is to help my fellow colleagues in writing centers and composition conceive of the various forces within an institution not as potential problems to avoid, but as institutional relationships to develop and foster. Relying throughout on Dewey's notion of democracy, I share representative anecdotes from our writing center to illustrate the process of relationship building and provide conceptual tools to put them into a useful context for readers: dialogue (Freire); rhetorical

listening (Ratcliffe); critical collegueship (Lord); institutional critique (Porter et al); and critical administration (Lee; Shor and Freire). Throughout, I argue for the writing center's capacity to democratize various forms of institutional communication and effect meaningful change. This project also answers calls from Elizabeth Boquet and Nancy Maloney Grimm to move writing center scholarship from the familiar declaration of independence brand of manifestos to work that conveys the intellectual and pedagogical value of writing centers. Overall, this dissertation offers for writing center directors and other educators interested in promoting democracy a form of institutional literacy (Gallagher) that provides an alternate way to read the role of the writing center within the institution.

To Mary Voight (1944-2006)  
Your voice lives on.

## Acknowledgements

“I do not at all understand the mystery of grace—only that it meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us.”

*Anne Lamott*

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## INTRODUCTION

### Building Relationships

“In the aftermath of action, we try to find the opportunity to reflect back on the memories, experiences, and interpretations that caused us to make what felt like instinctual responses.”

*Stephen D. Brookfield*

“What just happened?” I said to myself repeatedly as I embarked upon the hour long drive back to my campus after my first paid speaking engagement. I was invited by a small liberal arts college in a nearby community to address a group of thirty faculty members from across the curriculum to share my knowledge of writing center theory and pedagogy as it relates to designing a new writing center. In response to an email inquiry regarding the purpose of my visit, their contact person (a chemistry professor) replied as follows: “In terms of the content of your presentation, our main goal is to educate (or at least begin to educate) ourselves about Writing Centers in general and to build support for creating a WC at our college in the near future, so I’ll rely on your experience and expertise to give us the information you think is most relevant at this stage in the process.”

At the time, I had been a writing center consultant for fourteen years and the designer/coordinator of a new multi-campus writing center for three years. So I had experience, and from that I had plenty to say. No question about that. But *expertise*? Expertise at the rate of \$300 an hour? Gulp. Having never been paid to offer my opinion (professional or otherwise), I felt a tremendous pressure to produce.

So for the next many weeks, I diligently prepared for the meeting, meticulously considering how best to use my brief forty-five minute block of time (to be followed by a



Q & A session). My audience consisted of faculty members from a wide variety of disciplines (including English) who were involved in a campus-wide initiative to incorporate writing across the curriculum. They hoped to support this effort with the creation of a writing center although, as I soon learned, they didn't exactly know how or even why.

I ultimately decided that my role was to introduce them in this formative stage of their thinking to the idea of a writing center. For me, this meant three things: providing a context for this work by sharing the history of the writing center, introducing the seminal scholarship in the field, and, most importantly, emphasizing the importance of having a theoretical foundation (illustrating our democratic mission in great detail as an example). I wanted them to know where we come from, where we stand, and where we are headed as a field. And I wanted them to consider this context as they determined their place within it. What they wanted, although they couldn't articulate it either before or during our meeting, was something altogether different.

"It helps to create a mission for your writing center that informs all other decisions you make when designing and running it," I mentioned.

"Yeah, mission, uh huh, philosophy, great," they said, practically in unison, "but how about the room? Do we need our own special room?"

"Even this very decision—*where* to do the work of a writing center—would be informed by that overall mission," I said. "The space that you have and the furniture that inhabits it speak volumes about the sort of work that goes on there."

"Can't we just pull up a table in the learning center?" asked one gentleman.

“Certainly, you could,” I replied, “but you’d want to consider what sort of implications that would have.”

“How could where you sit down with the student to do the work really make a difference? It’s what you say to the student that matters,” interjected a professor who was clearly unimpressed by my reasoning.

“*Of course*, the content of the consultation is the most important thing of all. My point exactly. It’s just that we must carefully consider all else to preserve the integrity of that exchange,” I answered. “A miscellaneous table in the corner of the learning center could send a message that we are just another remedial service for struggling students. At our writing centers at Metro, we resist this association so that all writers (faculty included) feel welcome in the writing center. For us, it’s important to eliminate anything that reinforces the master/apprentice model of education that we are trying to avoid.”

“How does that work when faculty members use the service? Can they just drop off their work and come back later for your written feedback?” asked another professor in the crowd, drastically changing the subject back to something tangible, thus conceivable in that moment. And so the conversation proceeded, being pulled from the theoretical to the practical and back again. The folks present weren’t mean or hostile. They just couldn’t fathom how it all fit together. The limited time frame definitely was not in our favor, but my explanations, illustrations, and handouts didn’t seem to register either. For the most part, they looked at me through it all as if I had lobsters crawling out of my ears. And before I knew it, the session was over, and they were all scurrying back to their daily obligations.

In spite of the fact that I drove the first half hour back to work beating myself up for giving such a rotten, worthless presentation, the impetus for this project came right there on Highway 275. “What was I thinking?” I began. “Why couldn’t I articulate myself better?”; “Why didn’t I just bring our floor plan, our supply needs, and a bulleted list of what we will and will not do for writers?”; “Why did I think I knew what they needed to hear?”; and the grand daddy of all questions plaguing me: “Why, oh why, did they pay me 300 bucks for *that?*” Initially, I felt embarrassed, guilty, depressed.

Trying to discern where I went wrong, I began to replay in my mind the many conversations I had with my writing center colleagues at Metro the past several weeks about what we have come to believe matters most when starting a writing center. Through the various stories and memories of our first few years at this institution, we recalled what had worked well and what had not. And I asked the consultants what advice they would give to someone designing a new writing center. From these discussions, one central goal emerged—know who you are and what you want to be. We had been pulled ourselves in many and sometimes conflicting directions as we set out to establish our writing center. In the process, we learned how important it is to be on board with a shared philosophy, which acts as a filter, of sorts, through which all planning and decisions should pass. Without such a mission, a new writing center, in particular, could easily get sucked into the institutional abyss of being all things for all people and having no identity of its own.

The folks at this other college were poised to fall into just such a trap given that no one had a clear picture of what a writing center should be. They just knew that their students would be writing more than ever with the WAC initiative, and they hoped the

writing center could help to ease the transition for faculty members unfamiliar with the teaching of writing. Without a sense of direction for their writing center, I reasoned, this could be disastrous. Their writing center would inevitably be at the mercy of the initiative, which would likely produce problematic demands and expectations. The writing center would be expected to come to the rescue of both students and teachers who have little writing experience and produce an easy “fix.” Very little learning would occur along the way.

So, no, I convinced myself as I neared the turn off for my campus. No. I am not crazy. And I did not fail them. They asked for the information that I think is “most relevant at this stage in the process,” and this is definitely it. The problem, I finally decided, was that I barely even scratched the surface of this issue in those 60 minutes we had together (which included 20 minutes of serving ourselves lunch from the cafeteria and reassembling to eat in the meeting room). How could I possibly have done justice to all that I felt needed to be covered in such a small, distracted time frame? And how could I feel bad that, in a matter of minutes, they hadn’t the adequate chance to wrap their heads around what to most of them were unfamiliar concepts? I felt relieved when it finally occurred to me that this isn’t the stuff of a casual lunch chat. In fact, it’s a whole new way of thinking about institutional dynamics. “This is a book,” I thought to myself. And thus the idea for this dissertation was born.

When I first entered my doctoral program, I spent most of my scholarly time defending and bragging about writing centers, being a spokesperson for what I knew firsthand. Then, a few years later for a graduate seminar, I conducted an analysis of the past five years of the *Writing Center Journal*, which forever changed my understanding

of the role of scholarship and urged me to try to take a new tone in my own. A good share of writing centers that exist today cropped up in the 1970s as an answer to the crisis created by new open admissions policies. Students, in large numbers, were underprepared for the rigors of college, and the writing center's role was to right the wrongs, cure the ills, and fix the problems that plagued student writing.

Twenty-five years later, as my study revealed, writing center scholars were still smarting from the blow. They had grown weary of being expected to clean up student writing and resentful of the perception this work had created for the field as “marginal.” Many in the institution had come to depend upon the writing center. However, they also had come to universally treat it as lesser than and/or supplemental to the real work of the academy—classroom teaching. This sentiment is evident within the many problematic metaphors that had surfaced to name writing center work—fix-it shop, proofreading service, lab, clinic, detention hall, even prison (Carino; Harris and Fisher).

By the time of my study, writing center scholars were, understandably, peeved. They had come to understand the intrinsic value of the one-to-one exchange and the relative uselessness of correcting writing *for* students (even more annoyingly for *professors*). Thus, they wanted to be recognized as something more than helper-girls and -boys down the hall, realizing how such an image undermines if not squelches the writer's voice and potential for meaningful growth. I could see that, as a result, the conversation in the field had a certain overarching defensiveness about it. Scrutinizing the national writing center conversation in this way helped me to hear that with my pleas to appreciate the writing center, I was just part of the chorus of disgruntled writing center professionals, trying to fight for what we know is right. Although I have memorized the

words to all of the songs, this journal project helped me to realize that they're beginning to sound like the latest pop numbers that D.J.s play so frequently that you can no longer bear to hear them.

At about the same time, a few prominent writing center voices spoke out about the need to write new, more meaningful and sustainable songs. In her brief history of the writing center, Elizabeth Boquet asks this key question: "What is being left out of our discussions on teaching writing by our failure to account for the work of the writing center in a critically intellectual manner?" ("Our Little Secret" 479). That same year, Nancy Maloney Grimm's book came out, in which she makes the following assertion: "Students tell stories everyday in writing centers. Taken together, these stories can provide all of us in higher education with an understanding of the ways we might make literacy education more socially responsible and more open to the needs and desires of the real people who pay and work for an education" (120). Then, Lil Brannon and Steve North, when asked to reflect upon the viability of writing centers in the twenty-first century, had this to say: "For writing centers to continue to be en(viable), those who teach and learn there must exploit the uses of the margins....They must find ways to build alliances within the university, while continuing to open its doors to those who have traditionally been excluded from the university life" (12).

The story I have to tell here about the genesis of writing centers at one institution marks my effort to move writing center scholarship in these important directions. Just as (perhaps *because*) my local colleagues need to move beyond the material concerns, our national conversation needs to represent more fully and richly the complexities and possibilities of this work. For me, this takes the shape of a series of narratives that

illustrate the making of a democratic mission for our writing center. At the core of this mission is the dialogical exchange that opens doors for students to tell us their stories. For this approach to be effective, however, we must be consistent in our dealings with every other institutional entity that comes in contact with the writing center. Thus, for this mission to inform all decisions and actions associated with our work, institutional relationship building becomes its foundation.

When creating a democratic space is the aim, these alliances shift the locus of our work from justifying the practical to engaging it and putting it into conversation with the theoretical. Our field needs neither another manifesto that seeks to validate *what* this work entails nor a guidebook that tells *how* to do it. Instead, it needs incentive to reflect upon *why* our responsibility to writers should determine the course of our actions. The main goal of this dissertation, then, is to help my fellow colleagues in writing centers and composition conceive of the various forces within an institution not as potential problems to avoid, but as institutional relationships to develop and foster, all in the name of protecting and preserving the integrity of the work that we do with writers.

I provide representative anecdotes throughout to illustrate what it looks like at one institution to make this shift in the institutional dynamic. I chose this approach because stories have always been a valuable learning tool for me. With friends and family, I love to tell and listen to stories and then analyze their implications and characters. In returning to graduate school after teaching for ten years and in writing this dissertation, telling and scrutinizing my own teaching stories has been at the core of my education. As Joy Ritchie and Dave Wilson articulate it, “narrative can become the means by which teachers can resist and revise the prescribed narratives and roles of their personal and

professional lives” (14-15). For me, this project, especially, has been about learning to name and theorize my experience as a writing center coordinator, consultant, and teacher. Even more importantly, acquiring language to describe, analyze, and challenge the intuitive impulses that formerly shaped my pedagogical convictions and actions has helped me to begin using experience as a “critical and revisionary tool” (Ritchie and Wilson 15).

I share stories here, mostly from my writing center experience, which are emblematic of what I have learned and continue to learn along the way about the institutional positioning of a writing center and a writing center coordinator. These select narratives, then, chronicle both my coming of age as an educator and writing center professional and the development of a new kind of institutional presence for writing centers. The stories serve to provide for readers a window into the democratic relationships that I have learned to create and sustain with/in the writing center. Inevitably, the full complexity of a character or institutional dynamic is rarely captured in narrative moments, and I have struggled with that reality as I have worked to do justice to the stories I share in the following pages. But it is my hope that the narratives provide a way to read the moments that they represent not so much as complete pictures but as snapshots of sites for institutional change.

I share these stories and reflect upon them as a means of putting critical pressure upon the pedagogical and institutional work that is being done (or not) and, more importantly, that could be done in those representative moments by me and by the other participants. Rather than criticizing a dean, an instructor, or a pedagogical choice, for instance, I aim to make visible some points of conflict that exist on these institutional



levels to prompt educators interested in promoting democratic ideals to imagine ways of recreating their similar dynamics. “To be institutionally literate,” argues Chris Gallagher, “is to be able to read institutional discourses (and their resultant arrangements and structures) so as to speak and write back to them, thereby participating in their revision” (79). The anecdotes that follow collectively embody our writing center’s effort at Metro to begin rewriting the traditional script of hierarchies within the academic setting.

After the first chapter, which provides a foundation for the others, the remaining four chapters each take up a different institutional constituency and explain its potential as a relationship to be shaped through the dialogic, democratic approach used with writers in the writing center. To contextualize the many scenarios provided—to name the experience—I provide a conceptual tool and the necessary components for its success in each chapter. To protect the identities of the students, faculty, and administrators involved, names and other key details have been greatly modified.

Chapter One defines what I mean by democracy, borrowing from John Dewey’s notions of shared communication and freedom within a group. It then makes a case for practicing humility, listening, and making good decisions as the main components that need to be in place for a democratic space within an institution to thrive.

Chapter Two establishes the relationship at the center of it all—that of consultants and students. Through students’ stories, this chapter depicts our writing center’s commitment to Freire’s notion that dialogue allows participants to name the world for themselves. For this to be achieved, we must demonstrate faith and trust in and respect for our students.

Chapter Three, then, addresses the need to dissolve the master/apprentice model first and foremost in the minds of the consultants, who need to be fully on board in order to allow student writers to actively participate in the dialogue. This is accomplished through engaging in critical collegueship, and it entails living what you espouse, promoting reciprocity, and embracing the productive disequilibrium that ensues.

Chapter Four moves to an analysis of the relationship between consultants and teachers. It introduces the unique collegueship afforded by the individualized setting of the writing center dynamic, which we foster in the form of electronic communication with teacher in connection with their students' writing center consultations. This chapter promotes institutional critique. And it involves understanding the power dynamics involved, sharing inquiry and reflection, and becoming agents for change.

Chapter Five attends to a less easily defined relationship that the director needs to cultivate—that between herself as a leader and the institution at large. This chapter focuses particularly on how to be a critical administrator whose role is to protect the mission even when making what feels like undemocratic decisions. This approach to leadership relies upon asserting authority appropriately and negotiating without selling the writing center's soul. Within all of these relationships, we work to step outside of ourselves, our assumptions, and our intentions, pure as they may be, and strive to provide the democratic space needed for student writers to thrive within our walls and beyond.

## CHAPTER ONE

### **Making Democracy an Institutional Way Of Life**

“Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.”

*Paulo Freire*

My ongoing transformation from advancing good but oppressive intentions to imagining the possibilities of democracy in the writing center began, tragically, at the expense of Natasha, an African American student with whom I worked in the first semester of my teaching career.

“How’s it going today, Natasha?” I said one morning as she entered the writing center to satisfy her weekly obligation “to go to the writing center once a week for the remainder of the term.” Professor’s orders.

“Fine,” she mumbled, avoiding eye contact and carelessly tossing her paper on the table in front of us.

“Great,” I replied, making no effort to unpack or address the nonverbal message, which spoke volumes more than her monosyllabic response. “Let’s get to work.”

In that writing center, our director expected tutors to do for the student whatever the professor wanted. This particular professor consulted with our director and the two of them singled me out to serve Natasha’s sentence with her. Shortly thereafter, the professor made his way to the writing center one day with the offending Natasha, introduced her to me, and stood over the two of us while she signed up for an hour-long appointment every Wednesday morning for the rest of the semester.

“I want you to make sure Natasha’s writing is error free before she hands it in each week,” he said to me as if she weren’t standing right there. “Otherwise,” he paused, “she *will* fail my course.”

At this point, the director popped out of his office to chime in and assure the professor. “Don’t worry, Dr. Roberts, Katie will take care of her,” and the two of them shook hands as if consummating a business deal. The most troubling aspect of this scenario, in retrospect, isn’t so much the professor’s directives but the fact that we allowed for them.

In retrospect, I’d like to say I staged a rebellion right there by refusing to participate in this oppressive, unethical, and inhumane exchange. But at the time, I honestly didn’t know better. I had no teaching experience under my belt and no real expertise to claim. Plus, like so many other new teachers two decades ago, I had become accustomed to the master/apprentice model to teaching that permeated the academy. In fact, it was all I knew. So I did as I was told and offered the sort of intense one-on-one tutorials that Natasha’s professor requested—essentially, meticulous line-by-line editing/proofreading sessions to remove errors and non-Standard English in order to make her prose more readable for him.

Years later, I learned to recognize and even celebrate the fact that “our students have a practical knowledge of literacy and a wide range of the uses of language that extends far beyond the discourse communities of schooling and academia” (Trimbur 176). Under pressure to fulfill the professor’s weekly directives in thirty minute increments, however, I never thought to treat these moments as rich opportunities to value and draw from Natsha’s various literacies. Instead, I followed the director’s lead in

assuming that academic literacy is the only brand that counts. Only years later did I realize that this sort of assistance, while valuable *maybe* from the perspective of audience awareness, is very limited and sometimes even damaging to the student in terms of establishing voice and developing confidence and agency as a writer.

Natasha survived the class and the tutorials, but shortly thereafter, her (white male) professor casually told me in passing one day that she had dropped out of college and gone back to work in “some factory.” According to him, this was “for the best because she simply couldn’t hack it here.” I bristled at his nonchalance and felt sorry for her and for any other students who would wander into this institutional setting, which, for the first time, I perceived as elitist and inhumane. How can this be the best option for Natasha? Shouldn’t it be our job to help students figure out how “to hack it”? Intuitively, I found the professor’s basic rendering of the “system” at work extremely troubling, but in that moment I was far from being able to understand and articulate the institutional counterargument that I will put forward in this dissertation. I was still smarting from the blow and trying to determine what hurt worse—contemplating Natasha’s fate or admitting my contribution to it.

## **DISSOLVING HIERARCHIES**

Ten years later, I entered my doctoral program with the ghosts of professors like Dr. Roberts and students like Natasha lingering in the shadows. I had hopes of one day using this degree to land a writing center director job, and I wanted to right some of the wrongs that I had come to know and resent from my early days in the writing center. Thus, I read and studied and wrote with these aspirations in mind, and it was Lisa

Delpit's *Other People's Children* that finally opened the floodgates of my mind. Her depiction of the many "issues of power" at play in the academy and the varying levels of awareness depending upon the position within it was eye-opening to say the least. And it launched for me the period of reflection and naming that shaped my current understanding of a democratic writing center.

I've come to know that a democracy must consist of two key elements: shared power and a healthy sense of community. As Dewey puts it: "A society which makes provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms and which secures flexible readjustment of its institutions through interaction of the different forms of associated life is in so far democratic" (99). One that denies the participatory element, Dewey would categorize "an undesirable society...one which internally and externally sets up barriers to free intercourse and communication of experience" (99). As educators, we want the student "to note and recall and judge those things which make him an effective competent member of the group in which he is associated with others," says Dewey. "Otherwise we might as well set the [student] to observing carefully cracks on the wall and set him to memorizing meaningless lists of words in an unknown tongue—which is about what we do in fact when we give way to the doctrine of formal education" (67). The traditional hierarchies in place within the academy privilege the sort of canonical, principled body of knowledge that leaves little room for students to see themselves as and become valued members of the intellectual group.

Thus, much of what students could contribute to the learning process for themselves and others is lost in such an authoritarian system. As Dewey reminds us, "A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living,

of conjoint communicated experience” (87). Traditional power structures are dissolved by democracy to the extent that we involve our students and ourselves in collaborative conversation that leads to productive and meaningful relationships. What follows in this dissertation is a narrative account of how my own process of coming to terms with the virtues of democracy within the educational setting parallels that of being true to those ideals once they are in place. In other words, both understanding and living democracy as an institutional way of life rely upon practicing humility, learning to listen, and making good decisions.

### **PRACTICING HUMILITY**

During my first few years in the writing center, I had virtually no concept of how it was perceived or positioned within the institution. In fact, it wasn't until I enrolled in a graduate class at the university that housed our writing center (several years before I began my doctoral program) that I even had occasion to step outside of the moment enough to see the big picture. I discovered writing center scholarship, and it quickly became clear to me that under the influence of traditional institutional hierarchies, many in the academy (whether their institution already has a writing center or not) are conditioned to see (and actually shape) the purpose of a writing center according to how it serves—or could serve—them.

Even within the English department, I discovered, certain unsound demands are being placed upon the writing center. As content experts, some English faculty members have come to rely on the writing center to do “the dirty work” of teaching grammar and to fill in the gaps in the curriculum. They often require their students to visit the writing

center before turning in written work. And they freely volunteer the writing center to play various roles in the department: supplement to developmental writing program, starting place for new TAs, and dumping ground for faculty who need a few extra hours to fulfill their annual loads. In all of these manifestations, the writing center is imagined by faculty and administrators as somehow *less than* the real work and teaching of the department. This sort of “misunderstanding” both within and beyond the English department, says Stephen M. North, “is something one expects—and almost gets used to—in the writing center business” (433).

Perhaps, in part, because I certainly did not consider my writing center work any less important or worthwhile than my classroom teaching, I didn’t recognize this misunderstanding on my own before I read North’s seminal piece. The more scholarship I read, though, the more I learned about not only the field but also my own work within it. The various problematic metaphors that have been created by those on the outside to describe the work that they *hope* we will do in service to them spoke volumes to me when I first learned of them. “We *are* kind of like a proofreading service,” I thought to myself. “Students *do* come here to be punished sometimes. And diagnosed too.” I remember thinking “guilty as charged.” How could our writing center ever be anything *but* a sort of one-stop fix-it shop given that it is, in truth, what we have become? With our “please the professor” philosophy, I began to admit, we blatantly gave those outside of the writing center permission to shape us according to their—rather than the writers’—needs.

Some writing center directors, perhaps because it seems noble, try to make the writing center be all things for all people as they work to fulfill these externally imposed



expectations. I imagine this was the case at my writing center. Because I had been a willing participant, though, I had to come to terms with the fact that this reasoning does little more than perpetuate the problem by promoting obedience and deference rather than collegiality. Elasticity from a new program such as a writing center, on the face of it, may seem desirable and easy, but, as it had been for our writing center, it is bound to be problematic since it recreates the academy's power structure (administrators over faculty over writing center directors over tutors over student writers). I could begin to see that instead of seizing the opportunity for potentially rich relationships—all parties working toward a common goal of writers' success—the “we're here to serve” attitude subordinated (in effect, silenced) the two parties doing the very work—consultants and writers. In fact, it but all erased both the student writers and learning from the equation.

The more I considered all of this, the more devastated I became. In my heart of hearts, I thought I had been doing good work with these students the past few years. Yes, I found such power plays as I witnessed with Natasha unsettling. But, in the day-to-day, I was proud of how much more quickly and efficiently I could diagnose the problem in student writing than when I first joined the writing center staff. I was getting good at this! So it was quite a blow to have to confess to myself that I was, instead, perpetuating the problem—*from the inside*. All of North's talk about producing good writers rather than good writing became clear to me at this point. I had been helping students to crank out good (well, error free) writing. And, for some, I had evidence that my time spent working on a paper with a student produced a better grade for the paper. But, when I really stopped to consider it, I couldn't construct a case for having produced better

writers along the way. If anything, I was just producing a better editor (me). It was suddenly obvious how one-sided and unproductive was this dynamic.

Part of the problem at the time was that I had never considered, at least not critically, *my place* in the academy. From my own academic history, the role of the teacher seemed obvious. As an undergraduate and Master's student, I played my designated part in an all-too-familiar tale of apprenticeship by all-too-passively gathering (and regurgitating on demand) the knowledge of the masters at the head of the classroom. Thus, it's no great surprise that when I found myself on the other side of the podium as a 23-year-old adjunct instructor, I automatically assumed the role of teacher and tutor that I had come to expect—authority as “One-Who-Knows.” I didn't feel particularly worthy or prepared to fill that role. In fact, I was terrified. As a green new hire on a semester-by-semester adjunct contract, however, I had neither the time nor the confidence for self-reflection. I didn't even know there was a need for it. So I looked to the masters, as I saw them, and assumed a firm but fair hand was expected of me. It felt very much like a staged performance. At the time, though, I actually welcomed the distance it created between me and my audience lest they get too close and discover how very little I really knew about teaching and tutoring English. As you can see through my many tutorials with Natasha for *her professor* rather than for *her* and her growth as a writer and a person, this construction of roles led to a sterile, albeit superficially safe, environment, which played out in unproductive, even destructive ways.

At the time, I took refuge in my perceived authority in the same way that most students rely upon the imposed order. What I hadn't yet come to embrace, or even understand, is that “education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student

contradiction by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers *and* students” (Freire 72). Had I the humility to admit my necessarily limited contribution to the student’s learning process, I may have known that the students and I were at once both teachers and learners. At that point, though, I was not cognizant of the contradiction. Natasha was the student in need of tidy prose to satisfy her professor, and I had the key to the knowledge that eluded her. Rather than sharing it with her in a meaningful way and inviting her to own the new knowledge, I bestowed it upon her as if a gift from above.

Writing for her developmental English course, she would crank out page after page to satisfy the stifling course requirements (endless drills on sentences, paragraphs, and grammar exercises completely outside of any meaningful context). Playing the canned role of teacher as I understood it then, I would also dutifully remind her that her professor opposed seeing African-American vernacular in formal writing and then offer Standard English replacements for her words. She’d grumble about being out of place in that mostly white, affluent, Jesuit institution. Instead of allowing Natasha to teach me in these moments, I’d respond to her invitations to move beyond the surface issues by cheering her on with empty but evaluative encouragement: “you’re doing great... you can do it... good effort...keep going.” It bothered me, though, that she never seemed to believe me. It haunts me to this day, even as it inspires me to write this dissertation and promote a more humane and democratic model for writing center work.

The extremely limited training I received at the beginning of my teaching and tutoring careers had not prepared me to understand the source of this discomfort. When first hired as a Graduate Teaching Assistant (with my own first-year composition courses

to teach), I endured an intense, week-long training session for new teachers, which consisted of a one-way distribution of worksheets, drills, and exercises—an authoritarian system that thrived on imposed rule and order. The other GTAs and I jokingly referred to it as our “baptism by fire” because the leaders treated it as such. “Here. Now go teach.” While we did have weekly meetings with a mentor that first term, the driving assumption was not that these sessions would help us to grow and develop as teachers but that they would help us to know what on earth to do on Monday morning (which, in the urgency of the moment, I very much appreciated).

Furthermore, my model of teacher training did not feature students as thinking, feeling individuals with any context beyond the course assignments they were expected to complete. Instead, it operated on negative assumptions about them. Students will make grammatical errors so various and numerous and damaging that we need a set of columns under which to list corresponding tic marks that count (and dock for) errors. Students will not bring enough to the table to even risk letting them outside of the confines of the five-paragraph theme. Plus, students will not know what to write about, so we will choose topics *for* them. As a beginning teacher, my goals, visions, and values were governed by rules, structure, and correctness. Obviously, as a beginning writing center tutor a few years later, my approach was driven by similar tangibles such as the director’s orders and the professor’s assignment, marginalia, and directives, and, of course, the student’s grammatical ineptitude. My training for this new line of work amounted to a two hour-long meeting with the newly hired tutors and the director, who spent the time in lecture mode, aligning us with his service-to-the-professors philosophy.

That in either of these settings I could *have* and constantly *develop* “a pedagogy”

of my own that focused on students' needs never even crossed my mind in those early years. Unfortunately, my Master's program didn't have even one composition theory course that likely would have pushed me in this direction (just canonical literature). I *wanted* to be a good teacher and a good tutor, but, as far as I could tell, that meant complying with perceived (and sometimes real) expectations imposed from above. Given my previous experience as a student, this seemed like institutional life as usual.

In order to come to terms with what it really means to be a good teacher and a good tutor, I had to first make the painful admission that I hadn't been either up to that point. I once heard the Commissioner of Education in Nebraska claim that "the greatest challenge for educators and administrators is moving from the mechanical to the natural." I was definitely steeped in the mechanical (the easy, the rote, the quantifiable), and I knew I had to find a way out if I was going to move forward in this profession. Understanding my role within it and growing as an educator became my primary goals.

When I read the dissertation of a young colleague, Shari Stenberg, who was then relatively new to the profession, I was amazed and energized by her clear grasp of her role as an educator. "Pedagogy," she notes, "requires ongoing learning, study, and development. It is not something one can 'pick up' in an orientation or even a single seminar. It is not something one can learn by observing an experienced pedagogue, or by reading" (xviii). Therefore, according to Stenberg, teacher and student alike are "positioned as at once a learner and a knower" (xiv). She, who studied under such critical teachers as Stephen North, Lil Brannon, and Amy Lee, knew so early in her teaching career that such "a pedagogy that relies on all of its participants and makes students' ideas central is riskier and more complicated than a course in which students

simply receive and are tested upon knowledge transmitted by the professor” (148). But she acknowledged that the ensuing “messes” provide the forum for us “to articulate our pedagogical goals, visions, and values—and to consider revision” (149).

Stenberg’s clear and reasonable depiction gave me permission to embrace a more meaningful—albeit disorderly—conception of my place within the academic hierarchy. And she invited extended conversation about these issues—a new genre for me, through which much of my forthcoming (and ongoing) development would emerge. I could allow myself to begin “creating and sustaining productive disequilibrium through self-reflection, collegial dialogue, and on-going critique” (Lord 192). And the writing center, which involved working in an intimate setting with new students every day, emerged for me as the best environment for such pedagogical exploration. It seemed less precarious to make myself vulnerable to one student at a time. I shared my new line of thinking with a few writing center colleagues, who were also new to such a critically reflective forum. Our time between appointments was filled from then on with conversations surrounding the many questions, concerns, ideas, and suggestions about our shared work that had only brewed in our minds until that point—my first taste of a teaching community.

Paulo Freire contends that “in order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform” (49). While it is important to recognize that the context of oppression in Freire’s study differs greatly from ours in the U.S. academy, the dynamic to which he refers resonates in significant ways. I wanted to help my students to see their traditional role as oppressive

and then free them from it. I needed another chance to prove that I now know why what transpired with Natasha wasn't right. It is much more in line with my personal nature to enter into an exchange with another individual on equal terms, so this new, less directed approach was liberating for me as an educator, but it was also terrifying. I would no longer endorse the closed world that traps the Natashas, but I would also have to take on new, less tangible responsibilities. Lisa Delpit prays "for all us the strength to teach our children what they must learn, and the humility and wisdom to learn from them that we might better teach" (183). In this context, this means making a cognitive shift surrounding the nature of institutional roles. For me, the source of that shift came in being brave enough to acknowledge that my world had been just as closed as Natasha's and that it was my primary role as a teacher and a tutor to facilitate both her and my transformation.

## **LEARNING TO LISTEN**

When I read Delpit's *Other People's Children* for the first time in an independent study for my doctoral program six or seven years later, I practically wept at the thought of how I had silenced Natasha. Rather than allowing her to challenge the teacher or me or the ridiculous assignments and conditions of her success in this class, I played along with her professor and encouraged her to blindly jump through the imposed hoops. Natasha resisted all of it at every stage by complaining about the assignments and the professor and her enforced commitment to the writing center, but I glossed over that, leading the (subconscious) illusion that my white, middle-class encouragement was what she *really* needed. Instead of following our director's advice never to disagree with a

professor in front of a student, perhaps I could have allowed her to vent her frustrations freely and sympathized with her. Perhaps I could have offered to talk with the professor to help articulate her struggles with the class. Perhaps I could have helped her to see her own valuable contributions to what seemed to her a foreign environment. Perhaps I could have at least listened.

James Britton reminds us that “individual learning begins...with listening” (37). And I could see, finally, that I needed to listen. But like many of us, I had never learned how. I have just always been expected to do it, from infancy through adult life. Not surprisingly, then, I had developed what Krista Ratcliffe terms the “self-interested intent” with which we typically listen (205). In Natasha’s case, this meant listening to her text for the cues provided by her professor—fragments, verb tense inconsistency, nonstandard English, and other such grammatical infractions. These were my self interests because they were his, which is as our writing center philosophy would have it. Knowing in retrospect that the only door this approach to listening opened for Natasha was the exit, I was determined to listen for more. I learned from my work with her that there is too much on the line for me to listen exclusively for what the professor wants. What Natasha wants to get out of the exchange has to matter, I finally determined. How could it not? It seemed so obvious all of the sudden. Having lived the backlash with Natasha, I took to heart Nancy Maloney Grimm’s warning that “students refuse our invitations to literacy when we literacy educators fail to take into account their differing political, social, historical, and economic histories” (102).

I hadn’t intentionally denied Natasha’s history. It just hadn’t occurred to me that I should listen for it as a means for developing a healthy and productive teacher/student



relationship. My personal history had never seemed to be a factor in my education because (I know now) “members of the dominant group have difficulty conceptualizing oppression because it lies outside their lived experience” (Grimm 103). In ways perhaps only a member of the dominant group in my small Catholic elementary school and high school and in my conservative Midwestern university could be, I was naively oblivious to difference, and I was conditioned to imagine this as an admirable quality. With utterly good intentions, I was the classroom teacher who treated all students the same, essentially, by pretending that they *were* all the same and that I had the key to the common vault of knowledge that they all needed. I recognized in the individualized setting of the writing center the capacity to focus on individuals in a way that isn’t possible in the classroom. But I was still under the influence of a more service-oriented writing center philosophy and allowed that to dictate my thinking and my work. Victor Villanueva asks “isn’t it ironic that people with eyes to see [and, arguably, ears to hear] can be proud in choosing not to?” (8).

For me, it was the most dangerous sort of ignorance in the sense that, on some level, *I did* choose it. My moves, although not critically reflective, were indeed deliberate. I chose to be the sort of teacher that I had had and to, in effect, avoid cultural and racial diversity. Hence, it was shocking and frightening to learn that “no theory or method, then, of teaching writing is politically innocent, natural, or neutral” (Lee 37). I was beginning to grasp that my decisions and actions as an educator were packed with messages, some undoubtedly that I never intended to send. As I acknowledged the need to understand my own ideas surrounding learning and political affiliations, I became

obsessed with tracing my own literacy and teaching histories and scrutinizing the underlying assumptions and meanings.

About that time for a graduate seminar, I conducted a literacy study of our writing center (in spite of the many reservations voiced by our director regarding such a scrutinizing gaze on what he termed “a safe space”). For whom? I wondered, as I assured him I would change all names, ask permission before observing anyone, and refrain from videotaping the sessions as I had hoped to do. For this project, I observed who spoke, who listened, who wrote, and who read during the course of a writing center session. Watching and listening to my colleagues in this focused frame of mind altered my perspective on writing center work much as the journal project had for me shed light on the scholarship in the field. Of course, we had listened to and learned from each other over the years, but in passing, never in a sustained and deliberate way.

Thus, through this process of stepping outside of the situation and looking in, I learned that, for the most part, during my own sessions with students, I read, wrote, and spoke while the students listened. For three of the four tutors whom I observed, the balance was reversed. I always knew we had different styles of tutoring, but before this analytical look, I didn't know it was that they listened and I didn't. Carefully considering the literate acts that constituted writing center sessions compelled me to analyze the rhetorical significance of my own. What messages am I sending here? That I am the one who has answers, corrections, and insight to impart. That what I have to say goes. That students are and should be passive recipients of my knowledge.

Clearly, something had to give. Witnessing this lopsided display as if I were a third party served as an urgent reminder that I had to listen to learn more and speak less.

Without delay, I made a few conscious choices to set my pen on the table, ask more questions, and avoid making declarative statements about a student's writing. It seemed awkward at first as I began to realize that both within and outside of the writing center walls, I have always been one who needs to fill the silence. But I knew this is what needed to happen in order to begin loosening the reins of my authority and transforming the dynamic.

I decided the writing center was a good place for me to start because I could see that the stakes were different. I was not their teacher. My job was not to evaluate their writing for a grade. And I realized that we did not need to experience the same "us vs. them" mentality that sometimes exists in the classroom (which up to that point I had clearly endorsed and translated to mean that I speak and they listen). As a result, I began to build relationships with students in the writing center rather than to continue finding ways to distance myself from them with a cloak of authority. These moves and the more intimate setting provided an opportunity for me learn to listen to their stories, share some of my own, and follow my natural impulses.

In spite of this new commitment to listening, it took some time after reading Delpit to stop punishing myself long enough to learn from my own teaching stories. I berated myself for allowing such little room for deliberate self reflection and for justifying my authoritative stance as a means of survival. I chastised myself for not immediately abandoning or at least questioning the service-to-the-professors philosophy of our writing center. And I chided myself for all of the missed opportunities to be an agent for change in students' lives. I initially felt compelled to relinquish anything that looked even remotely like authority in my classroom and in the writing center, thus

amending my evil ways. And I wanted more than anything to find Natasha and apologize for my role in her institutional misery.

Fortunately, I listened to my graduate school colleagues and professors who witnessed these self-inflicted indictments and steered me toward other scholars to whom I should also learn to listen. bell hooks, for one, speaks of educators who support cultural diversity and cautions them not to “replace one set of absolutes with another” (*Teaching* 32). She reminds us that in any situation that involves new ways of thinking, “there are periods of chaos and confusion, times when grave mistakes are made,” and we cannot fear that if we hope to make meaningful change (*Teaching* 33). Lee also helped provide needed perspective by asserting that “whether or not we exercise this authority [granted to us by our position within the institutional structure], it *always exists*. We cannot ever completely or equitably distribute power. So, the issue might be *how* we exercise our institutional authority, rather than *whether* we do” (265).

Julie helped me to find the proper balance between the two absolutes as I saw them at the time—teacher who exercised authority as good and teacher who did not exercise authority as bad. Julie was a recently divorced, forty-year-old nursing student, who visited the writing center several times a week for two years as much to boost her self esteem as to work on her writing. She was enrolled in a medical ethics class, which involved soul-searching about and representing in writing her own ethical perspectives. For Julie, whose twenty-year marriage had been plagued with severe mental and physical abuse, these tasks evoked intense emotion and pain, which came out in various ways as she wrestled with the ethical dilemmas before her. In ways that I never would have thought I could or should in my first few semesters in the writing center, I embraced the

opportunity to be there for her. I knew that Julie needed to be heard. And that I needed to listen.

In her writing and in our early discussions, Julie tried to present her viewpoints as professionally and objectively as possible because, as she later confessed, that's all she thought she could do in this institutional setting. And she admitted being embarrassed to utter the atrocities and found comfort in the distance provided by the clinical language. With gentle encouragement and a few personal stories of my own, though, she gradually opened up. Sometimes, we didn't even get to the very words on paper in front of us, but I intuitively sensed that it didn't matter. What we did get to was far more significant. She routinely and more openly referred to the oppressive conditions of her past as she reflected upon the medical ethics in question. We would talk and sometimes cry together as she made connections between the two sets of circumstances. Painful as it was, she seemed to grow stronger and more confident with every session. The course requirements (reflective papers that draw from personal experience for reasoning and evidence) provided the forum that Julie needed to process and name her experience. The writing center became a place for her to validate the feelings driving her explanations by saying them out loud and working through them with another person. Heightened by the fact that many of Julie's stories involved incidences of her being silenced, my efforts to listen had never been so acute.

Obviously, I needed Julie every bit as much as she needed me at that time. The professor for Julie's class was completely removed from our dynamic as she preferred that I did not contact him. Removing that looming presence, especially given the long-term relationship I had with Julie, helped me begin to finally see beyond the institutional

impartiality of commas and sentences. Spending hours listening to her highly emotional rendering of moments from her past helped me as well to focus upon the institutional relationship that mattered most—the one between consultant and student. How could assignment directions or page requirements or even director's orders overshadow the gravity of what she shared with me in those sessions? And how could I possibly fill the silence in my usual ways—with grammar corrections, word choice suggestions, or transitional devices? It all seemed absurd, which was the sort of perspective check I needed to worry not about satisfying the professor or the director but about helping the student in a meaningful way.

Julie and I both took risks that semester and emerged from the experience with new understandings of our roles and our rights as members of the institutional framework. I assumed a new responsibility by not allowing those above me to determine the course of a writing center session. And she became more confident as a student and as a person by telling her story. She and I maintained email contact for quite some time after she graduated, usually containing updates about the latest article she had published. The one of which she was especially proud was an article she had written that was accepted by a medical ethics journal. In this article, she essentially explains her philosophy of ethics by contrasting a healthy nurse/patient relationship to an unhealthy marriage, drawing heavily from personal experience. That she felt entitled to voice that opinion in a public way was of far greater import even than the fact that she got it published. I wasn't yet aware of North's declaration that "in a writing center the object is to make sure that writers, and not necessarily their texts, are what get changed by instruction" (438), but Julie's catharsis was living proof that this was a most worthy

objective.

Connecting this and my many practical experiences to theory as I studied Delpit and various other scholars and educators (Freire, Dewey, Boquet, Grimm, Cushman) became food for my conceptual reconstruction of teachers and students. I absorbed the scholarship, which spoke to me in various ways about power structures, roles, and responsibilities within institutions. Grimm, for instance, contends that “to function as agents of change in higher education, to work toward a fair practice, writing center workers must understand how systems function, how language influences the construction of Self and Other, how literacy works as cultural and social practice, how political action produces social change” (11). I wrestled with such notions, trying to find my place within them. I also imagined myself as a teacher within the model my graduate school professors put into practice as they invited a truly open exchange, acknowledged their position as co-learners, and dissolved the traditional hierarchy. I learned a great deal from one professor in particular as he negotiated balance in politically and racially charged discussions that erupted in every meeting of a Literacy and Community Issues graduate course. In reading responses, seminar papers, and a literacy case study, I thought and wrote about how all of this continued to shape my growing sense of democratic pedagogy, especially in the writing center, which was becoming for me the richest site for both teaching and learning.

Scrutinizing my own education and questioning the master/apprentice model that defined it while studying composition and writing center scholarship for the first time—ironically, more than ten years into my teaching career—was an eye-opening, in not life-altering, experience. As a teacher, it was liberating for me to think along these new lines

both for the possibilities it opened up for student involvement and for the pressure it removed from me to know all. I found comfort in the theoretical explanations for the intuitive feelings that had come to shape my teaching. Moreover, I began to recognize parallels between writing center history and the emerging story of my own history in the academy. I could relate to Elizabeth Boquet as she promoted a different, more useful model of tutoring than the one driving the misconceptions about writing center work. She voiced concern “that a low-risk/low-yield model for tutoring encourages a framework of mere competence, or error-avoidance.” She wondered how we may, instead, encourage the “tutor to operate on the edge of his or her expertise” where he or she “will really feel like [he or she] is jammin’” (*Noise* 81). I had lived the first model with Natasha and the second with Julie. I knew the difference, and I wanted to keep jammin’. To consistently live this higher-risk/higher-yield model, says Boquet, “we must imagine a liminal zone where chaos and order coexist” (*Noise* 84), thereby abandoning traditional, detached forms of teaching such as drills and grammar correction and embracing (listening to) the noise.

I chose to enact this good advice by modeling my professors’ behavior of encouraging participation, collaboration, and originality, and by helping students to hear their own voices, even if it sacrificed order. I enacted the messages I was getting from my reading as well in various ways: by creating more space for dialogue with my students, listening more and rearranging the power dynamic in the room, sitting in a circle, encouraging participation in the classroom, and encouraging students to pick up the pen when working with them in the writing center. I also encouraged independence by abandoning modes, page requirements, and old, familiar textbooks and by helping



students in the writing center to see interpretive possibilities in their professors' sometimes confining assignments and to take risks in their writing. This approach was better, successful. It felt right. My own pedagogy—in theory and in practice—was taking on a new shape that challenged the academic hierarchy that before had defined it. The lines of communication were opening as I learned to listen and to put my ideas, educational history, and teaching philosophy in conversation with theory. For me, the experience did feel transformative. It meant that I was actually absorbing and learning to promote democratic ideals rather than presiding over the classroom.

### **MAKING GOOD DECISIONS**

I focused the remainder of my doctoral studies on writing centers with the end goal of one day directing a writing center based upon these democratic principles. I took to heart Delpit's claim that "despite the rhetoric of American education, it does not teach children to be independent, but rather to be dependent on external sources for direction, for truth, for meaning" (101). I was in a better position to comprehend this having admitted to myself that as a student, I had not learned to be independent, and as a teacher and a tutor, although egalitarian in some superficial ways, I hadn't always promoted independence. Coming to terms with my own experience and learning to listen provided the necessary foundation for me to establish a more participatory and socially responsible view of writing center work. "By holding up to examination taken-for-granted assumptions and everyday concepts and beliefs," says Brian Lord, "teachers are more able to build a more coherent conceptual foundation to support practice" (195). Thankfully, I had learned to more thoughtfully and purposefully transform my conceptual

framework of the roles of both student and teacher or tutor as a shared, democratic, humane process.

This process of self-examination in place, I often relied on Freire, who observed that “any situation in which some individuals prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence. The means used are not important; to alienate human beings from their own decision-making is to change them into objects” (85). I knew that I had alienated and objectified Natasha and other students in this way. I also knew that living democracy as an institutional way of life meant, instead, including and privileging student voice. This meant carefully considering my actions (and all that they imply) and making good practical and rhetorical decisions.

With this new way of thinking as my guide, the true freefall into democratic teaching came for me a few years later when I agreed to teach my first ever advanced undergraduate/graduate level class (at the last minute) for a local university, whose assigned professor had received late notice of release time for another project. It was a course in Contemporary Rhetorical Theory, which I had neither taken nor taught myself. Sure, my ongoing doctoral studies in Rhetoric and Composition had brushed up against and even focused on the subject in many ways and places, but the comprehensive picture was blurry at best. So I said yes. I had to. I couldn’t imagine passing up such an opportunity. Having considered my role as a classroom teacher so thoroughly and incessantly over the past many years helped me as I prepared for this class.

The one-size-fits-all notion of authority as teacher in charge no longer seemed suitable. Perhaps I also steered away from this habit because of the decidedly different student population and context for this course. It was an upper level course in the major,

and I was accustomed to teaching lower level required courses for the core. Given that the students enrolled were seniors and graduate students, I felt comfortable sharing authority with this class. My decision was motivated, in part, by wanting to create the democratic space for learning that my graduate professors had created for me and that I was working to create for students in the writing center. Although my comprehension of the subject matter, ironically, seemed as limited as it was when I taught my first few classes, thankfully, this time I did not resort to a false sense of authority to mask it. Instead, I took Lee's advice as I carefully considered *how* best to manage the authority inherent to the role in the given situation.

As my colleague Nora Bacon said to me when I was preparing for this course, "When the disparity between what we know and what our students know is small, our vulnerability increases." As a green teacher barely older than my students when I taught my first course, this translated to a reliance on false authority. Fifteen years later, this had morphed into a willingness for collegiality and collaboration, even commiseration. In truth, in both courses, I was terrified, but learning how to reflect upon my pedagogy and experiencing the power of dialogue in the writing center helped me to react differently and make better decisions this time around. These many years later, I chose to share that authority. I openly admitted to the department chair who hired me and to the students how I came to teach the class, what experience (and lack thereof) that I brought to the table, and what I hoped to learn from them in the process. This time around, I didn't frantically expect to be uncovered as a fraud because I exposed myself. Instead, I listened. A lot. And, not surprisingly, as a result, I learned more than I ever have as a classroom teacher.

What emerged in this course was the most open, rich, and democratic large-group environment that I have ever facilitated. For one project, the students wrote and presented three short rhetorical analyses to the class, each one focusing on the same artifact but from a different perspective. Thus, on the day we were scheduled to discuss, say, the feminist rhetorical stance, three or four students would present their chosen artifacts (an organization, a famous legal case, a textbook, a web site, a national event, an advertising campaign, etc.) through this rhetorical lens. Instead of assuming as the teacher that I should or even could produce the best synopsis of these many perspectives, I decided to rely on the students to teach the group by experimenting with and sharing their thoughts. And I invited questions, discussion, and reflection along the way, which always led to amazing discoveries and insights.

One student, for instance, analyzed the controversial Michael Moore 2003 Oscar acceptance speech. He entered the project with an admittedly strong opinion about the inappropriateness and ineffectiveness of the speech, and one of the approaches he chose—situational—supported that standpoint. The other two, however, forced him to consider the speech differently. Most notably, Burke's dramatist theory revealed for this student Moore's well-crafted, symbolic use of language and dramatic symbols and prompted him to admit that Moore's speech was, indeed, effective, at least on this level. Even more significantly, he and the others in class shared these epiphanies with one another in the class discussions that followed the presentations. In their final self-evaluations for the course, many voiced appreciation for these moments. As one student put it, "after witnessing the many different forms and opinions expressed in my classmates' projects, I have a new appreciation for rhetorical criticism and its power to

open one's mind and to do away with one's previous intellectually formed biases." As writers with whom I worked had begun to enter the dialogue, the students in this Rhetoric course took and appreciated the responsibility that my silence elicited, and the class was far better for it.

Freire reminds us that in order for the process of liberation to be complete, both oppressor and the oppressed—or in this case, consultant and student—must change. Indeed, "we can legitimately say that in the process of oppression someone oppresses someone else; we cannot say that in the process of revolution someone liberates someone else, nor yet that someone liberates himself, but rather that human beings in communion liberate one another" (133). Finally, my perceived limited grasp of rhetorical theory served as the catalyst, forcing my conceptual framework to move away from the mechanical to a more natural, humane approach. For the students in the class, this translated into a more meaningful learning environment because they were active participants within, creators of, and contributors to it. Their responsibility to teach the various rhetorical perspectives to one another is one of the many ways that the class allowed them to step outside of the traditional role of the student. Thus, they were finally liberated of the oppressive roles nailed to them, at least for that moment, which gave me the courage to begin letting go of the oppressive role nailed to me.

All that I now do as Writing Center Coordinator for Metropolitan Community College (Metro) is informed by this liberation. Metro's writing center was initially funded by a Title III grant, and I was hired to design, market, implement, and coordinate writing centers on our three main campuses and two satellite locations. From the moment I accepted the job offer, I have been bound and determined to rhetorically position this

writing center as a democratizing force within the institution. I could see from my own most liberating moments within the academy (working with Julie and teaching the Rhetorical Theory course) that democratic possibilities emerge within a teacher/student relationship based on trust and respect. And I sensed that in order to preserve the integrity of this exchange, all of my other institutional interactions should have the same foundation.

As an open-admissions, multi-campus institution serving both rural and urban areas, Metro has a very diverse population, whose skill and intellect levels, experiences, and cultural backgrounds differ greatly from student to student and even from campus to campus. My goal of establishing democratic institutional relationships across the board, therefore, is a complicated one as I negotiate these different terrains and interact with the varied administrators, faculty, consultants, and students along the way. In such situations, declares Nobel Prize winner Hermann Hesse, “it is not our purpose to become each other. It is to recognize each other, to learn to see the other and honor him for what he is.” It isn’t always easy to enact, but such advice serves me well as I work to dissolve the traditional hierarchies at work and put my responsibility to writers first. Seeking to honor another party in any institutional exchange for the position he or she brings to the table, I’ve found, takes the same sort of discipline needed to not only listen but also learn in the process. It involves working *with* that position rather than *against* it to achieve our goals for the writing center.

Unlike many who are thrust or even coerced into the role of directing a writing center or a writing program, I had the unusually fortunate experience of considering all of this before I landed the job. And as another immeasurable bonus, I was hired to put

writing centers in place at an institution largely unfamiliar with writing center work. This certainly did not mean my role came without assorted institutional challenges; however, clearly, I was positioned for a level of success that many new directors are not, in part because I knew what to expect and had come to appreciate the value of a democratic, dialogic, student-driven exchange. Besides having little experience in writing center work, many others have never previously considered the theory that should drive it (or actually have lived a less desirable theory), making their tasks particularly challenging especially if the writing center has already been established at their institutions. And, even if these newly hired directors have a sense of how a writing center should operate, they are bound to be met with resistance at every turn as they strive to undo what has been done and right the wrongs in the process. I've written this dissertation primarily as a resource for anyone in this or a similarly daunting position within the institutional hierarchy, though I hope it will be useful as well for any educator invested in promoting democratic practices and principles.

For all of these folks, especially those new to the field who are not innately aware of what to expect, becoming what everyone seems to need for your program to become might initially make sense. However, having learned the need to scrutinize institutional dynamics and decisions for the assumptions undergirding them (the hard way if you ask Natasha), I entered cautiously into the task of building and selling the idea of the writing center across our campus. As I have mentioned, writing center scholarship in the decade prior had begun to shift from the declaration of independence brand of manifestos to impassioned calls for work that conveys the intellectual and pedagogical value of writing centers, and I worked from the latter school of thought. As Grimm argues, "students tell

stories everyday in writing centers. Taken together, these stories can provide all of us in higher education with an understanding of the ways we might make literacy education more socially responsible and more open to the needs and desires of the real people who pay and work for an education” (120).

The stories of our students at this community college emerged quickly, in vivid color, to establish an understanding of the potentially democratizing capacity of the writing center. Many share tales of woe about teachers who publicly humiliate them for making mistakes and being unprepared (the fact that they may carry a full-time class load during the day and work the swing shift at night notwithstanding). Others confess that they have little time or energy to give to their studies because their largely working class families and friends oppose and resent their decisions to go back to school. Still others apologize for being there and taking our time because various forces in their lives have convinced them that they’re really not worthy of it. For these students, it is our responsibility to do what it takes to provide a space for them to voice concerns and for us to listen—a forum not typically available to them within the institution.

As I embarked upon the negotiation process for the various components needed to establish such a space, I quickly observed that the initial exchanges between the writing center and many other institutional entities typically began more as top-down declarations rather than democratic relationships. From the commonly held perspective that education is a consumer industry, some administrators, teachers, staff, even students at our institution initially treated the writing center as if it were a restaurant there to serve up anything they order, hot and delicious. I had come to know, though, that when the notion of writing center as service *to* or *for* (rather than *with*) others prevails, its potential



to thrive within an institution is limited. Such perceived subordination of the writing center denies the capacity for connection that is central to writing center work.

Therefore, deciding to allow these hierarchies to go unchallenged would have threatened our professional identity at Metro. We had to choose, instead, to grow egalitarian relationships that draw upon the strengths of each party. For our writing centers at Metro, we did just that, working hard, even in the face of resistance from some, to present a more socially responsible rendering of writing center work as democratic in order to articulate its true potential and worth and to establish for the writing center a central rather than subordinate position within our institution. Through it all I kept (and keep to this day) in the back of my mind Audre Lorde's reminder that "if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others—for their use and to our detriment" (45). Especially since we were charged with opening new writing centers, deciding to define *ourselves* and create *our own* identities were crucial endeavors.

The greatest challenges, we soon realized, lay first in choosing a professional identity based in democracy and dialogue, and second, in preserving it without compromising the very collegial spirit that drives our work. In the process, we needed to make good decisions and establish strong institutional relationships. First, we needed to avoid creating new hierarchies as we sought to dissolve existing ones. This involved not automatically honoring the various opinions and requests directed at the writing center, although that may well have been the tendency for me as a new director who aimed to make a favorable first impression. It also entailed neither setting ourselves apart from nor imagining ourselves above others in the institution, which we who believe firmly in the virtues of the writing center are also apt to do.

Instead, when introducing ourselves to and dealing with all institutional entities, we needed to embody a professional identity that is consistent with the very work that we do with writers. In other words, we needed to embrace the center's democratic mission as a way of institutional life by opening up the lines of communication with all of our various stakeholders, not just the student writers who are the primary focus of our work. We needed to make it clear from the start that we operate more from the assumption that "the point is not to agree or disagree with an opinion, but to locate an unquestioned assumption and explore (argue) its possible ramifications" (Brodkey 144). Many of the conflicting ideas of how our work might take shape and how we sought to explore the possibilities within them are featured in the following chapters.

The true work of establishing and preserving the integrity of our democratic space has come for us in these and other routine exchanges. Having a set of commitments is one thing, but living by them has meant making good and sometimes difficult decisions along the way to ensure that they are the guiding force of all that we do. As Chris Gallagher argues, "institutions are in fact sets of discourses that must be read and written by their participants" (80). Reading the institution as changeable and rewriting the discourse of negotiation as the same open forum that drives the writing center consultation has been the key to preserving the integrity of our mission as we have rhetorically positioned the writing center as a democratizing force within our institution. As Dewey reminds us, "Communication is a process of sharing experience until it becomes a common possession. It modifies the disposition of both the parties who partake in it" (9). For educators seeking to effect institutional change of this magnitude,

an additional and significant challenge lies in knowing where and how to draw the line and to build alliances so that theirs isn't the only disposition modified in the process.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Dissolving Hierarchies through Dialogue

“The ground of democratic ideas and practices is faith in the potentialities of individuals, faith in the capacity for positive developments if proper conditions are provided.”

*John Dewey*

“I QUIT!!!” declared my five year old son, Jake, upon exiting the school building on the third day of his academic career.

Exasperated, he explained: “This place has TOO MANY RULES. The principal has too many rules. My teacher has too many rules. And they’re all BAD rules!!! All we learn about is RULES!!!!”

Day Five:

Jake: “Mom, I’m not going back to kindergarten anymore,” his voice trailing off in a sort of melancholy.

Me: “What do you mean you’re not going back? Think of all the cool things you’ll learn at school.”

Jake: “I haven’t learned ANYTHING there...except RULES!” he retorted, challenging what he now saw as the bogus notion I planted into his head that school is about learning.

Me: “What about the five senses? You learned about them yesterday.”

Jake: “Yeah,” he admitted with a sigh, “but I coulda learned that from one of my friends, and they don’t make me raise my hand if I have a question.”

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From the onset of our academic lives, underlying assumptions—whether deliberate or not—influence the scope and texture of our education. Indeed, as Judith M. Newman contends,

Everything we do in the classroom is founded on a set of assumptions about learning and teaching, about knowledge, and about what counts as legitimate reading and writing....Our beliefs about learning and teaching are largely tacit. We operate a good deal of time from an intuitive sense of what is going on without actively reflecting on what our intentions might be and what our actions could be saying to students. (727)

I think of my son's initiation into the institution of school and I wonder why it is the norm for teachers to spend the first moments of our children's wonderful world of education telling them how they are to walk, not run, in the hall and what will happen to them if they flip a card. Surely, they do not assume that a string of rules and commands is what will get these fresh and eager minds interested and engaged. Either way, what are they suggesting about the role of student? About the role of the teacher? About the nature of learning? And from their choices, what can we assume about institutional pressures to take charge and establish order? Chances are the immediate and tangible need for crowd control prevents these educators from consciously considering the assumptions implied by their actions. Nonetheless, the die is cast. Teachers lead and enforce. Students follow and comply.

As writing center history and scholarship demonstrates, our work has been similarly defined by our actions. Writing centers that opened in the early 1970s to answer the open-admissions call for better prepared writers, for instance, became pigeon-

holed as “fix-it” shops and “clinics.” Although these folks may have intended only to address a current need—to help struggling writers—their actions set a precedent for writing centers as directive and as supplemental to something else. I doubt whether they predicted (or had the time to reflect upon) what their choices at the time conveyed (or would convey in the future) about the purpose of a writing center. The bulk of writing center scholarship in the wake of open-admissions, however, focused on the negative ramifications of these choices. Ever since then, the writing center’s marginalized position within the academy has been a sore subject for many, but, in part, what we have spent the past few decades trying to reverse are the expectations created by the assumptions underlying our own actions.

### **REVERSING THE TREND**

In the mid 1990s, Elizabeth Boquet and Nancy Maloney Grimm, with their calls for more extensive scholarship, challenged writing center professionals to critically scrutinize our practices in search of the pedagogical value within them. Such a move, they suggest, would both empower writing centers to define ourselves and push us to substantiate our work. In the previous decade, the larger field of Rhetoric and Composition made a similar move as our scholarship moved away from justification into pedagogical exploration. James A. Berlin, for example, proclaimed in the early 1980s that

we are tacitly teaching a version of reality and the student’s place and mode of operation within it. Yet many teachers (and I suspect most) look upon their vocations as the imparting of a largely mechanical skill,

important only because it serves students in getting them through school and in advancing them in their professions....Writing teachers are performe given a responsibility that far exceeds this merely instrumental task. (557)

Discerning and theorizing about what this responsibility entails has been the focus of teachers and scholars of writing ever since. And now, as writing center professionals, we are building upon that to represent our work in new and more substantial ways as well.

Our task in today's writing center, as I see it, is to engage different perspectives. In the past, certain voices (those of administrators, professors, directors, assessment officials) resonated more than others. Various external and sometimes urgent demands such as helping underprepared writers get ready for college level writing were placed upon the writing center, thus determining our course of work. As I have already mentioned, unfortunately, this problematic dynamic allowed the voices of the two parties doing the actual work—writers and consultants—to get drowned out. All perspectives involved, however, deserve to be heard, indeed, *need* to be heard, especially those of the writers, who are our very reason for being. In this chapter, I will argue for the dialogic exchange that is foundational to a democratic writing center. It begins with the students and consultants, as the narratives here will illustrate, and lays the groundwork for participating in dialogue as an institutional way of life.

Central to our democratic mission in the writing center is the Freirean logic that “without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education” (92-93). Students may gather large bodies of information by reading text books and taking notes in class, but little true learning occurs when the mode of delivery is so one-sided. In other words, “authentic education is not carried on by ‘A’ for

‘B’ or by ‘A’ *about* ‘B,’ [as has been done in writing centers past] but rather by ‘A’ *with* ‘B’ (93). It is our philosophy that we do writers a disservice when we leave them out of the learning process, which is precisely what happens in writing centers that allow consultants, teachers, or directors to take ownership of the sessions. Instead, in our writing centers at Metro, we strive to set a precedent when we enter into the consultations by inviting students to actively participate in a dialogue surrounding their work as writers. As the stories in this chapter will illustrate, student writers often have good reason to resist these invitations, which trace back to the assumptions that shape their personal and academic histories. For consultants, then, to build these dialogical relationships, we set a new tone by believing in our students’ abilities and worth. We model this trust by participating in rather than manipulating the dialogues we have with them and other educators. Then, most importantly, we convince them to use language for change.

### **BELIEVING IN STUDENTS’ ABILITIES AND WORTH**

Making our commitment to dialogue widely visible was my first priority in the ongoing campaign to define our writing centers at Metro rather than be defined by others. Since few at our institution had any background in writing centers, I was especially careful in the beginning to choose language that best represents what we do. I worked from Boquet’s notion that “to imagine...calling a thing a thing somehow *matters*, to consider that the ways in which we characterize work tells us something *about* that work” (*Noise* 8). With a dialogic democratic space as the goal, I knew that the many writing center philosophies and mission statements I had read that suppose knowledgeable



professors and tutors have what impressionable students need would send out contrary and problematic messages. The terms “tutor,” “tutorial,” and “tutee” project less than democratic assumptions as they reinforce the academic power structure students have come to expect. I worried that such commonly used, but loaded, terms would give off the wrong impression. I feared failing to demonstrate that we believe in our students’ capacity to think, develop, and learn by choosing problematic terms to describe the work.

With this in mind, one of the first decisions I made together with the writing center staff for the rhetorical positioning of writing centers at Metro was to use the terms “consultant,” “consultation,” and “writers” instead. After much deliberation, we determined that no designation for this unique dynamic is flawless. But we ultimately favored these names because as William McCall notes, “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 student success or failure with writing“(167). The truth is that a fair number of our students, particularly in the community college setting, have come to see themselves as failures. Rather than reinforcing their misconceptions, I chose “consultancy” as it best represents what we consider an interactive exchange.

The sort of rapport needed to establish such a relationship isn’t always easy to achieve, though, because consultants and students both need to make cognitive shifts in the process. Most importantly, students need to accept the increased responsibility that comes with engaging in dialogue while consultants need to believe in the students’ worth and abilities enough to open a conversation with them. We learn that some teachers show little such faith when we greet their downtrodden students, lurking hesitantly outside the

writing center door, with “SEE THE WRITING CENTER!” written angrily across the top of their papers, or worse, right over their text. Initially, these students come in hoisting overstuffed backpacks only to satisfy the teachers’ orders.

During one of the first quarters our writing centers were open, for instance, we met a writer who came in exclusively seeking her teacher’s approval. Mary was a smart, studious, and conscientious sixty-two year old woman attending college for the first time. She visited the writing center often, always prepared and eager. A gregarious woman, she would make it a point during her first few visits to announce to the consultant, “I’m here to learn what I’m supposed to do. So teach me.” She would tease us for being twenty and thirty years younger than she while simultaneously telling us how smart we were and how ill prepared she was for college at her age. And she would spend full sessions making sure that her paper gets at what she imagined the teacher “wanted.”

So I guess it should not have come as a great surprise when Mary lost her composure one day when a consultant, Carly, asked her to express her opinion about the topic at hand. It was her second revision of a research-based argumentative paper, which as Carly saw it, was structured, organized, and well written. “This paper is very well done Mary,” said Carly as she set aside the draft with her teacher’s comments. “But I can’t find your voice within it.”

“It’s a research paper,” Mary replied definitively.

“Sure,” offered Carly, “but it’s an argument isn’t it? Your teacher asked you to take a position, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then, we need to hear your voice. “

“What do you think I should say?”

“It doesn’t matter what I think. This paper needs to be about you. You know, your voice. Your opinion. You know far more than I do about all of this good information that you have gathered.”

“What I think is all right there. I put it together didn’t I?”

“Yes, but I really want to know how and why *you* chose this topic. This is put together so beautifully, but I want to hear what you have to say. It will make your paper so much stronger.”

“I chose the topic,” said Mary, “from a list of suggested topics that the teacher handed out.”

“OK. That’s fine. But why this particular topic?” Carly asked.

“Because she suggested it,” Mary replied without hesitation.

“But she also asks for your opinion since the paper is an argument. It’s you—your voice—that should shape the paper. You’re smart. And you, obviously, know a lot about this topic. I’m confident readers have much to learn from you. I know I do.”

Relentlessly, Mary kept insisting that Carly explain herself, acting as if she couldn’t possibly believe that Carly meant what she was saying. Carly just kept insisting that Mary had a valid opinion and a voice that she wanted to hear. As her hour-long appointment drew to a close, Mary, choking back the tears, finally conceded and said softly, “No one has genuinely ever wanted to hear my voice.” For previous writing assignments, as she eventually told Carly, she had a way of getting most teachers to choose her arguments for her. She told Carly that through two rocky marriages, she had become conditioned not to trust her own opinion. So she would try to get teachers to

assign positions to argue in favor of or against or she would get it out of them which positions they favored and go with those. “More often than not,” she announced proudly, “it worked! I’ve gotten good at this. I think they felt sorry for me.”

“How about the teacher for this class?” Carly asked.

“He won’t help me. He keeps saying, ‘Mary, what do *you* think? How do *you* feel about this topic?’ and I just don’t know how to answer those questions, which is why I came here. I thought maybe I could get you to tell me what to think.”

“I can’t imagine what good could come of your teacher or me or anyone else, for that matter, telling you what to think. Obviously, your teacher genuinely wants to hear your voice, too. And he *is* helping you by not putting words in your mouth.”

“I hear what you’re saying, but it is very hard to believe. I’ve just gotten used to saying what I think people want me to say. Especially men. I truly believe my second husband would ask for my opinion on something just so he could come back and tell me how stupid it was.”

That session in the writing center pried open a door for Mary. For the first in years, she claimed, she felt comfortable enough in there to speak up. She credited the relationships she had developed with consultants such as Carly over the past several months for giving her the courage to think for herself. Gradually, she revealed more and more to Carly and a few other (female) consultants with whom she worked, bits and pieces of her life story, usually highlighting stories of the men in her past who insisted (and ultimately convinced Mary) that she was stupid and worthless (their words). She even divulged how she had learned to keep her opinion to herself to the point that she

was hardly confident enough to articulate it much less utter it in the realm of higher education of all places.

Then, a few months later when working with Erica, another consultant, Mary spent nearly an hour asking her to clarify a one-sentence assignment presented to her by her English teacher. Instead of answering with the declarative statements that Mary's questions begged, Erica responded with questions, prompting Mary to determine the meaning and purpose of the assignment herself. She found this unsettling at first, telling Erica she wasn't used to having a teacher who expected her to do the talking. She was, clearly, still struggling to value the sound of her own voice. Fortunately, Erica's approach was not altered by Mary's discomfort. Instead, she insisted on allowing that space for Mary to participate in the process even if it left long, awkward silences and created obvious stress for Mary. It would have been so much easier for Erica to give into the pressure of the moment and blurt out the answers that Mary was so desperately hoping she would provide. But she believed in Mary's ability to come to them herself and knew that would mean so much more to her in the end. "You can do this, Mary" she repeated more than once and eventually convinced her to give it a try. She talked her way through Erica's questions, at first apologizing for how little she knew and understood. But, by the end, she was looking up the teacher's terms in the dictionary, guessing what the underlying purpose might be for such an assignment, and rephrasing it in her own words.

Mary left the writing center that day saying she understood the assignment better than any other she had ever received. Erica complimented her for hanging in there. And

she thanked Mary for helping her to understand the need to make herself clear when giving writing assignments.

“From reading this assignment, I wouldn’t have guessed it would be problematic, which probably says something about me. I write assignment directions, and I just assume that students will know what I mean. Then, I get annoyed when their papers don’t represent the sort of work I hoped they would do.”

To this, Mary declared, “Before coming into the Writing Center, I didn’t know I had the right to ask teachers questions. I thought I was just supposed to shut up and listen. But today you did all of the listening. Using my brain instead of relying on yours really worked! And *I* taught *you* something. HA! Amazing!”

For the next several quarters before Mary graduated, she visited the Writing Center several times a week, sometimes to talk through another challenging situation involving her fear of speaking up and other times to pop in and announce her latest victory: “I was telling my brother about how much I’m struggling with algebra, and he just laughed. He thinks I’m crazy to be going back to school at my age. He even told me to drop algebra class because he thinks it is too hard for me. He actually said it’s above my head, and for once in my life, I didn’t agree and apologize,” Mary declared proudly. “Instead, I told him ‘this math stuff isn’t gonna get *me*.’ Last year, I might have said ‘you’re right,’ but not anymore. I’m meeting with my algebra teacher in a few minutes. He said he’d go over the hard parts again with me.”

I don’t know the specific outcomes of Mary’s many writing assignments or of that algebra class. But I do know, in spite of the inevitable setbacks, that she graduated a better, more confident writer and person, who believed in herself. Carly and Erica and

many others in the writing center truly believed in her worth and abilities, and in the process, they helped her to trust that her teachers did too. Because of her personal history, Mary had learned to assume the worst about herself and, by extension, the teachers who imposed what she saw as their intimidating expectations upon her. In the writing center, she started to consider both herself and her teachers differently. And the consultants who worked with her gained valuable insight into the constant need to unpack not only the instructor's but also the students' assumptions for how they inform and shape the academic experience.

### **PARTICIPATING IN THE DIALOGUE**

Once the many students like Mary make their ways to the writing center (if, indeed, they ever do), we have a fighting chance to establish with them relationships that foster this sort of growth, development, and self discovery. But it isn't easy, especially when the negative assumptions are truly being made by the teachers, rather than by the student herself, as was the case with Mary. Since so many students have come to expect an authoritarian, master/apprentice model of education, they are apt to believe that it the natural order of things. They rarely understand the underlying implications of such a rendering, but many have learned to live within it and to behave in ways that are consistent with how they have been labeled. In some cases, this means that these students exhibit little confidence in their abilities to write, and they allow their teachers to negatively influence if not control their thinking.

So in the writing center, when we tell student writers that our aim is to provide a more egalitarian educational experience, we have to make it happen. Explaining to them

the benefits of such a shift in practice isn't enough. Sure, it's important to emphasize the more open discussions we'll be able to have since we are not in the position to evaluate the writing for a grade. And it's wise to let them know that we are writers who understand how difficult and maddening the task can be and that we are there to help them learn how to think through the process. But we must become models who live the alternative approach since as I've come to know by scrutinizing my own teaching practices, the messages of our actions hold much more weight than do those conveyed by our words.

With Mary, this meant helping her to reverse her own assumptions as a student by inviting her into and then making space for her contributions within a shared dialogue. In the following scenario, it meant the same thing, but it involved undoing negative assumptions from the other side—a teacher's perspective as well as my own. “We want these students to understand the importance of strong communication skills. Can you help me design an assessment test to give to them?” said Nita Larson, who had been told by someone that I am the campus Writing Center Coordinator and could maybe help. At the time, Nita was the Coordinator of Internships for the Technical Academy, a program sponsored by Metro that targets at-risk high school kids by having them come and experience the trades in an eleven-week program that spends time both in the college classroom and on the job. As it turned out, she had seventy of these kids who had been identified by someone, somewhere, as “at risk” coming to our campus a full week before the program officially began. The high schools would already be in session, and to justify releasing the kids for this technical academy, they asked Nita if she could “keep them busy” the week before our fall quarter at the college began.



Nita's idea of keeping them busy: a writing assessment.

My role: talking her out of it.

“Why an assessment?” I asked, thinking of Ira Shor's claim that “teachers and students need freedom from standardized tests, commercial textbooks, basal readers, and required syllabi ...[which] restrict student-centered, dialogic, and participatory education” (*When* 84).

“Why not? They're awful writers, and they need to get better if they're going to make it—even in the trades.”

“How will an assessment help them to become better writers? And what do you mean by *even* in the trades?”

Pause.

“Well...I don't know, but you should see some of the accident reports and employee evaluations they've written.”

“How do you plan to score or, more importantly, use the assessment?”

A Longer Pause.

“Just to show them how serious this is.”

“Do you think they'll respond favorably to such a wake-up call?”

“No. They don't respond to anything.”

“Then, why do it?”

“Well, we have to do *something* to keep them busy!”

I thought to myself, “No wonder they don't respond.”

“These kids are interested in auto body, welding, utility line, small engine repair, construction, and ventilation,” I said. “What good do you imagine will come from filling

their time with a writing assessment? Canned assessment tests are often met with resistance even from those whose primary interest is writing, and they are not always the most reliable measure of a student's ability."

"But, how will they know how serious this is?" she pleaded.

"I have a hunch they already know. They just don't know how to do anything about it or why they should even care."

"Well, *I'll* tell them what to do about it—take it seriously for once!!"

As I sat there with Nita trying to formulate a response, I was at a loss. In these moments, my role as writing center coordinator takes on a new dimension. Part of me wanted to leave her to smolder and say, "Sorry, this is outside of my realm" while another part of me felt compelled to put out the fire. This presented an ethical dilemma for me, though, since neither course of action models the sort of dialogical interchange that is at the core of our mission. I thought to myself that both options—walking away from and taking control of the situation—would deny my responsibility to be a participant in this dialogue. I also kept thinking of the Freire line about the need, sometimes, to speak *to* the people not just *with* them (64). As I understand it, by this Freire means that there must be a certain degree of directiveness when teaching, which for a fleeting moment helped me to justify in my mind the second course of action—taking over and telling this woman what should happen instead of an assessment. But then I knew that then I'd be imposing my own judgments and expectations upon her, which is precisely the move I opposed with her plan of action for these students.

I finally came to the conclusion that the healthy, balanced directiveness of which Freire speaks certainly would not entail forcing students to crank out timed writing—

relatively meaningless measures of their competence—while punishing and threatening them in the process. But it very well might involve guiding students to take ownership of their writing abilities. So I finally stated, “Let’s see what the students think.”

Another very long pause.

Far more often than not, the students’ opinions of how their educations might take shape are never figured into the equation, which assumes that they have nothing to offer. The potential, then, for sharing a teacher-to-student relationship based on dialogue is all but lost when pedagogical practices rely on misguided authority rather than a shared sense of meaning. As I sat waiting for Nita to conceive of including students in this conversation, it occurred to me why I so strongly dislike our institution’s required master syllabus, a template that features assorted college policies and regulations. Like Nita, its driving assumption is that students are problematic. Her comments and tone suggested to me that she assumed that these folks were bad writers and that assessment tests, punishment really, would motivate them, at least, to admit it (as if *that* were the source of their problems). Similarly, our standardized syllabus sends a message that students will feel the urge to cheat, so threatening them with turnitin.com (plagiarism detection software) will encourage them to do their own work. It also assumes that students may mistreat the resources available to them, so it issues a warning for them to read the “Procedures Memorandum on Acceptable Use of Information Technology and Resources” provided by the college. It further assumes that many of them will not be up to the task, so it provides the process and final date for withdrawing from the course. Both Nita and the syllabus presume that the role of gatekeeper, in its worst possible configuration as disciplinarian and keeper of the key to knowledge, is necessary, healthy

even. That students should and will respond with due respect. That they are to be acted upon rather than to act on their own accord. After making this connection, I thought to myself “I QUIT!! This place has TOO MANY RULES. And they’re BAD rules!!”

I was brought back to the moment by the sound of Nita’s briefcase being zipped up. “I’ll have to think about this one,” she said, and we agreed to meet again in a few days. In the interim, I thought a lot about how much I disagree with what both Nita and the syllabus assume about students, teachers, and learning. And I realized as writing center coordinator how frequently I am faced with ideas so contrary to the dialogical approach we use in the writing center. Overcoming the resistance, one student at a time, as with Mary, has its own challenges to be sure. But this was bigger and more daunting. It involved another program director and seventy students at once. Before I could even begin establishing an open dialogue with this large group, I had to convince Nita both to engage in dialogue with me and to entertain the notion of inviting the students into the conversation in the first place. I determined that I needed to find a way to employ the same strategy that both Erica and Carly used with Mary. They believed in her, gave her room to think for herself, and pushed her to assume some of the responsibility they relinquished by participating in rather than dominating their discussions. In essence, they operated from positive assumptions, which is what I needed to do with both Nita and her group of students.

While preparing for my next meeting with Nita, I passed the situation by Sandra, my office mate and English colleague, and asked for her advice. “I can tell you why she’s so bent on assessment,” she quickly interjected. “At the last Department Representative meeting with the deans, Michael [the Vice President of Academic Affairs]

spent about forty-five minutes emphasizing the need for more formal measures of accountability in the trades. I'm sure Dr. Fendley, her Dean, is putting the heat on Nita and everybody else after that." I had learned about this conversation a few days earlier when reading the meeting minutes, but it didn't even occur to me to put the two together. I wondered why Nita hadn't mentioned it, and it was a little unsettling to think that my own negative assumptions about standardized tests had prevented me from imagining that there may be a reason for her suggestion. When I thought of it this way, I could see myself within Chris Gallagher's claim that "in our zeal for critical pedagogy, we risk devoting ourselves to discourse that effectively removes itself from this arena by idealizing the transformative intellectual and by not paying attention to specific institutional contexts" (83). Acting as the sort of transformative educator who universally opposed such institutional structures as assessment tests, I, in effect, was limiting my chances of working with rather than against Nita to determine a better alternative, just as I was accusing her of doing with the students.

When Nita and I next met, I intended to articulate that parallel and admit that I hadn't given her a fair chance to explain her standpoint. She quickly opened the conversation by saying that she had thought at length about my suggestion for soliciting the students' input and admitted that she couldn't fathom any reason why we would do that. "You don't understand how unruly this group is," she declared. "We always have extra security in the room in case they get out of hand."

"What might they do?" I wondered aloud.

"You never know with a group of teenage boys" she said with a tone of warning in her voice.

Having never taught below the college age, I must admit, her comments momentarily altered my perspective and prompted me to second-guess the wisdom of putting myself in such a position. So I started there. “Maybe we could split the large group in half and have two sessions. That might be more manageable.” This made good sense to Nita, so we readily agreed to do just that. “What will they do in these sessions, though?” she questioned. “I told the schools we’d have them do some writing, and my Dean keeps pushing assessment,” she finally offered, opening the door for my admission. “They need to prove that we in the trades hold our students to the same standards as everyone else at Metro,” she went on. “So an assessment seems to make sense given that we’ll have a big group gathered together anyway.”

“In some ways, maybe. I just don’t think the pressure to be accountable always plays out in the most responsible ways, which I now realize is why I pretty much shot down the idea the last time we talked. Sorry. I should have made that clear instead of just expecting you to connect the dots.”

“But what would be irresponsible about giving these kids a writing assessment?”

“I don’t think it would be irresponsible, exactly. I just wonder if this is the best forum for an assessment. These students, technically, are not even Metro students. They are enrolled in this program through their high schools, and they are not getting college credit. So I doubt whether the college could even make use of the numbers we might gather by assessing these kids’ writing skills. Maybe I could work with you, too, on coming up with another way to assess writing in the trades.”

“OK. I guess,” she responded.

“Are there other programs or courses that are required of all Metro students?”

“Yes. We have a general introduction into the trade, and we have that technical writing that everyone has to take,” said Nita.

“That’s perfect. What kinds of writing do they do for the writing course?” I inquired.

“They do all kinds of writing, stuff that will help them on the job, such as reports and evaluations. Most of them are actually doing writing for their internships.”

“That seems like an appropriate place to start thinking about assessing students’ writing,” I said.

“Yes. I can see that,” she agreed, warming up to the idea.

“Perhaps,” I suggested, “the technical writing teachers could even be a part of it and help us find ways to assess this writing that they are doing for their jobs.”

“Makes sense to me. I will say these kids do get pretty interested when they start talking about their jobs. It’s probably the best writing that they do because they actually need to care about it. I’ll see what the technical writing folks think. But we still have to figure out what to do with the group next week if not an assessment. The schools were glad to hear they’d be writing.”

“I was glad to hear that too, as a matter of fact. The key is coming up with a task that they might find useful. You say they come alive when they talk about their jobs. What if we have a conversation with them at the beginning of the session and ask them what they think they should write and then give them the remaining time to work on it?”

Nita suddenly reverted back to skepticism and said, “It’s worth a shot, I suppose, but good luck! They can be a pretty unruly bunch.”

“I think we can make this work,” I exclaimed, sensing that she would get on board as she had with the assessment idea. “If we can get them to trust that they have some ownership in the process, I think they’ll behave differently than you might expect. It’s natural for them to resist what is imposed upon them without a logical explanation, as tests customarily are, but if we give them some responsibility for how they’ll spend our time together, I think they’ll rise to it.”

She was willing to go along with my plan, which I saw as progress, but it quickly became obvious that she saw her role as the one who would manage the testosterone in the room and mine as the one who would find a way to engage the students. She spent the rest of her planning efforts recruiting warm bodies to position around the room for added security, which, I must admit still troubled me. From the successes I’d experienced and witnessed in drawing individual writers into the dialogue, I knew that this could work with her students as well. However, I couldn’t help but panic when I considered the sheer numbers. “What if these kids act out like she predicts?” I worried. “What if they gang up on me and refuse to participate in the conversation? What if my plan backfires? What if the orderly, albeit meaningless, use of a test would have been a better idea after all? What if Nita is right?” Neither Carly nor Erica could have felt comfortable with Mary grilling her for answers, I reasoned. But they made it work by insisting on having a dialogue, thereby resisting the temptation to slip into lecture mode. They steadily encouraged Mary’s involvement in the process by believing in her and by giving her room to participate. I can do that, I thought. I can. Of course, I can. This is what we’re all about. Prompting Nita to name and discuss other alternatives for an assessment was certainly a start.



Moving from these one-to-one nuggets of success to the one-to-thirty-five reality of the classroom, I was quickly challenged to walk the talk. Standing in front of the first group of Technical Academy students a week later and trying to hush the crowd enough to get started, I could feel myself wanting to run for my former cover (authority) and abandon my plan to host an open-ended conversation. I quickly schemed, once I quieted them down, I would introduce myself, point out the various security forces around the room, and lecture about the virtues of well-crafted prose. If anyone got out of line, I would have him removed from the classroom and taken down the hall to the Dean's office (as the Dean had encouraged me to do if necessary). Nita was poised and ready at the front of the room for whenever such an escort was needed, so all was in place. Fortunately, Mary's face kept appearing in my mind as if to play the angel in my ongoing internal debate.

I took a series of deep breaths and made up my mind that even a failed attempt at dialogue would be a better result than becoming part of the disciplinarian regime. And having determined that I couldn't rearrange the power dynamic by moving the theater style affixed rows into a circle, I introduced myself and then moved around the room. Rather than talking at them, I proceeded as originally planned by positioning myself to facilitate a dialogue with only this leading question as our prompt: "What is good writing?" At first, there was only a roar of mumblings, to which I did not respond. Then, a silence permeated the room, to which I also did not respond. "What do you mean 'what is good writing?'" one of them finally blurted out.

“What is good writing?” I repeated. They’ll fill the silence, I reminded myself. Let them. They will. Such an exercise in restraint this was, especially with Nita staring from the front of the room with her authoritative gaze.

“There’s no such thing,” another young man finally offered up. “Writing just plain sucks,” to which the room erupted into laughter.

“You’re right,” I replied, once they had quieted to a low murmur. “Writing is hard. And sometimes it just plain suck. But when doesn’t it suck?” I asked. “Have you ever enjoyed writing yourself or reading someone else’s writing?”

“I like to read *Playboy*,” one kid quickly interjected, living up to Nita’s expectations. Another round of uncontrollable laughter rippled through the crowd, which consisted of over sixty boys and four girls. Then silence. A few insults came next from a boy in the back row about that being the only thing this kid would ever be able to read at the rate he was going. Determined to prove to Nita their capacity to think for themselves, I suppressed the dread that was rising within me by replaying in my head the reasoning for our commitment to dialogue and democracy. It doesn’t mean we promote or allow a free-for-all, I reminded myself, as the jabs about *Playboy* escalated. The lines from Freire that I recite often to consultants and administrators seeking to understand the idea of a writing center kept racing through my mind: “dialogue does not impose” but it also doesn’t mean that you enter into it without a set of objectives (168). I had to find a way to focus on my aims for this group, which were to allow them to voice their opinions about writing and to include them in the decision about what sort of writing is worth practicing.

I walked over to the boy in the back row and addressed him directly: “So what sort of reading is more worthy and what would it take for the other young gentleman to reach that level?”

“Something with fewer distractions,” he chided, and we all laughed.

“Name something,” I said.

Apparently sensing that I wasn’t going to let his punch lines be the last word, he straightened himself up in the chair and stuttered around uncomfortably for at least thirty seconds before finally saying, “Well, like, you know, *Popular Mechanics* and stuff.”

“OK, good, why is that a better thing for him to read?”

“Well, I suppose because it has a lot of cool stuff that he can show to the guys at work.”

Thus, the dialogue began, finally. Without one mention of their capacity (or lack thereof) for writing, I and several others in the group joined this brainstorming session, which eventually led to an acknowledgement of why they probably should care more about good writing. “Writing can actually get you places,” one gentleman who had yet to weigh into the conversation shyly admitted.

“You’re so right,” I affirmed. “Can you say more?”

“I know writing a half-way decent letter matters because I had to write one to get my current job.” Many in the group were surprised to learn that his job was at a garage in town where he served as an apprentice to the head mechanic. “I’ve had three mechanic jobs,” one young man claimed, “and I’ve never even filled out an application.” A few others piped in to tell him that he’s lucky, that it isn’t that way everywhere. One even

shared a story about not getting the job because he wrote what he described as “a shitty letter.”

Although some in the group acted as if they were in pain and rolled their eyes whenever someone spoke up, this sort of honesty led many more of them to begin talking about the ways that they could make their lives easier by knowing how to write reasonably well. Since getting a job was soon identified by the group as a common priority, I asked them to think about how writing might help them to achieve that goal. At first, they couldn't imagine anything beyond a cover letter. Then, someone recalled the questions he had to answer on some application, and another mentioned a job ad that asked for a résumé.

At that point, Nita abandoned her post, physically moving to about row three where she stood among the students, and chimed in to the dialogue. She asked, “How many of you would like to work for the tradesmen and women who allowed you to job shadow last week?” Several hands shot up, to which Nita replied, “Maybe you could write to them.” After much discussion, the group determined that it wouldn't make sense for most of them to write to apply for the jobs yet since they wouldn't be out of school for eight more months. One young man suggested they write to thank them for their time and to get their names in the employers' heads at the same time. This idea seemed to go over well, so we took an informal vote, by way of a show of hands, and the majority agreed this was worth writing.

We spent fifteen minutes brainstorming about the purpose and contents of a thank-you note. Then, they spent the next hour writing, many of them toiling over word choice, trying to recall details of the visit, and revising to get their messages just right.

Some (but a small few) also stared off into the distance, never connecting pen to paper. But those who beamed with pride as they showed me their final drafts on college letterhead made it all worthwhile. Most had never written a thank you note, and some admitted that they were glad they now had. Nita came over to me as they were all filing out to announce that she heard one young man say, “No teacher has *ever* asked me how writing could matter to me outside of school.”

“That really worked,” Nita whispered to me. “I can’t believe you pulled it off!”

“You pulled it off every bit as much as I did,” I told her. “It was your mention of the job shadow that gave them the idea of the thank-you note.”

“I suppose so,” she said hopefully. “The students made me think of it with their talk of job correspondence. So I guess it was a group effort.”

“That’s the best kind!”

For educators and students alike, the mindset shift needed to become participants in the dialogue doesn’t always come naturally. Students such as Mary and the Technical Academy folks have to suppress the more prominent voices that have been playing in their heads for years (“you can’t do this...you’re not worthy...other people are smarter than you”) enough to even hear and trust the invitations. And educators have to resist the urges or pressures to impose our (or others’) agendas upon them and to fill the silences and the disagreements with our answers. Freire helps me to understand why it is so crucial that we as educators lead the way by altering both our thinking and our actions. “Leaders who do not act dialogically, but insist on imposing their decisions,” he notes, “do not organize the people—they manipulate them” (178).

In retrospect, I can see that if I would have neglected to help Nita begin to understand my reasoning for not giving an assessment to these kids, which was my initial inclination, I would have only manipulated the dynamic to reach my desired end. My voice would have just become the loudest. It was a matter of stepping outside of my own realm of understanding enough to appreciate hers. She was in a position to satisfy institutional accountability requirements but had little background in either writing or assessment to guide her. And she had an obligation to the schools, both to have their students write and to exercise crowd control while they were in Metro's care.

In essence, as much as I had to help Nita to trust and to convey to her students that they were capable thinkers, I had to learn not to see her motivations through the lens of my own expectations. I constantly return to this interaction for all it taught me and continues to teach me about the need to acknowledge and accept that one's institutional context, necessarily, and rightfully so, influences her thinking. Thinking of how this logic applies to me as well provides useful insight into the ways that my positioning within the institution may be perceived by others.

### **CONVINCING WRITERS TO USE LANGUAGE FOR CHANGE**

The sort of relationship that we hope to develop with writers in the writing center implies a mutual trust. Aside from believing in our students and living the dialogical approach by humbling ourselves enough to recognize and then alter the messages we send through our own actions, consultants build this trust by hearing and respecting the writer's voice. This final component to a successful writing center dialogue, in many ways, is the most crucial of all since it's the one that gives our students the strength and

confidence to be heard. They often need this push, we learn, as we see rejections such as “ungradeable” and “unacceptable” and “not college writing” written by teachers on their papers. When asked by a consultant to explain the previous comments, a particularly close-minded teacher replied “As I instructed my students, NO THESIS—NO ESSAY—NO GRADE.” This student, he decried, “did not write on the given topic, and I did not give her a choice on this.” How must it have felt for the student to be treated as if she couldn’t and shouldn’t speak for herself?

Another one of his students wrote a paper describing her utopia, which consisted of becoming a secretary, being respected by coworkers, and owning a home so that her grandchildren could visit. His sole comment this time: “This isn’t utopia. It’s like regular life.” Such insensitive and cruel comments, necessarily, forge chasms between teacher and student. At least from our window of perspective into his classroom, this teacher gave his students very little credit. While I want to believe that this couldn’t have been his intention, his own agenda and his disparaging delivery of it created an atmosphere of despair. Clearly, educators all along this harmful spectrum have no concept of what Mike Rose calls the “healing possibilities of the teacher-student relationship” (123). Instead of celebrating and developing the voices that students most vulnerably share in their writing, this particular teacher treats them as unpleasant noises to be hushed. In Freire’s words, “the teacher presents himself to his students as their necessary opposite; by considering their ignorance absolute, he justifies his own existence” (*Pedagogy* 72).

Thankfully, we come in contact with only a small percentage of teachers, like this one, whose pedagogy seems to be based on intimidation and domination. Yet these and

other toxic types, unfortunately, do exist. In the writing center, we are committed to drawing students in rather than alienating them as we pretty regularly see ones who have been silenced by far less offensive remarks. Often, these students, thusly victimized, wind up in the writing center—like this teacher’s students, like Natasha—because they’ve been made to. Given their experience, they rarely wander into the writing center hoping to engage in dialogue or expecting to get writer-to-writer advice. I imagine very few would even identify themselves as “writers.”

Like Mary, many of our students are entrenched in what Freire calls the “culture of silence” of the dispossessed: “Rather than being encouraged and equipped to know and respond to the concrete realities of their world, they [are] kept ‘submerged’ in a situation in which such critical awareness and response [are] practically impossible” (Richard Shaull qtd. in Freire 30). Teachers like the one I’ve just described perpetuate this common practice by discouraging free thought. And those who have traditionally been silenced play their part by believing “that the source of self-knowledge is lodged in others—not in the self” (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, Tarule et al 31). They rarely have reason to believe otherwise.

Knowing that “dialogue cannot be carried on in a climate of hopelessness” (Freire, *Pedagogy* 92), we begin students’ writing center experiences by telling them that *their* concerns and questions will drive the consultations and that we will approach this institutional relationship as a consultancy—cohorts, really, engaging in dialogue in order to make sense of the projects before them and to help them to emerge as better writers. We emphasize their active role in the process and ask many questions, thus sending the message that they have much to teach us about their writing, the subject matter, and the



assignment. Most appear surprised, uncomfortable, and skeptical of a level of respect they maybe have never known in the life of school. Their immediate response, I would imagine, is a sort of mental double take. Learning that the top-down hierarchy they've come to expect will not drive this writing center session is at once surprising and unsettling for most. Part of it may be as Freire points out: "they are so used to following orders that they don't know how to be responsible for their own formation" (Shor and Freire 77). Certainly, this is a frightening prospect, especially when that pattern of behavior has been a lifestyle for students, both within the academy and beyond.

Thus, whenever students have the time and wherewithal to become writing center regulars, we work especially hard to establish and develop relationships that confirm their worth and capacity to think for themselves. Along with believing in our student writers and inviting them to engage in dialogue with us and their teachers, we see it as our responsibility to encourage them to name and transform the world. "Human existence can not be silent," says Freire, "nor can it be nourished by false words, but only by true words, with which men and women transform the world" (88). Helping students to negotiate the negative assumptions that may have influenced their personal and academic development is a place to start. Prompting them to take action, in other words, to use their own voices to change their worlds, is the next step. In the remainder of this chapter, I will share stories to illustrate two manifestations of our dialogical efforts to effect this sort of change.

For some, such as Scott, the dialogue helps him to make connections take on new responsibilities. Scott was a writing center regular who had his sights set on medical school, yet he couldn't get beyond his Introduction to Literature course. A bright,

meticulous student, Scott would read and reread the poems and stories, take copious notes, and tell me, practically word-for-word, what the pieces were about. However, he would go into class and falter during quizzes, discussions, and exams. It wasn't that he panicked and forgot all that he had gathered through the reading. In fact, when he shared his graded work with me, I could see that he produced some the most well organized, detailed, and careful writing that the professor probably had seen all semester. But, still, Scott couldn't manage to do better than a "D" and couldn't for the life of him figure out why. His professor's written comments and my verbal explanations mirrored one another almost exactly. In essence, in spite of his deft plot summaries, he wasn't answering the questions, which involved probing for symbolism and meaning.

For that entire semester, Scott and I met once or twice a week. We read his writing and discussed at length the differences between summary and analysis. Conceptually, he understood. He was smart, and he acknowledged that this all made sense. He could even see that his writing did not delve below the surface. Actually doing the analysis and articulating it in print was another story, though. It was as if an invisible force were preventing Scott from taking that next step, and I began to wonder if it had to do with the degree to which his previous education had prepared him to think for himself. He was definitely book smart and could answer any questions I had about the literature itself, but none of the strategies I shared with him on thinking critically about the literature seemed to ring familiar to him.

Eventually, one day, I decided to abandon the literature and writing that was in front of us since it only loomed uncomfortably as a roadblock to his progress. Instead, as I should have done when working with Natasha, I diverted the conversation to his

interests—his workouts, his science classes, and his job. I asked what Scott felt passionate about and soon hit the jackpot when he started telling me about his love for gymnastics. Since he revealed that he was an avid gymnast and gymnastics teacher, I acknowledged his expertise and asked him where in town I should go to sign my children up for a class. As if ignited by fire, Scott could hardly contain himself while he clearly and concisely enumerated the many evils of the local gymnastics scene. Aside from the gym that employed him at the time, apparently, every other gig in town hired inexperienced teachers, promoted substandard techniques, and lacked work ethic.

I patiently listened and sympathized with Scott. Then, once he had simmered a bit, I put a blank sheet of paper in front of him and encouraged him to write about what we had just discussed. I told him to pretend he was writing to persuade me to choose his gym for my children. He looked a little confused but complied and began writing. I picked up a book and began reading to avoid lurking over his shoulder. Only about five minutes had passed when Scott abruptly put his pen on the table and stopped writing. Looking over the nearly two pages of text in front of him, Scott said simply, “I get it.” And then he proceeded to declare, as if it were brand new information, all that I and his literature professor had been saying those past few months about making an argument and forwarding an opinion. “I can’t just tell you what we do or what all the other bozos do. I have to tell you why what we do is right and what they do is not.” Not summary but opinion. Yes. “And I really can’t expect you just to believe me if you’re going to entrust your kids to us. I need to back up what I’m saying with stories and incidents that prove what I’m saying.” Analysis and evidence. Yes. “I mean, these are your kids. I want you to know that our gym is the right one, the only one to even consider if you want

them to learn anything and appreciate this great sport.” Conviction and purpose. Yes, yes, yes. Scott threw his hands in the air as if to declare victory, and, then, without warning, sprung out of his chair and did a back flip right there in the writing center.

I only wish every consultation that successfully urges a student to think critically and make self discoveries would prompt such a befitting and symbolic response. For many, it *is* a complete turnaround, perhaps more gradual than Scott’s, but no less monumental. Because I had time in this individualized setting to grow a solid relationship with Scott and then, in this moment, to turn the conversation to his brand of literacy, I was able to convey to him that his story is worth telling and hearing. In our prior sessions, I could see that I had joined his teachers by trying to simply deposit an understanding into Scott’s head; thus, I denied him a role in “the act of creation” (Freire, *Pedagogy* 89) that is dialogue at its best. And I lessened my chances of learning something from Scott in the process.

Needing to find a way for Scott to name his experience helped me to realize my tendency toward naming it for him. My shift in thinking and in practice opened a door for Scott to draw meaningful parallels, gain confidence, and take more ownership both in his writing and in our conversations. After his revelation, I tried to make sure I had no fixed agenda for our sessions, just the goal of letting them develop in ways that were useful for Scott. Democratic spaces, Rose reminds us, “is, by definition, vibrant and dynamic, discomfoting and unpredictable” (238). For Scott, a confident and capable student already, the lack of the structure that had determined the shape of his education was liberating as it cleared space for him to make sense of what we were discussing and make connections between seemingly disparate schools of thought. He visited the

writing center after that semester once to share the final grade he earned in his literature class and another time to show me a sales brochure he created for his gym. What Scott learned by participating in the dialogical setting of the writing center became a tool he could use in life. “My boss is loving me right now,” said Scott proudly, “because he’s been wanting to do more advertising. When I told him I have learned just what he needs to do to convince parents like you to choose our gym, he said ‘you’re hired,’ and offered to pay me two hundred bucks to come up with a sales brochure that we could send in the mail.”

“That’s awesome,” I exclaimed.

“Who knew figuring how to think would earn me cash?!” declared Scott with a laugh.

“This is just the beginning for you, Scott,” I assured him, “and for me as a consultant too. I learned a lot from you about keeping my mouth shut!”

When even small pockets of our worlds are altered for the better for having engaged in dialogue, we enjoy the most gratifying aspect of our jobs as writing center consultants. For Scott, it was a matter of facilitating his personal discovery of a voice that just hadn’t take shape. And, for others, such as Polly, whose story I will share next, it’s a process of helping them find the courage to admit that their voices are ones that others need to hear.

Polly, a student returning to college in her early forties, was initially shy and apologetic about the assistance she sought with her writing. Her papers were always carefully crafted, well before the deadlines, and she came in several times with new revisions to make sure that she had everything just right. I would compliment her efforts

and improvement, but she would minimize her achievements by pointing back to a grammatical mistake she had made or to a sentence with awkward wording. And she would credit me for helping me to make sense of the content. But when I told her how much I enjoyed working with her as we were wrapping up a recent consultation, she remarked: “That’s just amazing to me. I used to think, to put it bluntly, that I was nothing but trash and nobody would want to hear what I have to say. But the writing center has made me believe that isn’t true.” Polly has spent several hours a week in the writing center over the past two years, and this was the first time I had ever heard her refer to this rendering of herself in the past tense. I pointed this out to her and congratulated her for it as I had witnessed on several occasions her lack of self esteem. “What made the difference? How did you finally see your former opinion from the other side?”

“It happened in the research paper,” she said with impressive clarity and confidence. For her composition class the previous quarter, she had written about the life-altering experience of having had gastric bypass surgery. Her goal, she told Jeff [the writing center consultant] at the beginning of their first session for that paper, was to convince everyone in her family that it was a good idea. Apparently, they knew very little about the procedure and refused to listen when she tried to explain it to them. They just told her, repeatedly, how crazy she was to throw her money away like that and to put herself in danger. She told me about how difficult it was to put the paper together, especially as she imagined her family’s off-putting reactions to most everything she ever said. In her paper, she detailed the many psychological, mental, and physical reasons she had for justifying the financial burden. She also told me about all of the encouragement

that Jeff gave along the way to be honest and strong. “He helped me to forget about their reactions while I write. That helped a lot.” By the end, she admitted, she made what she thought was a compelling case. Polly seemed so pleased that I thought sure she was going to tell me then that her family finally appreciated her and accepted her decision. A result she desperately wanted when she set out to write the paper.

Instead, she announced that “they wouldn’t read the paper, but my teacher loved it and asked if he could use it as an example for future classes. I can’t believe that. I guess I do know what I’m talking about, at least about something. And Jeff kept telling me that I’m making good points as well. That means the world to me. You two know a lot more than they do,” she said with a confident laugh. On the evaluation form for that session, Polly wrote “I just love how excited Jeff and Katie both get and how they listen to me. I mean, they really listen to me and actually remember what I said last week or the week before. Makes me feel good.”

A few weeks later, Jeff mentioned that he ran into Polly on campus and she couldn’t wait to tell him that she had unearthed her many notebooks that contain twenty years of journaling about the awful hardships she has faced in life, many at the hands of her family members. He said when she first revealed to him that she had been keeping records all of these years, she swore him to secrecy. She was embarrassed to have wasted that time and was afraid that someone to whom she refers in the journal would find out and read all of the awful things she said.

Jeff was hoping she wasn’t going to say she destroyed the journals as he had always feared she might. He had encouraged her on several occasions, instead, to share these experiences and the insights she made (but never believed were worthy) with other

women who had suffered as she had. He had even arranged an appointment for the two of them to meet with a Student Services Counselor to learn about any college-sponsored forums or groups she might join. She hadn't in the past responded proactively to his efforts, though, so he wasn't sure what to expect from her now. But she quickly interjected: "I'm going to write that book. I am. I know I told you before about being afraid of what would happen if other people read it. But I'm beginning to think they really *should* read it. And, if they don't, that's fine too. I'm more interested in getting it into the hands of other women who can relate. I've moved the notebooks from under my bed for the first time in twenty years to the top of my dresser." She had definitely progressed from hiding her words in shame to using that language to effect change.

Jeff cheered her on and asked how he could help her get started. She replied, "you already have."

As we can see from this work with Polly, Jeff clearly understood that "the best and perhaps only way to change student writing is to help students revise their attitudes towards themselves as writers and toward writing" (Warnock and Warnock 19). Further, Jeff realized that "a crucial part of the change is to restore to students the sense of their own authority and responsibility" (19). Respecting Polly's perspective and encouraging her to break the silence helped her to see her worth as a writer and had the best possible result of convincing her to speak out against the many abuses she had suffered. Such an effort will be transformative for her and for those who share her pain. And it changed Jeff too. In his words, "I am humbled by her all of the time. She teaches me more about being brave and standing up for ourselves than I could ever teach her about writing."



Freire cautions us that “if the dialoguers expect nothing to come of their efforts, their encounter will be empty and sterile, bureaucratic and tedious” (*Pedagogy* 92). Students and teachers alike who promote dialogue but also exhibit tendencies of the banking model of education will likely have such a stale experience. However, when consultants, students, and others like Nita who are connected to the writing center in some way expect the most from shared dialogue, their encounters become lively, meaningful, and engaged.

And, in the best case scenarios, our work with students, as was the case with Scott and Polly, illustrates the ultimate, transformative capacity of dialogue. Many like them initially continue to visit the writing center because they seek comfort, but on some level, they become drawn to the possibilities born of democracy. Dewey states that “it is the business of the school environment to eliminate, so far as possible, the unworthy features of the existing environment from influence on mental habitudes” (20). Our job in the writing center, then, is to replace the negative assumptions that have shaped too much of our thinking in the academy and with more forward-looking, proactive notions and actions. This means giving students permission to focus less on forced compliance and more on shared development by engaging their perspectives and giving them the confidence to be heard.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Creating Critical Collegueships

“We must become the change we want to see.”  
*Mahatma Ghandi*

“Just *be* with the writers,” crooned Dr. Erwin, the recent grad hired to revamp the composition program at our university.

Although eager by that point to entertain alternatives to the stifling tic-mark approach, I couldn’t quite grasp this major mind shift. “What exactly does that mean?” I asked.

“It means writers learn by themselves. Teachers should not interfere.”

“But,” I began, “but, then what should we do? I can certainly understand not wanting to interfere with students’ progress, but I’m there to teach. How can I justify staying out of it?”

“You just find a way,” he said. “Just *be* with them, and the rest will follow.”

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Going to the extreme of relinquishing all traces of authority, as this new hire presented it, seemed dangerous and irresponsible. I toiled over it a lot, trying to discern how what seemed like the opposite extreme of the current traditionalism that had defined our curriculum to that point would be the improvement we so desperately needed. I had come to believe that students learn virtually nothing about language use and writing from listening to me wax on about grammar, but I couldn’t imagine them figuring it all out on their own either. Nevertheless, I read Peter Elbow scholarship as Dr. Erwin encouraged us to do and tried to make sense of it. So I learned about this approach and changed

things in my classroom, on the face of it, anyway. I liberated students from the shackles of my former teacher self by promoting free writing, extolling the virtues of personal voice, and celebrating the messiness of it all. These were substantial changes in practice, to be sure, but I had difficulty within this approach to teaching reconciling the fact that, in the end, I still made the necessary, final, authoritative move of assigning grades. It felt like a betrayal of all that I had denounced by sneaking into my cubicle to cast the final judgment after all. I remember thinking that at least with the tic marks, we all knew where each other stood. I couldn't then and I can't now deny my role as the final evaluator, but I've come to know that I can manage it better.

Wrestling with the notion of the “teacher/student contradiction” for my graduate school projects helped me to find a place for my authority as a teacher somewhere between these extremes of imposed order and passive observation. Through trial and error, I became better at sharing control with students without allowing them to misuse it (or misusing it myself). And dialogue was becoming central to my pedagogy. So, a few years later, when I began imagining myself in a new position of authority as writing center coordinator, I looked again to Freire as a touchstone. He helped me to comprehend the struggles I had with Dr. Erwin, who set out to right the current traditional wrongs by deeming all authority bad and wrong. I had come to think the authority that I exercised as the prose police in previous years *was* bad and wrong because it was based in punishment rather than learning. Even so, I couldn't articulate why the seemingly opposite viewpoint being promoted didn't appeal to me.

Eventually, I determined that my understanding of dialogue and his were different. I think our newly hired professor was on board with Freire's view that “a

dialogical situation implies the *absence* of authoritarianism” (Shor and Freire 102).

However, I finally recognized that what seemed to be different about his philosophy was that he didn’t seem to work from the notion that “to achieve the goals of transformation, dialogue implies responsibility, directiveness, determination, discipline, objectives” (Shor and Freire102). He, instead, worked from the belief that students were responsible for their own learning and that teachers who exercised authority only stood to obstruct their forward progress. I had spent the past many years seeking to strike this balance as a teacher and as a writing center consultant—knowing where to draw the line between extreme authority and complete freedom. And I was grateful to have faced this dilemma once I found myself in the more undeniably authoritative role of administrator.

When working with students such as Scott, I had witnessed and experienced firsthand the transformative capacity of dialogue between writer and consultant and saw it as my responsibility to create such an interactive atmosphere. And I knew that creating the sort of writing center at Metro that would foster this possibility relied upon first establishing for the director and the consultants the same dialogical foundation. In other words, getting consultants to embrace this open, healthy middle ground between imposing their opinions and leaving writers to their devices meant embracing and modeling it with both my words and my actions. Promoting dialogue in the broad strokes is one thing, but living it in the details is quite another. I certainly did not want to be, once again, one of those teachers whom bell hooks contends “claimed to follow Freire's model even as their pedagogical practices were mired in structures of domination, mirroring the styles of conservative professors even as they approached subjects from a more progressive standpoint” (“Engaged” 235). But I also couldn’t bring myself to

endorse Dr. Erwin's stance that suggested dialogue really isn't necessary. In the context of my new role, this meant not becoming the sort of administrator who promotes one philosophy and operates from another.

My overall goal, as I have mentioned, was to make sure that the same freedom of expression and responsibility to writers that drives the dialogical consultation would also constitute all other relationships with and within the writing center. I can see in retrospect that setting this initial goal was a key move for me as an administrator because it provided a foundation for my approach to leadership. My initial inclination might have been to take the institution by storm. I was the one who had been dreaming and scheming about the ideal writing center all of those years, after all. And I was hired by folks who had little knowledge of writing centers and who were graciously willing to trust that I did. Without the stronghold of dialogue as the necessary driving force, I could have easily slipped into an authoritative role and made unilateral decisions. Instead, thankfully, I knew I had to practice what I was preaching in the name of maintaining the integrity of the work that we do with writers.

I had to live the concept of "engaged pedagogy" as described by hooks. In order to promote education as the practice of freedom, she asserts, the teacher must be willing to take the same risks as she asks the students to take ("Engaged" 237). Embracing this notion had helped me to have the courage to invite the students to share the authority in my upper level Rhetorical Theory course. Both my giving over and their assuming new responsibilities involved risk. The same was true was true when establishing the writing center coordinator/consultant relationship. In asking and expecting the consultants to put themselves out there with writers—to share their own vulnerabilities and to learn as much

as they teach—I as the coordinator had to be willing to do the same. As Freire contends, “Dialogue, as the encounter of those addressed to the common task of learning and acting, is broken if the parties (or one of them) lack humility” (90). My approach to leadership in this democratic space, in many ways, rests upon my capacity for humility and my willingness to take risks.

A more traditional approach to leadership (much like the one I originally took as a teacher) relies more upon exhibiting confidence and maintaining order. This method is definitely tidier, more structured, and, therefore, easier in some ways than the approach I’ve chosen to take as writing center coordinator, but it would necessarily compromise the mission. It would involve, for instance, me making rules, determining policy, and saving face when things don’t go as planned. And it would mean training new consultants “how to” do this work, manual style—first, you do this, then, you do that. Essentially, assuming the onus of control would put me in a position to dictate to rather than collaborate with the consultants. Just as the master/apprentice model to teaching compromises the potential for true education, a similar approach to leadership would diminish the opportunity for meaningful professional development—for both the consultants and me.

Instead, I consider the coordinator/consultant relationship what Brian Lord terms a “critical collegueship.” Our writing centers are staffed by consultants who are faculty members, so the dynamic lends itself to collegiality. My administrative role with this group, as I see it, is to create the sort of community atmosphere that encourages deliberation, investment, and growth. Traditional methods of staff development are more appropriately termed “training” as the person in charge seeks to impart the knowledge

and skills necessary to complete the task at hand. Lord calls this “reductionistic” staff development—giving teachers “a set of behaviors, skills, and items of knowledge to be routinely ‘applied’ in the classroom” (182). I seek to involve the consultants in the process as much as possible, knowing that we will all learn much more if I don’t pretend that I have to give all that they’ll need in the first place. A fair number of our consultants come to the writing center new to this particular line of work, yet they are all experienced teachers. A minimum of two years teaching experience is a prerequisite, but many of our consultants have been teaching just as long as or longer than I have. Therefore, it seemed odd to suddenly sit across the table from my fellow colleagues and conduct anything resembling a traditional “training session.” Even if I were working with a staff of peer of graduate student consultants new to the profession, I would resist a conventional approach for all that it suggests about the roles of those involved.

Critical collegueship does not rely on that sort of “routine dissemination of information and techniques to inspire new practices,” according to Lord. Instead, it “turns to increased reflection, informed debate, honest disagreement, and constructive conflict as tools of change” (194). In such a dynamic, nobody is expected either to supply all of the answers or to learn to live with top-down decisions. Critical collegueship definitely “suggests a different set of responsibilities for teachers, but also provides a set of opportunities for strengthening the profession” (196). Both our writing centers at Metro and ourselves as professionals are stronger for the self reflection, rhetorical listening, productive disequilibrium, and ongoing critique that this approach entails.

## **BEING SELF REFLECTIVE**

For administrators and educators to be the sort who welcome new responsibilities both for themselves and their students, we have some soul-searching to do. While this more critical stance involves sharing some accountability, it also means relinquishing some control, which can be unsettling. For prospective consultants, their ability to reconsider their roles and reflect upon the implications of shifting the locus of control becomes apparent even as I interview them for the positions. My own process of self-reflection has led me to believe that if I expect consultants to embrace the new set of responsibilities, I must, first and foremost, lead by example rather than directive. Making this philosophy and approach apparent right from the start—in the interview—is important.

For me, this means sitting down with prospective consultants and engaging in dialogue. Instead of using a set of guided interview prompts, I rely on the conversation to take me where I need to go in terms of making a hiring decision. In the spirit of inviting collegiality rather than deference, I begin most interviews by explaining how I managed to land this position after teaching fifteen years on the adjunct circuit. In the process, I share the story of how these writing centers at Metro came to be and how my own evolution as a teacher informs the mission, which always involves revealing the shift I had to make from my current-traditional roots in the academy. Then, I encourage the prospective consultants to share the stories of their teaching lives that brought them to the interviews. We soon become teachers talking about teaching, which often leads to pride and appreciation for strengths we have both honed as teachers along with honest acknowledgement of our weaknesses and mistakes.



In a recent interview, for instance, the prospective consultant, Christopher, and I somehow wandered off on a tangent about the worst experiences we have had as writers. In each of our stories, the teachers involved had humiliated us to the point of tears. And we soon realized that we were both still riled up about it (although his experience happened sixteen years ago and mine twenty-two!). My experience involved a marketing professor who, I was now horrified to admit, had treated me just as I had treated Natasha.

As I told Christopher, I wanted to write copy for advertising at the time, and marketing was my minor. For this professor's class, I was wrestling with what I was learning about the ethics of sales as I found certain marketing strategies, such as subliminal advertising, to be deceitful and manipulative. When I mentioned these concerns to the professor, she brushed them aside with a "you're doing fine in the class" or "you don't have anything to worry about because you're not the type who will use advertising that way."

"I hope not," I'd say, "but it seems like that's what it takes to appeal to audiences, and, even more disturbingly, to keep up with the competition. I'm second guessing whether this is the best career for me."

As a professional in the field, rather than engaging my dilemma and helping me to think it through, she just said, "you'll be fine." I found this evasive response to be devastating in much the way Natasha must have reacted to the empty encouragement I consistently offered in lieu of the thoughtful and empathetic replies she most needed. And I admitted to Christopher that unearthing the parallels between my professor's and my own behavior, albeit ever so painful and embarrassing, had given me a whole new

perspective on what students need from us—understanding, compassion, and support—perhaps even more than content and correctness.

Christopher then shared a story about learning to respect anything a student chooses to write after smarting for years over his fifth grade teacher humiliating him in front of their entire class by intercepting, reading out loud, and critiquing a poem that Christopher intended to be read only by his girlfriend. His embarrassment, he acknowledged, was escalated by peer pressure, but he said he never forgot how it felt to have his writing ridiculed in that way. We concluded what had turned into a lengthy discussion appreciating what our bad experiences with writing had taught us even as the memories of them reminded us of the weight/lasting impact of our positions as teachers.

Interviews like this one, because they involve practicing and thereby promoting the sort of humility at the core of assuming a less authoritarian role, reveal my style of leadership while also telling so much more about the prospective consultants than I could probably ever glean from the question “what is your teaching philosophy?” Most importantly, they serve the important function of putting both parties on common ground, which is the essence of the writing center dynamic. Those who easily switch modes in this setting, as this consultant was able to do, more readily embrace the more collegial exchange of the writing center consultation.

Not surprisingly, I’ve found that the dialogical approach to the interview reveals just as much when the interviewees hesitate to make the leap into this new territory. It suggests that maybe they aren’t the best fit for the job since challenging traditional roles causes discomfort. Of the thirty some consultants I have hired these past several years, those who haven’t worked out are the three who have insisted on remaining in what they

see as the traditional, appropriate role of the employee—deferential, compliant, submissive. Predictably, in their writing center work, they also couldn't shake the authoritative role of consultant as master and student as apprentice, which, of course, is in direct opposition of the democratic relationship we're trying to foster. As one of our consultants recently wrote in a self-evaluation, "a functional democracy is one where all the participants are willing to avoid, or at least suspend, the impulse to play any of the ascribed roles that a power-based system invites."

### **LEARNING TO LISTEN RHETORICALLY**

When approaching critical collegiality as professional development, participants must reflect upon their own practices, but "this kind of collegiality cannot be fostered in environments of professional isolation" (Lord 185). We need to create a community of teachers as engaged learners who have "opportunities to voice and share doubts and frustrations as well as successes and exemplars" (183). Creating such a dynamic, according to Lord, is a matter of developing "those dispositions or habits of mind that provoke self-examination of classroom practice" or, in this context, writing center practice and administration (194).

Since many competing ideas, personalities, and pedagogies enter in to the mix of conversations and negotiations for and within the writing center, being able to "rhetorically listen" as Krista Ratcliffe recommends is the key to establishing the trust needed to build such an open exchange. Of course, by its very nature, the dialogue at the core of our mission implies listening, but as she admits, "listening is hardly a simple solution" to the scarcity of opportunities for meaningful cross-cultural dialogue,

particularly given “the power differentials of our particular standpoints” (197-98). However, she argues, rhetorical listening is one of the best tools we have to realize “discursive possibilities” between cultural groups and positions and promote dialogue among them (197).

In our writing centers at Metro, the potential for such cross-cultural communication exists on many levels—between me as the coordinator and the consultants, between the writing center and the institution, between consultants and teachers, and between consultants and students, to name a few. Being charged with creating our writing centers from the ground up provided the most immediate incentive for me to promote rhetorical listening as both professional and program development. I was forging new ground, inventing every day, and with dialogue at the center of our mission, I needed to find a way to listen to and account for the many discourses in and around the writing center. Ratcliffe invokes a version of understanding, which she terms “standing under” to describe this process. In her words, “standing under the discourses of others means first acknowledging the existence of these discourses; second, listening for the (un)conscious presences, absences, unknowns; and third, consciously integrating this information into our world-views and decision making” (206).

In this sense, rhetorical listening becomes a tool for navigating institutional waters. When I was hired by Metro, I had never created institutional documents, program policies, or job requirements. And I had certainly never made decisions about hiring, preparing, and evaluating employees. Plus, I was new to the institution. So I chose to listen rhetorically, for the most part, because I had a lot to learn. I *needed* input, and I sought it mainly from those with whom the success of the venture largely rested—

the consultants, the ones who would be working with writers. As I saw it, we were all teachers embarking upon new territory, they as consultants and I as their leader. That first year of the writing center's existence, I considered the consultants a team of cofounders whose various standpoints I relied upon to help determine our place within the institution.

I recruited three teachers I knew from my adjunct days and two others who were currently employed at Metro. Only two of the five new hires had ever worked in writing centers, so we set out, first, to understand the work that was in front of us. I shared with them all that I had come to know about writing centers. But I also sought the different institutional perspectives that these five consultants brought to the table. Listening in this way, says Ratcliffe, "not only signifies respect but also asks listeners to acknowledge, to cultivate, and to negotiate conventions of different discourse communities" (210). I counted on the Metro veterans to help me recognize and find my way through the discourse of institutional policy and the terrain of individual personalities. They often advised me what to consider in light of school politics and logistics and how to approach the right people for the best results. I drew upon the writing center veterans for direction, as we often brainstormed together about what worked and what didn't in our previous writing center experience. These consultants helped to best position and represent the writing center. And I looked to the three who had never worked in a writing center to play the devil's advocate and imagine all of the misconceptions teachers like them might have about the place and purpose for a writing center at this institution. They provided the discourse of resistance for the purpose of troubleshooting and laying a strong foundation. Rhetorically listening in these moments is a "way of helping us recognize

that our standpoints are not autonomous points of static stases but rather complex webs of dynamically intermingled cultural structures and subjective agency” (Ratcliffe 209).

Considering not just my own interests and hopes for the writing center but those of all others involved, as a group, we are, as Chris Gallagher recommends, “developing our collective ability...to read and write, and *re-vision*, institutional discourses” (81).

We had several meetings during those first few quarters that proceeded as did our planning conversations—as opportunities to invent shared understandings about our roles and what they mean for the students, for the institution, and for ourselves. I would typically initiate the discussions with a scenario or a question, and together we would work through the possibilities and potential dilemmas surrounding the issue at hand. Many of those early meetings focused on troubleshooting and problem-solving. The first week we were in business, for instance, a teacher whose class I had visited for a writing center orientation walked an ELL student down the hall and asked the consultant who was working at the time “to teach him grammar.” Our previous discussions about the purpose, philosophy, and mission of our writing center provided the discourse for her response. She turned to the student, introduced herself, and calmly explained to him that she would gladly work with him on all levels of his writing, explained the conversational nature of the exchange, and showed him how to sign up for an appointment. And she assured the teacher that once the higher order concerns were addressed, she and the student would certainly consider grammar. It just wouldn’t be their sole focus. The teacher, in the consultant’s words, was “visibly disappointed” with this explanation but thanked her for her time and, with the student, left the writing center looking defeated.

The consultant later mentioned that she would like to process the situation with me. She was annoyed by the teacher's initial presumptuousness but felt conflicted about how the scenario played out. I asked her if she would mind bringing it to the group for our collective response instead as I felt inclined to listen for my own "self-interested intent," as Ratcliffe calls it (205). And I hoped the rest of the staff as critical colleagues could help me to see beyond the offense that I immediately took to the teacher's blatant disregard for all that I shared with his class just a few days prior.

At first, the consultants were taken aback by the exchange as well. While our collective impulse was to get defensive, we spent a hearty hour at that week's meeting more responsibly discussing the implications of the teacher's request, his mode of delivery, and the message that his action was sending about his expectations for the writing center. We decided that the discourse of the academy, which figures resources such as a writing center in service to the faculty, had spoken more forcefully to this teacher than I had in the writing center orientation. From our perspective, this teacher, in spite of all of the messages I had been sending to the contrary, tried to will the writing center to be what he needed it to be—a fix-it shop, a remedial center, a service station. He did not seem to want to believe otherwise, or he wouldn't have made such an unrealistic request. And, we concluded, he obviously didn't place much stock in his student's ability to think and develop as a writer. If he did, he probably wouldn't have presented the student as a problem that needs to be solved. That he was the master and the student was his apprentice was obvious. Yet neither the teacher nor the student seemed to be uncomfortable within such a pecking order. And both of them seemed to think it was perfectly natural to expect the writing center consultant to fall in line and do

as directed. One consultant commented, “Of course, they did. That’s just the way it is in college.”

Recognizing these external expectations and realities helped us to understand what we would be up against in the immediate weeks and months of representing (and living up to) our mission. Convincing teachers and students alike who are so entrenched in this traditional mindset that we will offer an alternative approach to teaching and learning would not be easy. As the conversation proceeded, even more significantly, several of us even admitted worrying about slipping back into teacher-as-expert mode ourselves, thereby allowing the dominant discourse of the academy to wash over us as well. I and a few others who were trained in the current-traditional approach to teaching confessed that it had certainly washed over us before.

Conceding our own potential to defy the dialogical model was a breakthrough. It prompted us to listen anew to the discourse of the teacher’s words and actions “not *for* intent but *with* intent” in order to understand them (Ratcliffe 205). We spent several minutes deconstructing the scenario, admitting that we hadn’t even considered what may have motivated the instructor to bring his student to the writing center. When approached from this angle, the conversation naturally turned to our own experiences with ELL students when we simply didn’t know what to do to overcome the language barriers. This helped us to empathize with the teacher, who identified himself to the consultant as a member of the Biology faculty. We acknowledged that he must have felt a magnified sense of helplessness given the fact that his expertise did not include the study of language as ours does.



That he hoped grammar was something we could serve up to his student, as if in a tidy package “to go,” was actually beginning to make some sense to us. In fact, we could relate to such a desire as we jokingly wished both that we had that magical power and that we could exercise it with many of our own students. Identifying this unexpected but edifying cross-cultural intersection between pedagogical expectations opened our eyes to the complicated texture of what looked like one-dimensional dissonance. Although we still disdained the teacher’s mode of delivery and treatment of the student as but the object of the request, we began to replace our equally problematic harsh reaction with more humane understanding. In other words, we began to make the shift from “rhetoric’s traditional focus on the desires of speaker/writer” to “the desires of both speaker/writer and listener” (220).

I could see, in retrospect, my own snap judgment about his expectations for the writing center was no less irresponsible than what I perceived as his misinterpretation of our mission. This revelation didn’t change the fact that we wouldn’t fulfill his directive, but it did identify the need for many future discussions and initiatives on working with ELL students *and* their teachers to best address their needs. I regret that I couldn’t address the issue directly with this particular instructor as he didn’t reveal his name to the consultant and his student never returned to the writing center. But what we as a team of writing center professionals together learned about understanding and appreciating different standpoints will, hopefully, forever inform our actions and decisions, especially in moments of conflict and resistance. In a writing center, especially in a community college as diverse as ours, we will never be prepared for every scenario, but it helps to have a “space within which we may interject our own agencies, albeit partial and

complicated, into our own socializations” (207). Learning how to listen rhetorically has proven to be the best possible “training” we can have.

### **EMBRACING PRODUCTIVE DISEQUILIBRIUM**

Building reciprocity as we have done with our discussions in monthly meetings has given the consultants incentive to participate and become invested in the development of our writing centers. Rather than delivering statements to the consultants about decisions made and changes implemented, I rely upon them to collectively consider what works, what doesn't, and what might. Not surprisingly, as Lord notes, “this invites conflict, discomfort, and dissonance, but these are the prices for a more than superficial response” (194-95). Lord encourages us to consider it a “productive disequilibrium” (194). This means collaboratively dealing with the problems and challenges as they arise and embracing what they teach us in the process. A less democratic approach to leadership would place sole responsibility on one person, which has the potential of creating blame or praise for the individual rather than professional development opportunities for the entire group.

We learn the most, perhaps, from the many opportunities for “critical collegueship” that exist in the daily operation of our writing centers. Initially, this involved determining the very logistics of the consultation—its length, a policy for the number of visits allowed per week per student, protocol for greeting students, etc. Some of these decisions we made in the weeks prior to opening our doors for the first time, but many more have been (and will be) made in response to mistakes made or lessons learned along the way. For instance, in a staff meeting early on, the issue of making students feel

welcome arose. Trusting the group, one consultant, Daniel, shared a story that involved his detrimental choice of words as a student entered the writing center for the first time. Not assuming the implications of the question, he asked the student “do you have an appointment?” Already visibly tense (according to the consultant), the student abruptly turned to the door flustered, apologizing all the way because, no, he neither had an appointment nor knew he needed to make one.

As it turned out, the student was visiting the writing center per the directive of his philosophy instructor, who said he would read this student’s writing only after it “passed through” the writing center. The student, as the consultant later learned, was not comfortable seeking our help, in the first place, as he did not know what to expect of what had been presented to him as a sort of assembly-line punishment, masked as assistance. Undoubtedly, upon entering the writing center, the student felt that he was a miserable failure of a writer, and now he screwed this up on top of it. It’s likely that he also immediately placed the writing center in the same mental category with his unforgiving, rules-driven teacher.

Joe, another consultant, spoke up and said we were making a big deal out of nothing. He argued that very few students presented with that seemingly innocuous question would react as this particular student had. And he disagreed with those of us who thought the question contributed to the angst the student was already experiencing.

“We don’t hold that much weight in these students’ lives,” he said matter-of-factly.

“Sure we do,” retorted Sara, another consultant. “I mean, I’m not a major influence on them, but I know that I can do major damage in an instant if say something

that hits a nerve. I also know, unfortunately from experience, that it takes far longer to build a friendship than it takes to destroy one, and I think the same is true for the relationships we build with students in here.”

“You’re overanalyzing this and making it more complicated than it is,” said Joe, seeming unimpressed and annoyed.

But I and a few others who thought Sara was on to something pushed the conversation and tried to draw Joe into it.

“How would you feel,” I asked Joe, “if one of your grad school professors met you at the classroom door not with a cordial greeting of some sort but with ‘did you do your homework for today?’”

“I’d say, ‘of course I did,’” he replied nonchalantly.

“But what if you hadn’t done the work?” I continued.

“I’d just keep walking to my seat and say nothing.”

“Would the silence make you uncomfortable?”

“I don’t know. Should it? What are you trying to get me to say?” Joe blurted out.

“I’m not trying to get you to say anything,” I answered a little defensively as I could sense a growing tension in the air. “I just want to help you imagine how you’d feel so you can better understand how students might feel when we put them in a similar position.”

“And I’m trying to say that I wouldn’t feel that uncomfortable and I don’t think students would either,” Joe shot back.

“No offense, but this is a lop-sided analogy to begin with,” added another consultant. “Joe can hardly be compared to a Metro student.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because he comes from a completely different place. He’s a former student of both Creighton Prep and Creighton who excels in grad school, wins most of their scholarships, and teaches at two institutions of higher learning. Of course, he’s going to have more confidence than many of our students.”

“Point well taken,” I said without hesitation. “I guess I hadn’t thought of that. But I still think it’s a useful comparison. The very fact that we *can’t* compare ourselves to our students on many levels is, ironically, the best evidence we have for needing to care about how what we’re saying is received by them.”

Joe raised his eyebrows with an optimistic expression as if to say “could be” but remained silent for the duration of the conversation. The rest of us continued, trying to think of other things we say during consultations that we might need to reconsider. We had never so openly discussed how differently we are positioned than our students in terms of institutional power, confidence, and status. And most of us had never considered the logistics of a consultation in connection with pedagogical choices. Going back and forth with Joe helped us to imagine the writing center experience from the student’s perspective rather than our own for a change. Getting a view from this new standpoint also made us realize the degree to which our responsibility to writers must shape even the seemingly tangential aspects of the job. This is the sort of conflict that, although uncomfortable in the moment, generates what Lord considers “productive disequilibrium” or “tools of change” (194).

We concluded the meeting that day by collaboratively considering what we should and shouldn’t say to greet students who walk into the writing center. For some,

we finally agreed it maybe wouldn't matter, but since we can't automatically distinguish these folks from those to whom it could make a difference, we determined that it's worth it to revise what we say to all students who walk through our doors. Upon the recommendation of Daniel, we agreed that it would be better to open all consultations thereafter with a more inviting "how are you today?" or "welcome to the writing center." Even Joe nodded in favor.

As a group, we continue to debate the details of daily practice in this trial-by-error, honest way, always striving to focus on what is best for our students, even if that creates dissonance. Constantly, we strive to align the details with the big picture as we seek to change and improve our thinking and practices. This is the essence of critical collegueship: "small groups of teachers [who] form communities of interest around matters related to their teaching" (Lord 196).

Another pedagogical decision we made in this way involved the writing center orientation sessions that we provide for classes across campus. We created these as a mechanism we could use to get the word out about our new service. And they quickly provided the best forum for us to reiterate what we are about, helping the students and faculty come to terms with our mission. Having worked in writing centers for many years at that point, I knew the danger of misconceptions, which are informed in part by the self-serving expectations of students and, even more so, of faculty. Thus, even before I hired a staff of consultants that first quarter, I created a handout to distribute in orientation sessions entitled "Top Ten Myths about Writing Centers" (David Letterman style listed from least to most astounding). My initial impulse to set everyone straight made sense to me, and we needed something to speak from in the sessions that quickly

followed the new consultants' first day on the job. This handout, thus, became part of the orientation "road show" along with our mission statement and a postcard that listed our hours and location. Blinded by what I knew my audience needed to hear, I plowed through the myths one by one in each orientation session that I covered. The myths spanned the gamut from people mistakenly thinking (hoping) that the writing center is here to prepare students for standardized tests to even more who think we're here to right all of the wrongs of student writing.

We opened our first writing center site mid-term. As a result, we proceeded those remaining six weeks of the quarter in a bit of a whirlwind, and the small staff and I delivered as many orientation sessions as our schedules would allow. It wasn't until we enjoyed a debriefing moment at a staff meeting a few quarters later that we (really *I*) first recognized and then acknowledged the problematic nature of this handout. I didn't provide a script of any sort, as do some writing centers, just the handouts, which the consultants could use as they saw fit to introduce students and teachers to our services. Our reputation was more firmly established by that time, and many on the writing center staff now had experience talking from these orientation materials. So I asked the consultants to revisit the various handouts with me to see how they were working for everyone. I had just listed the myths, "The writing center is only for students in English classes." "The writing center is a place in which you can expect to get grammar lessons." "The writing center does work for writers that they should be doing on their own." And so on.

As two or three of the consultants were quick to point out once I finally asked, this format sometimes backfires as a quick glance at the sheet (which is all most give it)

only seems to reinforce the very myths that we are trying to dispel. Furthermore, as a consultant pointed out, attempts to speak to these myths all too often lead to explanations of what we will NOT do for writers. “This is NOT a proofreading service, as you may wish it to be,” for instance. Or “No, we will NOT provide grammar lessons. Sorry.” I hadn’t thought of these possible interpretations. On the reverse side of the postcard listing hours and locations, in fact, I had printed the words, “Although we DO NOT proofread, we DO help writers to realize the power of the written word.” Here, the consultants helped me to see that I presented the writing centers as keepers of secret knowledge that we are not willing to share. A much healthier (not to mention more accurate) emphasis, we decided together, focuses entirely on what we WILL do for and with writers in the spirit of collaboration and collegiality. I took the consultants’ good advice and quickly revised both documents to accentuate the positive. “We will help *you* to detect and revise patterns of error in your writing,” for instance. And “we encourage students from across the curriculum to bring their work into the writing center.”

Though revising a handout may seem like a routine staff duty, this was a significant moment for us on two levels. The consultants, who were relatively new to writing center work, demonstrated, for one of the first times as a group, a critical commitment not only to students but also to our professional identity. Too often, “we allow our users or sponsors to define us, sometimes in terms that contradict our self-definitions and subvert the work we would like or centers to do, and then we resent the images that have been assigned to us” (Enriquez et al 108). The consultants were beginning to understand—and see themselves within—the responsibility to create our own image. At the same time, I was learning to invite and value their participation in that



process, even when it involved being vulnerable to scrutiny. Thus, with relatively little revision to one document, we made significant steps forward into making decisions as critical colleagues and embracing productive disequilibrium.

### **ENGAGING IN ONGOING CRITIQUE**

Virtually none of our practices, within the consultation and beyond, escape the scrutiny, analysis, and revision of the consultants. It's an ongoing conversation that constitutes both our writing center and our professional development. Together, we celebrate successes, admit failures, and learn. Moreover, per the recommendation of one of the consultants, we now have a routine means for finding a place for what we do in the theory. He found the seminal writing center articles that I shared when he was hired helpful and wished we had more time to think about them in terms of what we can and do accomplish with students. So we decided that each month we would meet off campus at one local coffee house or another for what we call "Conversation over Coffee." I or one of the consultants chooses a piece of writing center or composition scholarship for the group to read, and we meet for an hour or two to discuss it. These voluntary sessions, born of one consultant's interest in reading more about the evolution of the writing center, are sometimes well attended, sometimes not. However, the inquiry, debate, and banter that ensue—whether two or ten of us show up—always speak volumes. It provides the all important "perspective on the profession of teaching that extends beyond the four walls of the school and beyond the duration of individual teachers' careers" (Lord 199).

As teachers, we do not have enough well defined spaces in which to get together and talk about our teaching. In a sense, these coffee conversations have morphed into a teaching community for us because we use them to bounce ideas off one another, to resolve problematic issues we're facing in the writing center or the classroom, and to make sense of what we do. A few of us are graduate students on the side, but for most of our staff, such formal intellectual forums do not exist. Many, like me during my first several years of writing center work, weren't previously aware that such scholarship even existed. Our monthly conversations, therefore, serve the important functions of heightening awareness and introducing us to these larger conversations surrounding our work.

The article for one month, for instance, was "Marginal Comments on Writers' Texts: The Status of the Commenter as a Factor in Writing Center Tutorials" by Patricia A. Dunn. In the lengthy exchange, which focused almost exclusively on her advice for tutors to "respond to writers rather than writing" (31), the four or five of us who were present enjoyed a shared revelation. We had been operating all along upon North's premise that our task is to produce better writers rather than better writing. And that morning, Dunn's article prompted us to share various stories from our own writing center experience in which we came to truly comprehend what that means for us. Something about Dunn's turn of a phrase shed new light on the notion. She prompted us to consider the implications of our role as commentator and to understand the messages we send about what matters most through the very language we employ in the process. One consultant remarked "it's the difference between opening a session with 'how are you?' and 'what are you working on today?'" (further complicating our previous discussion).

Another added, “and ‘do you feel good about what you have so far?’ and ‘what’s missing?’” Perhaps, the distinctions seem slight, but as epiphanies go, they suddenly added substance to our intuitive hunches about the need to focus on the writer rather than the document. This opportunity to understand our practices through reading and discussing theory could never be replaced by a one-sided presentation of the importance of theoretical background, as might be delivered in a traditional “training” session. By instead engaging in ongoing critique of our own practices and of writing center and composition theory, we together invent new ways to know and describe the various dimensions of our work.

At the same time, we regularly reinforce Eric Hobson’s notion that “conventional wisdom...[may] reinforce the idea that theory leads to practice...the inverse is more often true” (2). These productive and worthy results of *peering into* the larger conversation prompted me to invite all interested consultants to *contribute to* it by joining me and participating in presentations first at regional, then national and international writing center and composition conferences. At our community college, where the pressure to publish does not exist, few take or have the time away from their teaching loads to enter this other realm. In fact, in the six panel presentations that we have made over the past three years, eight of our consultants made their first conference appearances. For some, not surprisingly, it was a daunting experience at first. Our coffee conversations had warmed them up, but still some acknowledged suffering that familiar feeling of fraudulence when entering into unfamiliar territory. As I assured them, the smaller writing center conferences, especially, provided settings and open conversations much like the ones we enjoy once a month over coffee, thus making the transition to the other

side of the scholarship seem natural. In yet another way, the consultants and I are together learning to listen not to receive and file away others' ideas but to invent and share our own.

The germ of this dissertation, in fact, sprouted in the preparation stages for a presentation we made at a TYCA conference called "Planting Seeds of Democracy: The Writing Center as Sower on the Institutional Landscape." It was through the many drafts and opinions the five of us shared over several weeks that we were able to find words for the set of commitments that drive my, and by extension, the writing center's work. We started out by trying to identify where we stood at our institution. Having worked together to establish our writing centers for a few years, this was the first time that we collectively stopped and considered what sort of impact we were having. I got the conversation rolling by acknowledging that the Vice President had recently told me that "I can see now, two years into it, what you meant when you told me that the writing centers are not about remediation." He was beginning to see that we were of value not just to struggling writers but to the college as a community. One panelist added that this new awareness must be due, in part, to the email correspondence with teachers that had certainly invited interdisciplinary pedagogical discussions that had never happened before in her academic experience. Another noted that working with students in the writing center provided new ways for him to help students situate their academic work in a social context. And we all agreed that our work here had definitely prompted us to revise our own philosophies and practices as classroom teachers. From all of this, we realized, as one of the panelists termed it, "the writing center's capacity to democratize

institutional communication.” And we proceeded to find language within Dewey’s and Freire’s work to articulate our points for the conference presentation.

We learned together how to think about, name, and represent the inherent values within our writing center practices. As critical colleagues, moving from reader to producer of scholarship in this way was indicative of the pattern of professional development we were establishing for ourselves. This move to put ourselves in dialogue with rather than in deference to what we considered experts in the field marked another significant step towards living democracy as our institutional life in the writing center. As critical colleagues in these many ways, we constantly challenge and add to a shared knowledge base that informs, shapes, and reshapes all that we do in our writing centers.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Engaging in Institutional Critique

“At their best, writing centers can use their intensely collaborative work to make traditional university borders more permeable than can other more firmly fixed programs.”

*Carol Peterson Haviland and Denise Stephenson*

“Hello, my name is Kerri Bordeaux, and I teach Human Relations here at Metro,” said the person on the other end of an incoming call. “I hate to bother you. I know I should just figure this out myself, but I’m at a loss. Would it be possible to sit down with someone in the writing center and talk about a writing assignment that I gave to my class?”

“Of course, it would,” I affirmed. “And it wouldn’t be a bother at all. We welcome that sort of discussion.”

“The students just can’t seem to grasp what they are supposed to do. I’m asking for one thing, and they are giving me something else,” she explained.

“From my writing center experience, I’d say that’s actually a pretty common discrepancy.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely. I am regularly surprised in the writing center by how many students do not understand their writing assignments and even more by the ones who go ahead and write the paper anyway.”

“That makes me feel better somehow. I thought it was just me,” said Kerri sounding relieved.

“Oh no. It’s you and me and everybody. Seeing how students receive and interpret other teacher’s writing assignments has been a huge eye opener. I’m constantly looking back at my own writing assignments and trying to figure out how I may be confusing them. Designing good writing assignments is hard!”

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At Metro, we do come together within departments to revise the curriculum or to assess programs. Some of us participate in organized teaching communities and collaborate on scholarly projects. And we engage in service activities, share office space, and sometimes even team teach with our colleagues across the disciplines. These joint efforts bring us together around pedagogical issues. Yet, in higher education, we do the bulk of our work by ourselves in the classrooms and in our offices. Relatively few and limited mechanisms are in place to bring us together explicitly for the purpose of talking about teaching.

At our institution, we have some professional development opportunities designed to provide such a forum. Most such general efforts, though, as Brian Lord describes them, are “one-shot activities that emphasize technical skills development and have limited follow-up” (186). These college-sponsored sessions for faculty may give us something tangible to do on Monday morning. But when it comes to truly developing and growing as teachers, we’re pretty much on our own. What teachers need, according to Lord, are

opportunities to voice and share doubts and frustrations as well as successes and exemplars. They need to ask questions about their own teaching and about their colleagues’ teaching. They need to recognize that

these questions and how they and their colleagues go about raising them, addressing them, and on occasion even answering them constitute the major focus of professional development. (183)

In truth, though, we typically do not have such opportunities, or certainly not enough of them. As a result, we know relatively little about what goes on in most of our colleagues' classrooms, especially those outside of our discipline, and they have equally little insight into what happens in ours. In chapter three, I discussed ways for writing center colleagues to grow and develop as professionals; in this chapter, I aim to extend that conversation by illustrating one approach to collaborating with teachers across the disciplines.

In the writing center, which welcomes students engaged in writing for any course offered at the college, we have what is an uncommon window into other teachers' pedagogies. Students from courses across the disciplines share their writing with us, and we routinely inquire about the assignment and the class in order to contextualize their work. And, at our institution, we treat it as a professional, collaborative opportunity by initiating email conversations with the teachers whose students visit the writing center. Many, such as Michelle in the English department, welcome and value these invitations into dialogue. In a letter that she sent to me, the Dean, and the Vice President of Educational Services early on, Michelle was kind enough to articulate what she thought about this particular practice:

In addition to genuinely helping Metro students become better writers, the writing centers also do an excellent job of communicating with instructors, helping us to become better teachers. I have to admit, in the beginning, as



excited as I was about other people working with my students on their writing, I worried that the writing center consultants would do the work for my students and that I wouldn't have any idea of what was going on during those sessions. What a surprise—and relief—it was to receive that first email from a consultant explaining which student came to see him and what things they worked on together. These messages are so useful. They help me to feel connected to what's going on in the writing centers, and they also provide me with insights into my own students' needs. Sometimes, I am surprised by what a student has gone in for help with; whereas I may have thought the student had understood something we talked about, it's obvious from the writing center visit that she needed a bit more explanation or guidance. Because of the communication from the consultants, I can follow up with the students to make sure everything is clear. Additionally, such cases make me aware of ways I can improve my teaching. Maybe I need to provide more thorough explanations and examples, or perhaps an assignment sheet needs to be more specific.

The primary function for these emails is to provide a forum for the teacher and the consultant to collaboratively assist the student with the writing task in front of him/her. After each session, the consultant asks the student's permission before engaging in such a conversation and tells him/her what she plans to share with the instructor. Often, then, the teacher, as Michelle did, extends the conversation with the student to clarify or reiterate directions or issues as needed. And, in the best case scenarios, the teacher or the consultant or both gain new insight into their own teaching and consulting practices.

With teachers such as Michelle, the electronic conversations meet and often exceed our hopes and goals for the exchange, in large part, because of their willingness to let the writing center consultants into their classrooms in this way.

Not surprisingly, though, the mere idea of such a thing can be unsettling for others—teachers and consultants alike—for all that it reveals about both parties' pedagogical convictions. From the start, as consultants entering this new territory, we knew teachers who have rarely needed to open their classroom doors to outsiders may not know what to make of *our* invitations into dialogue about *their* students. Without a formal forum for teachers to share pedagogical ideas and struggles at our institution, we fully realize that many traditional notions of authority are challenged when we visit with their students in the writing center, help them to interpret assignments, and advise them on writing they're doing for these teachers' classes.

And, because some in the institution, inevitably, perceive the writing center as a service *to* rather than *with* them, participating in a collaborative relationship with consultants must seem antithetical to them. As these teachers have come to see it, in the traditional rendering of institutional life, *they* are doing the real deal—teaching—therefore, *we* are ancillary. Some choose never to believe anything else, in spite of our efforts to democratize this relationship with collegial conversation about working with their students. Apparently, they can't get beyond feeling threatened or patronized by the prospect of talking pedagogy and being reflective with who they imagine are “helper girls and helper boys” down the hall in the writing center.

In extreme instances, they even choose to lash out so as to mark their territory and remind the consultants and students of what they see as the proper order of things—

teacher over student; teacher over consultant. Such blatant and manipulative declarations of power as “the writing center will be instructed not to assist you in any way” have even appeared on a teacher’s handout that passed through the writing center. In such moments, students in the writing center hear one thing: “we’re here to engage in dialogue with you about whatever you want to work on today, and with your permission, we’ll invite your teacher into the conversation by sending him an email detailing what we covered and asking for his input.” Past experiences in the academy, though, sometimes cause students to resist this new and foreign concept as well. They have come to expect the authority figures in the academic setting to make the rules and have expectations *for* them. Thus, our position in the liminal space between teachers and students challenges traditional roles on several levels—teacher as expert, student as novice, and writing center consultant as supplement.

In the spirit of Nancy Maloney Grimm’s hopes for the postmodern writing center overturning these and many other institutional norms, at Metro, we accept these challenges as one way to build another set of relationships with professional development and collaboration as the focus. We feel a certain responsibility, even, to take what is an institutional rarity (teachers being privy to each other’s pedagogies) as our chance to effect institutional change. In Grimm’s words, “because writing centers are places where literacies come in contact with one another, they offer powerful educational opportunities for the social transformation that can occur when different ideologies interact” (119). She further urges the postmodern writing center to move “from service to collective action” (118). Porter et al, with their notion of “institutional critique,” help us to imagine how to implement Grimm’s progressive thinking. It is one thing to imagine what “ought

to be,” but it is quite another to find ways to enact it. Institutional critique “insists that institutions, as unchangeable as they may seem (and, indeed, often are) do contain spaces for reflection, resistance, revision, and productive action” (Porter et al 613). But, significantly, “that critique needs an action plan” (Porter et al 613). Our writing centers at Metro are one such space where change is possible, and our action plan takes the form of electronic communication with the teachers whose students visit the writing center.

I do not intend to lobby here for a shift in practice for other writing centers to involve correspondence of this sort as they very well may have approaches more suitable to their situations and institutions. Instead, as a means to illustrate the potential of institutional critique, I am offering one form of rhetorical action through which we in the writing centers at Metro “intervene in institutional scripts” (Gallagher 81). We find value as well in many other forums in which collaboration and conversation with teachers can and do enhance the work that we do with students in the writing center. In fact, we promote several other efforts ourselves by facilitating workshops on designing writing assignments in addition to a "Teacher Talk" series, which invites teachers from across the disciplines to discuss topics such as evaluating ELL student writing. As the opening scenario with Kerri indicates, we also invite faculty to visit the writing center with their professional writing (assignments, conference proposals, teaching philosophy statements, etc.). For the purpose of this chapter, though, I'll focus on the email exchanges, an unprecedented genre of institutional communication that provides, for us at Metro, one of the best opportunities to bring educators together, engage in critical reflection, and taking productive action.

## **BRINGING TEACHERS TOGETHER**

Some writing center professionals operate from the premise that we are not obliged to tell teachers either what we covered with their students or that we met with their students at all. At Metro, we agree with this stance from the “we are not here to serve or supplement your program” perspective. We write to the teachers not because we think it is our obligation to either report in with them or privilege their authoritative gaze. Instead, in the hopes of engaging in meaningful dialogue across the board, we seek to open the lines of communication with them. As Kenneth Bruffee asserts, “any effort to understand and cultivate in ourselves a particular kind of thinking requires us to understand and cultivate the community life that generates and maintains conversation” (90). Through the collegial email exchange, we promote a “we’re all in this together” mentality with both the teachers and their students. We make it clear from the onset that we see our role in conjunction with rather than distinct from that of the classroom teacher and that the student is necessarily an active participant in the process. Andrea Lunsford notes that a “collaborative environment must be one in which goals are clearly defined and in which the jobs at hand engage everyone fairly and equally, from the student clients to work-study students to peer tutors to professional staff” (6), and, I would argue, to the instructors whose students visit the writing center.

In order to generate this collaborative space—one in which what some see as disparate roles have the capacity to complement and reinforce one another in a joint effort to help students become better writers—consultants first need to invite teachers in the conversation and give them incentive to join it. In many complicated ways, this new genre of writing puts us all in precarious positions. How often does an outside party enter

into the classroom dynamic, sometimes unbeknownst to the teacher, and converse with him about his students' work for that class? Furthermore, consultants approach teachers as colleagues working together to help the students, even if that means seeking clarification on their assignments. How often are teachers expected or even invited to share that responsibility? How often are those in what are perceived to be tutorial roles given that responsibility? The students at the heart of this mix often feel conflicted as well since they assume the traditional role of apprentice in most classrooms. How are they to interpret and trust our invitations to become active participants in the process? Clearly, "understanding the power and operation of such structures is important to developing strategies for changing them" (Porter et al 626). On a regular basis, together we engage in such struggles as we learn, practice, and negotiate this complex correspondence.

We especially appreciate the unusual position in which this correspondence puts faculty because all of the consultants in our writing center are teachers ourselves. We do not have peer or undergraduate consultants, as many writing centers do, which would surely complicate this exchange even further. Thus, it's important to note that while this dynamic situates our writing center to use electronic communication for institutional change, other writing centers may achieve greater success with alternate rhetorical moves. As fellow teachers, in theory, we enter into these conversations knowing our audience but also expecting them to treat us as colleagues. Occasionally, in spite of our equivalent institutional standing, we are taken aback by some of the strong reactions and negative treatment that we encounter. We strive to see these moments as opportunities to bridge the gap between the autonomy they hope to protect and the collegiality we hope to

establish by building relationships with these colleagues. “Institutional critique,” claim Porter et al, “looks for [such] gaps or fissures, places where resistance and change are possible.... [for] it is in the gaps, the ambiguities, and the mismatches that the system is flexible and open to change” (631). Fortunately, with only a small few, there is no ambiguity—plain and simple; the line of collegiality just will not be crossed as they respond to our invitations into conversation by promptly slamming the doors on our faces. For most teachers, our task is to bring them into the conversation in ways that they, and more importantly their students, will find meaningful.

A series of exchanges with Victoria, a nursing instructor, shortly after our writing centers opened illustrates this effort to establish dialogue that focuses on our shared responsibility to writers. One week, another consultant and I worked with several of her students, and with their permission, we each wrote to Victoria detailing our work with her students. She responded to both of our emails in a similar tone. To me, “I corrected Audrey and Nate’s papers. Audrey received an 89 out of 100 points, and Nate received an 80 out of 100 points....I am concerned about the fine line of what your mission is and what we can expect from you.” And to the other consultant just a day or two later, “I have great difficulty with my students going to the writing center for help with APA format. The only thing missing were his one-inch margins....I drew on his paper where the margins should be.” We both replied in our usual ways, reiterating the mission and highlighting the goal to produce better writers rather than better writing. No reply. I wrote again and encouraged her to call me with questions and concerns. Her reply: “Thank you. I think I understand now.” Sensing from the brevity of her response that she

may need further explanation and encouragement, I picked up the phone to see if she would like to verbally continue the recent conversations we had started via email.

“No thanks,” she said hesitantly.

“I’m sorry to hear that. May I ask why?”

“I figured out that the writing center is not for nursing students. They need grammar and APA instruction,” she said as if to conclude the conversation.

“Oh, but it *is* for your students,” I quickly replied. “We can definitely help them become better writers. Correctness is just one element of good writing.”

“But I can’t expect you to help with the rest since you are not content experts.”

“Yes, you can,” I assured her. “In some ways, it’s good that we don’t know the subjects well. It puts the student in a position to teach us since we can’t fill in the blanks in logic, etc. for him. Plus, we rely on the email conversations that we initiate with teachers to further our understanding of the assignments and the subject matter. It becomes a kind of group effort.”

“I suppose,” she conceded after a brief silence on the line.

Sensing an opening, I suggested “why don’t we set up a time to sit down and talk about all of this? You can tell me about the kinds of writing that you assign, and I’ll tell you how we can help.”

“Well, I’m awfully busy. I don’t know...” she trailed off.

“I’ll come to you. It’ll only take about 30 minutes.”

“OK,” she agreed after a brief pause, and we arranged a time.

A few days later, we met. Her first words after we sat down were, “now, this isn’t going to take long, is it?”



“No,” I assured her and then began asking her questions about what she saw as the purpose for a writing center.

“If a paper goes through the writing center, it should be perfect by the time I see it,” she said definitively. I thanked her for the vote of confidence but admitted that such an expectation was impractical. Even if we had the superhuman capacity for perfection, we could never guarantee that it would translate into a perfect paper for the student. And if we could, I told her, it would mean that we, not the students, were in control of their writing at that point.

“Well, yeah, I can see that,” she said.

“Besides, that really wouldn’t be ethical,” I added.

“I guess not.”

At that point I launched into an explanation of why we focus more on the writers than on the papers that “go through” the writing center. “We want writers to learn something and gain confidence while they’re there, which we would sacrifice if we just made corrections for them,” I proclaimed. “Sure, we can help them to navigate the intimidating rules of grammar and the APA style, but we want to work with you, the instructor, to *teach them* how to how to do that. And we want to make sure their arguments are strong and well articulated before even worrying about the rules. Does that make sense?”

“It makes sense, yes. I guess I just thought the writing center was more about rules. I mean, I can remember failing a final research project for a grad class because the margins were off and we were supposed to be submitting these papers for publication. So

when I heard about Metro's new writing centers, I immediately thought I wish I would have had someone like that to clean up my writing."

"That's understandable," I offered. "But as professionals writing in your field, they won't always have a writing center to lean on."

"You got that right!" she interjected, with a laugh.

"That's why we want them to learn how to prepare manuscripts for submission on their own. We want to help them with the many other facets of professional writing as well. We work with students on everything from making a valid argument to providing a clear structure for their papers."

"Well, that's definitely something they will all need. Especially for those going for advanced degrees, there's a real pressure to stay current and contribute to the scholarship."

"I'd be glad to meet with your department sometime to introduce them to the writing center and to be sure that we understand the style of writing your students need to learn. And, the good thing is that, for your students who visit the writing center and grant their permission, we'll always stay in communication with you and the other teachers via email as a way to work together to help your students."

"That sounds like a plan," she said. "I'll get with my department, and we'll be in touch."

Shifting the focus to a shared responsibility for helping students move forward as professional writers brought this teacher, and by extension her whole department, into conversation with writing center consultants. By seeing within the initial gaps that separated teachers like Victoria from us signs of potential flexibility, we have been able

to effect meaningful change. In this instance, we bridged the gap that was born of misunderstanding and have been working fairly regularly with nursing students in the writing center and collaborating with their instructors via email ever since.

### **ENGAGING IN CRITICAL REFLECTION**

Securing the foundational boards to this bridge is, understandably, a challenge. For teachers, it means first coming to understand and embrace a new sort of institutional space—one that dissolves traditional hierarchies. Even more importantly, it means extending the conversations with consultants into a shared process of critical reflection. For both teachers and consultants, this involves taking risks and making ourselves vulnerable. The teachers' assignments and teaching strategies and our own pedagogical convictions often figure into the conversations that we share regarding their students' writing. And if there is one thing I've learned in my writing center work, it's that students with alarming regularity do not understand the writing assignments that we put in front of them. Often, this is the case because assignments are articulated in the language of academic discourse, which many students don't easily comprehend.

This reality constantly makes us in the writing center turn the reflective lens back onto our own writing assignments with an eye for what needs to be clarified. And this need for clarity almost always enters into our conversations with students in the writing center, which compels us to extend the dialogue to their teachers. We work from the Stephen Brookfield notion that “we never have the luxury of regarding ourselves as fully finished critical products who have reached the zenith of reflective evolution” (42). Thus, even when we need to address an unclear assignment, we approach the email

conversations not as a place to put teachers on the spot, rather as an opportunity for both teachers and ourselves to learn and grow so as to better teach our students. In other words, we enter these email dialogues with a sort of reflexive curiosity. We genuinely want to know both how to help students succeed as writers and how to better articulate ourselves with students, which often involves working through our own ideas even as we ask the teachers to clarify theirs. Revealing and scrutinizing our professional selves in this way (as we the consultants regularly do with one another) is a necessary step toward the sort of meaningful professional development that is missing from most of our academic lives.

Porter et al acknowledge that “the classroom certainly is one significant site for change, but some changes need to happen in order to influence how the classroom is constituted” (632). The critical reflection that can occur within these email conversations provides for us one alternative site for the sort of change needed to prompt revised thinking about the classroom. It’s not always easy to know our places in this virgin territory of institutional change, and some hesitate or even refuse to accept our invitations into pedagogical discussions. For instance, a consultant, Carly, contacted me after she had worked numerous times with a student on his research paper for an English Composition II course. She had spent an hour-long session with the student trying to help him determine how to get started. The instructor’s written assignment used words such as “do not include your opinion” and “everything in your paper should be factual,” but the student’s notes from her verbal explanations of the task included the words “argue” and “take a position.”

Neither the student nor Carly could make sense of the apparent contradiction, so Carly asked the student's permission to write to the instructor seeking clarification. She crafted a careful email detailing the two very different kinds of papers that the teacher seemed to be promoting for this one assignment and shared with her the words that confused her and the student. She even restated the two thesis statements the student had written—one informational and the other argumentative—and asked the instructor to please let her know which one seemed most appropriate for her assignment. The instructor replied with this: "I'm sure whichever thesis he chooses is what I want." Then, in another response to a series of specific questions, simply "Thank you." Aside from offering no help whatsoever to the student who was obviously confused, this instructor neglected to entertain the notion (with the consultant, anyway) that her assignment may have caused confusion. And this was just one of many futile exchanges between this teacher and the writing center that quarter with the student struggling all the way.

Fortunately, not all teachers are so immovable. With others, such diligence by the students and consultants prompts a mutual exchange from which all parties emerge changed. One story of this sort of transformation began with our consultant, Jeff, who was working with an international student struggling to understand the directions for his English Composition I essay. The student, Shin, presented a first draft that contained nothing but stories and facts about the two countries that he set out to compare and contrast. In the email to the teacher, Jeff carefully explained the conversation he had shared with Shin about the purpose of a comparison/contrast essay and the need to include his interpretation of the similarities and differences between the two countries along with an overall reason/purpose for comparing the two in the first place. And Jeff

shared with the instructor that Shin thought his task was to gather information about the two countries and leave it at that. Jeff concluded by asking the teacher for any further information he should have about the class or the assignment since Shin had scheduled another appointment to talk about his revision. The teacher's response: "Okay, but why is his paper still full of errors?"

The instructor addressed neither the consultant nor the content of the consultant's message. Apparently, he just wanted to know why the consultant didn't remove the imperfections from the student's writing. Given this one-line, impersonal, and accusatory question, it's fair to assume that this instructor did not initially imagine this exchange as collaborative. He seemed to see himself in a position of authority and the writing center as but a service designed to make his job of reading student writing easier. Jeff shared the exchange with me before he replied and admitted that it really angered and annoyed him to be treated by the teacher in this way.

Such blatant disregard for our efforts to work *with* instructors to help their students is discouraging. Brookfield warns us that "being critically reflective may well bring us into direct conflict with organizational priorities and hierarchies of power" (40). Teachers like this one may respond as he did because they feel threatened. It is not the norm for an outsider even to be privy to a teacher's assignment. Thus, says Brookfield, "one of the most important tasks for critical teachers is to develop a measure of tactical astuteness and cunning when it comes to challenging commonly accepted assumptions and practices" (41). After a little venting and a lot of processing, Jeff decided to suppress his initial urge to respond defensively. Instead, he took it as an opportunity to reiterate

the purpose of the writing center and issue another invitation to work with the instructor to help Shin.

Jeff's reply articulated why his conversation with Shin took the direction that it did. "I've found with my own students," Jeff offered, "I don't get very far if I talk about concerns with comma splices when the content is likely to change substantially. While we are certainly going to help Shin become more proficient with the English language, we know that nobody would gain in the end if we simply edited his papers for him." Jeff went on to explain that in the writing center, we feel strongly about helping students to articulate their ideas and think for themselves. And he concluded by noting that many of Shin's grammatical concerns were typical ELL issues, which he assured both the instructor and Shin they would together address once the content and structure were in place. The teacher responded this time with "This is a correct assessment. Thanks for helping my students become better writers." This time, he addressed the consultant ("Dear Jeff"), expressed gratitude, and offered a cordial closing ("Best Wishes"). He hadn't exactly embraced the concept of collaboration with the vague line, "this is a correct assessment." But the email from the consultant clearly made an impact on his understanding of the role of the writing center and the sort of dynamic we hope to share with instructors.

The next series of email exchanges between Jeff and the teacher focused on the extent to which Shin's confusion about the assignment stemmed from the difficulty he had with the English language. Jeff explained one session in which the two of them spent a good while talking about the purpose of his next assignment, a persuasive paper. All the while, Shin nodded his head as if he understood. Yet, when Jeff invited Shin to sum

up in his own words what he needed to do for this essay, Shin stammered a bit and then confessed that he had no idea. So Jeff chose to spend the rest of their session asking Shin about the writing that he had done in his native Japan. He found out that Shin's confusion and apprehension had a great deal to do with the fact that he had never written papers in the expected direct, thesis-driven style of his English class. To him, announcing his opinions so boldly seemed disrespectful and wrong. With Shin's permission, Jeff shared all of these insights with the teacher.

"I had suspected that Shin's major problem with my class is his inability to understand English. He just doesn't seem to absorb what we do in class. But, quite honestly, I guess I have never considered the very different, conflicting approaches to writing," said the teacher. He and Jeff spent the next few emails acknowledging and exchanging thoughts about the fact that as teachers they know far too little about ELL students and the backgrounds that influence them. They also explored together what resources exist at Metro that might be able to help Shin in the fundamental ways that could never be covered in one English class or in a few writing center consultations. And they compiled a list of what they found, complete with contact information, which they shared with Shin and the writing center staff.

In significant ways, these discussions helped the teacher to put the student's propensity for grammatical error in perspective. Towards the end of that semester, in an email to Jeff regarding this student's work, the teacher opened by thanking him profusely: "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. One begins to doubt himself in the dynamic of the multilayered interaction of a classroom student body. I have come to value the help and wisdom of the writing center. I will use the information that you



provided on this student's approach and will work with his rough draft in the next workshop. A counter point is, could I write an essay in his native language? NO! So I value his effort and hard work. Thanks again.”

Rarely do we see such a profound turnaround (especially within a matter of weeks) as a result of our efforts to communicate with instructors, but because the potential is there, we persist. This instructor’s compliment illustrated a new understanding of the many roles being played and a certain gratitude for the opportunity to collaborate with the writing center consultant. And the several emails exchanged conveyed a growing sense of shared authority and respect. They not only offered details about their own pedagogies but, eventually, welcomed and accepted suggestions from each other. Even more significantly, they acknowledged the difficulty of the tasks they put in front of ELL students, in particular, and admitted their own shortcomings and newfound appreciation for students.

Though difficult and disconcerting at first, this process of insisting upon open conversation benefited everyone involved. The instructor and the consultants each gained colleagues. As a consultant, Jeff was challenged to think hard about his own teaching through these conversations since, he admitted, he had never before truly considered the struggles our many ELL students face when asked to write “our way.” Thus, a revision of his own convictions inevitably drove the ways he articulated his comments to the instructor and looked to understand the student’s perspective. The student was better served when both parties—the consultant and the instructor—teamed together to assist him. He didn’t have to hide behind the insecurities born of cultural expectations. And their assistance extended beyond the writing center doors in an effort

to find the best resources available for the student. Shin was no longer depicted as the carrier of error-ridden prose but a living, breathing human being whose story explains and complicates his ability to function as the teacher originally expected him to within that space. When our email correspondence elicits this sort of engaged thought, the gaps between the teacher and student and between the teacher and consultant begin to close. This is critical reflection at its best when “creating connections between educational practices, students’ experiences of learning, and what they feel are important concerns in their lives becomes a guiding principle” (Brookfield 43).

### **TAKING PRODUCTIVE ACTION**

The true capacity for institutional change emerges in our writing center when teachers and consultants who have embraced and engaged in the dialogical approach use it to take action. Chris Gallagher maintains that “as an institution, the academy would be a very different place if pedagogy—the process of shared, reflexive inquiry—truly were at its center” (126). While we cannot begin to alter the academic landscape with this one form of critical dialogue, at our institution, it’s certainly a start. Now, we must make something more of the bridges built through our conversations by turning these reflexive moments into productive action.

In the following string of correspondence between an instructor and a consultant in our writing center, we can see one illustration of what we have to gain by becoming agents for change through these emails. In his initial message to the instructor about a writing center visit, the consultant, Jack, provided a detailed depiction of the dialogue he shared with the student regarding a paper she was writing to analyze a short

story, “Regret” by Kate Chopin. The student, he noted, came into the writing center to brainstorm, so the two of them went through the story asking questions about and locating the instances of regret. And before the session was over, the student had written her first paragraph and identified main ideas for supporting paragraphs. The consultant let the teacher know that the student made another appointment to bring her rough draft into the writing center and asked for any feedback the teacher might have for him in the meantime. The teacher replied, assuring Jack that he was providing valuable input for the student. And she concluded her email by saying “I wish I had the time to sit down with each student, the way your center does. I try to conference as much as possible. Let me know if there are any other writing center techniques to incorporate in the classroom that will help students with their writing.”

Jack’s reply extended the dialogue by engaging the pedagogy further: “I’m glad the writing center is helping,” he said. “Yes, the one-on-one stuff is very effective. Those interpreting assignments are hard to teach. I spend the whole quarter working on that with my intro to lit students. It’s hard when they’ve never had to do that sort of thing before. I think it’s a good assignment, and it looked like your student had all the materials she needed. It’s just hard for them when it’s their first time. Asking students questions about their writing (rather than making my own statements about it) is the best strategy I’ve learned in the writing center. It really makes students think.” The teacher thanked him for what she termed “a great idea” and explained that she chooses to teach writing about literature in the English Composition I course so that they have some exposure to that genre before they enroll in upper level literature courses.

A few more exchanges were made as this student visited the writing center with regularity for all of her composition assignments. And towards the end of the quarter, Jack and this teacher had developed such a collaborative relationship that Jack asked her for advice that extended beyond the consultations at hand: “I’m teaching a section of English Composition I this winter and am trying to decide what kinds of assignments to give. What did you have the best luck with this quarter?” The teacher replied by sharing student feedback that she had collected on a mid-term evaluation. They had completed three writing assignments to that point, and among other things, she had asked the students to describe each one in their own words. It was the second time she had asked students to do this, she told Jack, and she was pleased by the results.

“It gives me such better and more useful responses than the usual evaluative questions I ask that just tell me if they liked or disliked the assignments,” she noted. “This approach, which gave them the responsibility of articulating their understanding of the assignments, gave me a much better picture of what is working well and what isn’t. I learned, for instance, that none of them really had a clue about that first response essay they did. I knew there were problems when I read their essays, but I didn’t put two and two together. These evaluations told me that they didn’t know the difference between a response and a literary analysis, even though I thought I made that clear.”

“Asking them to describe the assignments is such a great idea,” said Jack in his reply, and the two of them continued the conversation over several emails. They talked at length about the word choice for the response directions and eventually agreed to share their written assignments for the next quarter to help each other be as clear as possible. Teacher to teacher, Jack and this instructor sought each other’s input, shared ideas, and

worked to improve their own pedagogical practices. When both parties let down their guards enough to collaborate in this way, the students and their best chances for success become the focus—the reason for having the conversation.

Christina Murphy reminds us that “the potential our writing centers have to transform the rhetorical communities of college and university campuses by extending and redefining the dialogue of literacy education represents their most significant power and makes them agencies for change within academics” (124). Our decision at Metro to connect with rather than distance ourselves from instructors is just one of several ways to transform the texture and impact of communication within our institution. Opting to engage in conversation in this way with instructors has presented many rich possibilities for collaboration, growth, and change. This relationship between consultants and instructors can be complicated and challenging, especially when it means putting one’s pedagogy on the line and sacrificing the autonomy typically afforded to teachers in higher education. But, for us, it’s time and effort well spent. It is our commitment in the Metro writing center to initiating this sort of dialogue with instructors that stands the greatest chance of effecting substantial institutional change.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Exercising Authority within Democratic Spaces

“I fear, sometimes, that we are too willing to give our institutions *what they think we want*, whether or not it is what *we want* or, ultimately, even what *they want*.”

*Elizabeth Boquet*

I had a meeting with my Dean to discuss allowing full-time English faculty members to work in the writing center as part of their annual load. No other person at my institution, not even the writing center staff at that point, had been witness to as many of the promotional efforts and as much of the relationship building as the Dean. He was on the hiring committee that heard me wax on about the pedagogical value of the writing centers. He met with me regularly to negotiate the logistics of space, staffing, and pay. And he attended countless meetings in which I explained the writing center mission and philosophy, which touts the Writing Center as an important space for both learning *and* teaching for both writers *and* consultants. Nevertheless, when I suggested that he consider allowing full-time teachers to work in the writing center, he quickly and definitively replied—“No. I need them to teach.”

“But we are *teaching* in the Writing Center,” I argued.

“This site is every bit as important as the classroom,” I retorted.

And, finally, I pulled out “*I need the full-timers to teach, too.*”

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“Few of us,” as Boquet admits, “chose to spend our careers in writing centers because we wanted to *administer* them. We chose to spend our time in these centers

because we appreciated (and continue to appreciate) the richness of *tutoring*” (Noise 57). For me, then, the task of establishing writing centers in our multi-campus community college setting began by first imagining myself as an administrative presence within it. Making the mindset shift from working with students to running the writing center as my primary responsibility involved deciding what kind of leader I wanted to be. I knew I wanted to operate from the democratic ideals that were the foundation for our mission. I wanted to be the sort of administrator whose responsibility to writers came first. In other words, I wanted to be a leader who used her position to protect the richness of the exchange we share with student writers.

Freire warns against transforming authority into authoritarianism (Shor and Freire 91), but I worried too about the opposite—surrendering authority in the name of democracy. I hadn’t previously held an administrative position, and I wasn’t altogether comfortable with the idea of suddenly holding sway over those who had been my colleagues for the past ten years. Instead, as more of a facilitator, I wanted to promote a group effort. Thus, one of the first things I needed to realize was that both extremes were anti-democratic. Instead of either taking over or allowing the potential for other forces to take over, I had to find middle ground as an authority figure. Freire helped me think this through by reminding me that the democratic teacher “can never stop being an authority or having authority” (Shor and Freire 91). The same, I soon learned, was true for the democratic administrator. So I sought to avoid becoming either an authority *over* the writing center, which would reinforce an authoritarian approach or one who assumes no authority, which would favor the misconception that anything goes within a democracy.

Instead, I sought to position myself as one who uses authority wisely but who also seeks to strategically share authority with the consultants and other administrators who are vested in the success of the writing center. I continued to draw largely from the pedagogical literature of rhetoric and composition to comprehend my institutional positioning as an authority figure. Amy Lee helped me to know “we should not assume that a simple giving up or sharing or transferring of power is possible” (272). Even within a democracy, someone is (and needs to be) in charge. Denying that role as an administrator, then, is not only irresponsible but also impossible.

Ira Shor further helped me to comprehend and articulate the need for an authority figure in a democracy. As he puts it, “the more the students have confidence in me as an authority who directs a productive course, who can maintain discipline, who has a good command of knowledge and how to gain more knowledge, the more my students will trust my interventions” (Shor and Freire 91). The same, I have learned from these scholars, is true for me in my role as writing center coordinator. Deploying my institutional authority means first claiming it and then making good decisions about using and sharing it.

From the start, I saw as my two primary responsibilities establishing relationships with the students, consultants, faculty, and administrators and earning the confidence they needed to know that I am a capable leader who has built a program upon a set of commitments to writers. As Gallagher asserts, “while individuals are rarely in positions to change those rhetorical systems [of decision making] with sweeping gestures, the systems themselves are constituted (and reconstituted) by and through the daily interaction of human participants” (80). Inviting everyone into dialogue on a daily basis



became a way to deploy my authority in meaningful and productive ways as we together sought to revise the traditional dynamics of our institution. And the climate here *is* changing in the sense that many students' valid opinions, like Mary's, are being valued, consultants' collaborative efforts are contributing to the development of our writing center, and faculty members' writing assignments and pedagogical approaches are being reconsidered and revised. When sharing authority means, as it did in these instances, giving vested individuals a say and encouraging positive forward progress, it's an easy and logical move.

The greatest challenge so far has come in knowing when not to share the authority. I had to learn to trust that even authoritative moves that can feel undemocratic, fixed, and inconsistent are, in fact, necessary to protect and promote the democracy. Making everyone happy, although we may feel so inclined, is not always feasible or desirable even when operating within a democratic setting. In some administrative instances, particularly, all parties are not on board with the democratic ideals of the writing center, and, therefore, threaten to sabotage them. Through a few difficult and uncomfortable experiences, I've finally discovered that allowing these voices to misuse the openness would be undemocratic in itself. As Stephen Brookfield contends, "teaching [and I would argue administering] democratically is not to be confused with creating a laissez-faire atmosphere of intellectual relativism, where anything goes" (44). Knowing how to exercise authority appropriately in these moments is one of the most difficult tasks of the job. At first, it felt contrary, on the one hand, to espouse democratic ideals that suggest openness to change and collaboration and, on the other, to be steadfast when it comes to protecting the sacred ground of the writing center consultation.

I had to grasp that the two seemingly disparate positions, in fact, both have a place within a democracy. Rather than assuming a “fixed” position “at a permanent distance from the students [and I would argue fellow administrators and colleagues],” liberatory educators must be willing to adjust to the circumstances (Shor and Freire 92). In other words, they “have to use authority within the limits of democracy” (Shor and Freire 91), to “evoke authority critically” (Lee 272). In all writing center relationships, I saw it (and continue to see it) as a matter of making deliberate choices in order to strike a balance between allowing for a free-for-all and acting as an authoritarian regime (both with other administrators and as an administrator myself). Hence, I drew upon Shor, Freire, and Lee’s advice for teachers and focused on becoming the same sort of critical administrator. This approach to leadership has involved seeing myself not as an equal but as an authority, learning to know how to compromise without selling the writing center’s soul, and asserting authority to avert antagonism.

### **SEEING MYSELF AS AN AUTHORITY**

Shor insists that “the teacher is different from and not equal to the students, even as we practice democratic relations in the classroom” (Shor and Freire 94). “In fact,” he argues, “those differences make the liberatory project possible” (95). I have learned to believe that the same is true of a critical administrator and the consultants of a writing center. I like to joke with the consultants that I am but the hostess; I gather us all together as friends, but they make the party what it is. I try not to interfere; instead, I mingle to solicit their feedback about how things are going and how they should go, and I appreciate their opinions and accommodate their requests along the way. It is not lost on

me that even as a hostess, I am responsible for the party. My authority is always *there* (Lee; Shor and Freire). Yet this is how I like to imagine myself—as the one among a group of peers whose role is to plan the outings and keep the gang together. And in most cases, it works.

Stepping in as the authority when the gathering gets out of hand, however, is also my role. As a critical administrator, I've had to learn that both decisions—working side-by-side with consultants and taking charge when needed—are based on the set of commitments conveyed by our democratic mission. Lee reminds me that “we cannot, once and for all, determine *the* positions to be occupied by teachers or students [or administrators or consultants]” (272). Our roles can and do change. What matters, in the end, is that dedication to our overarching commitment to students drives us even in unsettling circumstances. Freire discusses what this means when acknowledging that “the student [and the consultant, I would argue] needs to know that in some moments freedom must be punished...and the punishment must be made by the authority” (Shor and Freire 93).

I distinctly remember the first instance with a consultant that called for such an authoritative response because it was a dilemma for me. This consultant, Susan, had been in the writing center for a few years and had become a regular participant in any conversations, formal or informal, surrounding the pedagogical dimension of writing center work. She was fascinated and even surprised by how her work with students in this one-to-one setting informed her classroom teaching. And she loved talking about her revelations regarding assignments and classroom practices both with her writing center colleagues and with the instructors of students with whom she worked in the writing

center. She regularly shared with me particularly productive or frustrating email correspondence between her and an instructor, always as a site of inquiry, discussion, and debate. We were educators learning and exploring these issues together, and I enjoyed the collegial exchange. I even went to Susan on several occasions for advice when I needed to help another consultant work through a challenging series of emails with an instructor who was unwilling to engage in dialogue about the pedagogy of his assignment.

So I was perplexed when I was approached first by an instructor, then by this consultant—both voicing concerns about the other one. The instructor opened the conversation by saying how much she had come to value the input she usually gets into not only her students' writing but also her own teaching methods by talking with us on email when her students visit the writing center. And she named an incident in particular when she revised some problematic wording of a writing assignment based upon dialogue she had shared with another consultant. All of this said, she launched into the disappointing sequence of events that had just transpired between one of her students and the writing center. According to her, the student had missed numerous classes, neglected to contact her in the meantime, and then visited the writing center in an attempt to earn the extra credit offered for making that effort.

For obvious reasons, the student had limited understanding of what the assignment at hand entailed—just the one word title listed on the syllabus—“narrative”—and a vague recollection from the last class she attended about the need for a thesis statement. As I learned later from Susan, the student shared this description of the assignment with her, complaining that it was vague and confusing, but she neglected to

mention that she had missed the previous two weeks of class, during which this assignment was discussed at length. In the process, Susan sided with the student (who told the teacher so) and opted not to engage in our usual electronic communication with the teacher. When Susan came to me to shortly thereafter to discuss the incident, she reluctantly admitted not emailing the teacher, saying she just didn't know where to begin.

“But you are one of the best when it comes to bringing teachers on board with questions about their pedagogical choices,” I reminded her. “What happened?”

“I don't know,” she said quietly.

“This just isn't like you,” I commented.

“I just couldn't do it this time.”

The dynamic of this discussion was decidedly different than any others Susan and I had shared, especially regarding teaching and representing our pedagogical choices. Knowing that both the student and her instructor were upset made Susan uncomfortable. She could tell me that much, but her usual verbosity and self reflexivity were replaced with monotone, one-sentence responses and hesitation. The absence of the mutual exchange gave me pause as well, and I had to finally admit, as Shor points out, that “the dialogical relationship does not have the power to create such an impossible equality” (Shor and Freire 92). In other words, Susan and I were not and could not be just teaching community buddies in this moment. She had breached the trust and freedom we had established, in a sense, by neglecting to engage in the common practice of email correspondence. Freire speaks of similar moments when students test the freedom of a democracy within the classroom and asserts “if you punish that student, you really [are] not honest. Your speech [does] not have any value” (Shor and Freire 93). Thus, in a

similar position as an administrator, I had to assume authority and get to the bottom of what was causing this distress, but it would have been wrong and contradictory to reprimand her.

“Are you really that upset about her assignment? Or is it something else?” I finally asked.

Susan and I sat in awkward silence for well over a minute before she spoke, only to say “I don’t know.”

Susan had told me before that she wasn’t crazy about this instructor, based on experience working with her years ago at another institution. And I was beginning to wonder if this current conflict was residual.

“I sense that your resistance to the usual exchange isn’t about the assignment at all.” I said. “Am I right?”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“Then, could you tell me what it *is* about?”

She finally revealed that the instructor had beat her out for an adjunct teaching job at another institution several years ago even though she was far more qualified. Susan admitted that she had resented this teacher ever since. Something that the teacher had said to me came to mind: “I can put differences aside when it comes to students.” I assumed at the time we were speaking that she meant pedagogical differences, but I was beginning to see there was more to it. The free exchange of ideas that Susan and I usually shared was eclipsed by the need for me to fill the role of authority and discuss with her why her behavior with this student and teacher was problematic. We talked about how this situation might have played out differently if she had removed her own

self interest and sent the sort of email that she usually composes in these situations. And I reminded her that the student's best interest had to be her guiding force in these moments.

She acknowledged that her inability to get beyond personal beefs with the teacher had negatively influenced her. "I can't believe I let this affect me so much," she said. "I also can't believe skipping a few emails could lead to *this*." We ended up talking for about an hour about how that happened. We both valued the process, but we had never really considered either how much of ourselves we throw into this work or what this email exchange had come to represent. Our focus in prior conversations surrounding these electronic discussions about pedagogy, we could now see, had been on the teachers' comments not our own. We began to wonder if there were other times when our own biases toward or perceptions about an instructor affected the quality of the emails we sent. And after only briefly combing through our sent boxes, we were both a bit surprised and embarrassed to learn that there were. "I guess I was a little short with this one," I admitted when finding a message I had sent to the teacher who insisted on introducing me as "the lady from the writing center." His replies were usually condescending and dismissive, which probably explains why the message I wrote was brief and to the point with a less inviting closing than usual. I hadn't consciously thought this through at the time, but it seemed pretty obvious in retrospect that my opinion about the teacher rather than the best interest of the student had driven my communication with this teacher.

After unearthing a few more revealing examples, Susan and I both owned up to the fact that avoiding the conversations with teachers for personal reasons was

embarrassing and wrong. In these situations, nothing and nobody was changed for the better. Most disappointingly, by being unprofessional in these instances, we both eliminated the possibility for the sort of “social transformation” of which Nancy Maloney Grimm speaks. We continue struggling with certain teachers to this day. But we often read each other’s email messages before we send them to find the words and the tone needed to engage in the sort of dialogue that will put the writer (not our own petty concerns) at the center. Shortly after our initial conversation, the two of us facilitated a discussion at a writing center staff meeting about these issues, admitting what we had discovered about ourselves and inviting others to turn the same lens upon their own email correspondence. The conversation that we started that day is ongoing as we are constantly sharing with one another stories of success and setback and offering strategies we’ve devised “to put differences aside when it comes to students.” As a critical administrator, I am constantly learning right along with Susan and the other consultants as we develop strategies—in this case reading each other’s emails—to help us focus on what is best for student writers.

### **COMPROMISING WITHOUT SELLING THE WRITING CENTER’S SOUL**

When it comes to negotiating relationships outside of the writing center, my struggles with authority take on a completely different shape. In these moments, rather than assuming we are peers who are creating and learning together, I must constantly remind myself not to operate from a fixed position. I often think I know what’s best for the writing center. Period. But taking such an unwavering stance is rarely a good idea. Most critically, it implies the very authoritarianism we work to avoid on so many levels



in our writing center. Yet, as Lee emphasizes, “in considering our roles as teachers, it is important that we not assign absolute, transcendent parameters” (267). Instead, we must adjust according to the changing circumstances of a classroom or a writing center. Shor argues “the willingness to move with the class involves a willingness to be flexible in the form of the authority the teacher exercises” even though “the teacher’s authority must always be there” (Shor and Freire 92). The same holds true for me as a critical administrator. I have to find ways to move through administrative negotiations with flexibility and openness while simultaneously remaining true to my convictions.

For me, the most taxing moments of this sort have come when I have wanted to outright reject proposals involving the writing center made by colleagues in the English department. For example, when a fellow faculty member approached me about having the writing center teach one credit of a particular 4.5 credit hour English class that he was hoping to develop, I was in a precarious position. I did not want the writing center to be in a position to dole out curriculum and grade student writing. Both tasks are in contrast to the non-evaluative, collegial stance that we take as writing center consultants. Compromising that approach by offering core credit for time spent in the writing center would certainly have a ripple effect. “If you can grade my English paper, why can’t you just tell me what grade you’d give this philosophy paper?” the students might say. Or “What do *you want* for this English paper?” A large part of the success of writing center consulting is due to the fact that we, unlike teachers (even those who resist) *can’t* answer that question. Instead, we *can* help writers to figure out what *they* want to accomplish in their writing.

Lee provides a nice gauge for me in these moments by reminding me that “rather than assuming a discourse and its practice (or practitioners) are inherently ‘radical’ and anti-authoritarian, we must continually critique our pedagogies [and I would argue our administrative philosophies] for ways in which we reproduce that which we seek to challenge” (102). In the face of proposals like this one, admittedly, the urge is usually there to immediately launch into how far-fetched the idea is. Since we work so constantly and diligently to make our mission an institutional way of life, I tend to get defensive and annoyed when requests show such blatant disregard for who we are and what we are about in the writing center. Yet I know how counterproductive such a fixed response would be, and I don’t want to simply respond to my distaste for one extreme idea with another equally extreme refusal. Clearly, responding to the apparent disregard of others with an exclusionary rant would be out of line.

Instead, in this instance, I decided to provide my usual spiel about the mission and our dedication to preserving it. And I proceeded gingerly as I explained how honoring the request could put us in a compromising position. The challenge came in convincing my colleague and administrator that rejecting their initial ideas did not mean that we claimed any sort of superior status for the writing center. The last thing we hoped to create was just a revised hierarchy in which power merely changed hands. The person making this request, however, kept pushing it. As it turned out, he not only wanted to use the writing center to teach part of these classes but also had visions of joining forces with the writing center in a more general sense. He liked the way that the writing center staff seemed to work together and dedicate themselves to the work. Along the way, however, the faculty member and the Dean often made sweeping statements (in the same breath)

such as “we want our teachers to buy into the curriculum for this class like the consultants buy into the writing center philosophy” but “they better not step out of line.” Moreover, the training for teaching these classes included such directives as a template syllabus, mandatory assignments, and an attendance policy, marking the crucial differences in the overall approach to preparation in the writing center.

As is too often true in such institutional moments, for both of them, the writing center’s participation in the process of revamping a program seemed like the best and easiest fix but, unfortunately, not because it was a good fit. The faculty member who had been, essentially, coerced into spearheading the project wanted to profit from the ground that the writing center had covered. And the Dean couldn’t resist the idea of the writing center having a credit bearing capacity. Given their institutional perspectives, I could understand the source of their motivations. But that didn’t necessarily make it easier to accept the fact that their goals and hopes for us did not match our convictions, at times, seemed like a moot point to them. For many months, the faculty member and the Dean both acted as if their proposal had been accepted by announcing in various meetings a developing partnership with the writing center consultants who would soon be co-teaching these classes. And I would add a qualifying statement or two to more accurately represent the degree to which writing centers would contribute to their project.

After much deliberation, I finally decided to enumerate for the teacher and the Dean the various ways that our two approaches and philosophies differ, and I was careful to point out the merits of each one. That we operated from different philosophies, I assured them, did not mean one approach was superior to another—just different in ways that would make the complete overlap they were hoping for unproductive if not

impossible. I shared with them my reservations regarding joining forces in the ways they were suggesting for the conflicting messages our participation would send to students and faculty about what they can expect from the writing center. I explained to them that the space that we have created for students to be heard and to learn the transformative capacity of language is something we will protect at all costs. “This is our sacred ground,” I declared. At the same time, I knew that I didn’t want to be the sort of traditional teacher (or in this context, administrator) who “is always in charge from beginning to end” as Shor describes it (Shor and Freire 90). I wanted, instead, to be the sort of critical administrator who lived the anti-authoritarian ideals that I promoted by compromising to the extent possible. So I solicited the Dean’s and the teacher’s input, and together we brainstormed to find alternative, mutually acceptable ways that the writing center might become a resource for the class being developed.

The faculty member quickly suggested requiring that each student visit the writing center at least one hour per week and that the consultants meet every Monday with the teachers of these classes to find out what they wanted us to do with their students that week (a thinly veiled version of the one-credit idea). I encouraged him to remove the implication of punishment by providing incentive—say extra credit—rather than making the visits mandatory, assuring him that students who visit voluntarily gain much more from the experience. And I reminded him that teachers are welcome to use the writing center at any time to engage in dialogue about their own writing and their writing assignments. I also offered to visit these classes to provide an orientation session regarding what writing center services entail. The teacher then asked if we could come into their classes to teach various aspects of writing. I responded by inviting him,

instead, to provide topics of interest to these students that he would like for us to address in our quarterly writing center workshop series. And I encouraged consultants who covered these topics to schedule them at times when these classes are meeting to provide an opportunity for them all to attend.

In the end, they both voiced disappointment for having to throw out their proposal. And compromising for me meant giving this teacher a slight hold over us as in meetings and conversations, he regularly interjects ideas for workshop topics we need to cover with an air of expected subservience in his voice. That the writing center's degree of participation in his project should be determined by our mission rather than by the desires and/or needs of his program didn't fully register. I don't think this teacher's desire for our collaborative efforts are ill-intentioned. He cares about students and their success every bit as much as we to. We just go about reaching our goals differently, which means that we can, and do, say no to some of his suggestions ("how to write a five-paragraph essay" for instance). Still, the dynamic is still uncomfortable. Even though none of us emerged fully satisfied, the Dean, the faculty member, and I eventually found a workable (albeit imperfect) common ground that I consider a work in progress. My goal is to continue seeking better and more productive ways to collaborate with them, all the while doing what it takes not to sell the writing center's soul.

### **ASSERTING AUTHORITY TO AVERT ANTAGONISM**

For the first several years as writing center coordinator, situations like the one described in the previous section were quite unsettling for me. I had difficulty reconciling in my mind the tension between living the democratic ideals of the writing

center and maintaining healthy ties with my English colleagues. Once again, I worried about coming off as the gatekeeping type, who promoted one set of ideals and operated from another. It wasn't until I was faced with the following dilemma involving an antagonistic full-time English faculty member who wanted to work in the writing center that I learned what Shor means regarding having to use authority within a democracy. Freire makes an important distinction that helped me reach this understanding. "In the theory of dialogical action, organization requires authority, so it cannot be authoritarian; it requires freedom, so it cannot be licentious" (178). Finding a way to both have authority over a democratic space and promote the sort of freedom that defines it has been valuable learning experience.

From the start, I have been negotiating with my Deans for full-time teachers to be able to work in the writing centers either as part of their annual loads or for extra pay. Currently, they may exchange 3.0 ECH (earned credit hours) per quarter of their teaching loads with hours in the writing center. For our first few years, those full-timers who chose to take advantage of the ECH allowance in the writing center were fully on board with our mission. They embraced our responsibility-to-students-first approach. And their positive, supportive, and professional presence helped to establish the collegial and scholarly community that our writing center has become.

Just this year, though, another faculty member expressed interest in working in the writing center, but she would not be such a natural fit. Having taught for years in a room that was transformed into one of our writing center sites, she was not supportive of the writing center from the start, presumably, because it invaded her turf. She lurked around the room during writing center hours, made comments about how busy (or not)

we were, and found numerous ways to mark her territory in the room (with her stuff, presence, and comments). One day in the writing center, she asked me “so what are you studying for your PhD work anyway?” I explained that I was working in the field of rhetoric and composition with an emphasis on writing center theory and pedagogy. And I told her that I would be writing my dissertation on the ways that all decisions made when establishing a writing center must be informed by a democratic mission. She interrupted me before I could elaborate and declared “Well, how complicated can it be? You find a room for the writing center, turn on the light, and go.” In spite of the ample time she spent loitering in the writing center, the essence of the exchanges between students and consultants seemed to have eluded her.

So when this faculty member asked me one day in passing about the possibility of working in the writing center, I was surprised, given her resistance from the start. I said, “I had no idea you were interested in this type of work.” “Of course I am,” she said incredulously. “I conference with my students all the time. Besides, I’d like to work in the writing center because I never have enough time for my own students during office hours, and I could use some extra cash.” She actually said that. The writing centers were fully staffed, so I wasn’t hiring at the time and could use that to skirt the issue of telling her “no.” I just said, “in the writing center, we give our time to work with other people’s students.” And for the time being, she dropped it.

Then, as if our previous conversation never happened, she called me about a year later and left a message casually mentioning that she’d like to work in the writing center, this time she said, “to lighten the load a bit.” When she asked the first time, I told the English Dean about the conversation we had, shared my reasoning, and asked him to

please support my decision if Bridget came calling to him. He responded simply with: “C’mon. Give her a try. What have you got to lose?”

What *did* I have to lose? This was a good question that stopped me in my tracks, prompting me to think it through a little more thoroughly. My initial reaction was to put up a protective shield when she voiced her reasoning for wanting to work in the writing center. All I honed in on was “office hours” and “extra cash” even though Bridget had also identified a pedagogical connection with writing center work. Thinking of what I had to lose by hiring her made me begrudgingly admit to myself that I didn’t grant the latter notion a moment’s consideration. In all honesty, I think I just decided not to engage the thought because I didn’t believe it (and didn’t want to believe it given my growing uneasiness about Bridget’s motives).

“Well, she has been teaching for a long time. Maybe she could get on board with the rest,” I eventually uttered half-heartedly.

“We’ll have to see what happens,” he concluded.

I toiled over this situation for the next few weeks, wavering back and forth between feeling that I just couldn’t hire her and knowing that she deserves the same chance as any other prospective consultant. Fortunately, I did not have to directly deal with the matter again for another year. The second time Bridget inquired, since the request was not made in person, I had a chance to think about it and consult with my two Deans (by this time a new English Dean and the one who had directed the grant that funded us) before responding. I explained the many reservations that I had about hiring Bridget, which included new concerns regarding at least seven different consultants voicing concern about her tendency to invade the space of consultations by lingering



around, listening to, and even interrupting the consultants while they were working with students. She also had reportedly made snide remarks on several occasions (in front of students even) that consultants were on easy street, implying that writing center work is somehow less rigorous and demanding than classroom teaching. All in all, she had become someone who made nearly all of the consultants (and likely the students) in the writing center uncomfortable.

When I mentioned all of this, I was met with a proactive response from the Deans, who both pretty readily endorsed my decision not to hire Bridget. With each one of them, I first expressed concern about being in a position to enforce authority over a colleague in the English department. Our department doesn't operate as many do with a peer acting as Chair, so they are not accustomed to such a dynamic. In terms of institutional status, we are all equals. The only hierarchy that exists is perceived, and it usually plays out as an unwritten deference to seniority, which in this case would favor Bridget. So the persistence of this particular long-time faculty member made me nervous.

While I felt more strongly than ever about not hiring this person, the obligation to make this decision as I made others based upon the candidate's vitae and interview still tugged at me, and I mentioned it to my Deans. I sensed that it would be the right thing to do. Plus, I didn't want to be perceived by her or others in the department as exclusionary or authoritarian, which could easily be the result if I denied her request without having so much as a conversation with her about job.

At the same time, though, I sensed that Bridget, like students who test teachers' professed commitments to openness and democracy, was testing me on some level. I

discussed this too with the Deans and voiced my opinion that with all of her direct exposure on top of our thorough advertising efforts that Bridget was frequently witness to, she *had* to know that her attitude about writing center work did not mesh with ours. A sideways glance and smirk directed to the friend who was with her when I first questioned her interest in the writing center seemed to suggest as much. It felt very much like she was pushing me. It was almost as if she knew how conflicted I felt as she seemed to be provoking me to just give in or to lash out. Yet I wanted to avoid the shift in power that I thought either stance would create. We were colleagues, and I neither wanted to stand over her and say “no” or stand under her and say “yes.”

It took several soul-searching conversations with the Deans to reconcile the forces of guilt and obligation alternately playing upon me. I wanted to stand by my convictions, but the fellow faculty member status challenged me to figure out how to do that with colleagues of equal faculty status. It was my English Dean who finally convinced me of Shor’s conviction that such equality is impossible.

“You were hired by a committee of eight faculty members and administrators to make these very decisions,” she reasoned. “You *are* in a position of authority, and you have a responsibility to exercise it when needed.”

“Of course I do,” I answered. “But I just don’t know if I’ll be able to do it. And I dread the thought of having a regular interview with her. The truth is that even if her pedagogy lines up with ours, I will have a difficult time overlooking the contradictory messages and motives she has been sending all along. But I also hate the thought of telling her ‘no.’”

“Katie, your commitment to what is best for writers guides all the decisions you make for the writing center, correct?”

“Yes.”

“How is this decision any different?” she asked. “Are you willing to compromise your core conviction to avoid potential conflict with Bridget?”

“No. Absolutely not,” I quickly shot back.

“Then, I think you know what you need to do.”

## **CONCLUSION**

The truth was that what I needed to do had already been done. The democratic mission driven by our responsibility to student writers had become an institutional way of life for us in the writing center by then through the relationships we had worked so hard to build and grow with writers, fellow consultants, faculty, and administrators. We had set a precedent of practicing humility, learning to listen, and making good decisions in order to preserve the integrity of what we can accomplish with students like Mary. Of course, as these chapters convey, conflicts arose (and continue to arise) along the way. I instinctively know how to handle some of them and for far more I rely on the strength of our convictions and relationships to help me learn and to guide my thinking.

This situation with Bridget took my role as the administrative party within this democratic setting to a new, more complicated level. It was in state of conflict, however, that I finally began to believe some authoritative moves are, in fact, necessary in order to protect and promote the democratic space that we have created. I realized that telling

Bridget she wasn't the best fit for the writing center—even if it turns out that her teaching style complements ours—was right in line with all we have done these past four years.

I still struggled with the likely ramifications of this decision and feared the reality of such a conversation. But I had to think about my most urgent obligation—providing the best possible conditions for student writers to learn and to use language for change. Had the consultant who first worked with Mary been someone like Bridget who constantly undermines the value of the exchange, Mary may have never heard the sweet music of her own voice. When I could finally see it this way, I no longer saw this dilemma as the sort of “invitation to authoritarianism” of which Freire cautions (Shor and Freire 93) but as a move, among many in our writing center, to ensure that our responsibility to writers *necessarily* determines the course of actions.

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