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Situating Our Rhetorical Practice

by **Tim Taylor**, Eastern Illinois University

As the writing consultants and Assistant Director have demonstrated, *kairos* is a core concept that we can use productively to situate and reflect on our rhetorical practice. The idea of “right timing,” the “opportune moment,” and the “embodiment of *carpe diem*” will further help us push past the false dualism of either directive or nondirective tutoring (Hawhee 20). As the reflections above show, enacting *kairotic* thinking in the writing center can move us beyond that either-or choice and perhaps move us towards a stronger both-and philosophy. Since consultants are creative individuals who make important decisions on the spot when working with complicated individuals, this core concept invites us to reflect on our practices and our principles. Hill describes *kairos* as a “habit of mind, one that expresses itself in a kind of time that is living and creative” (212). The creativity of writing consultants brings to life the possibilities explored in Geller’s discussion of “epochal time” and coheres with the call put forth by the authors of *The Everyday Writing Center* that “[a]t the very heart of what we five have come to understand as we’ve talked about time is our belief that writing centers should be most focused on time that is relational” (33). Tutoring with *kairos* in mind provides a way to conceptualize that relational model of writing center practice.

Writers—and writing consultants—need to play with language, play with ideas, and play with details as they develop a sense of themselves as writers and broaden their appreciation of the possibilities inherent in a piece of writing.

So while it is important to study and use strategies produced and broadcast through what some might call writing center “lore,” *kairos* validates our beliefs, values, and research that writers are individuals who work within the socially-mediated act of crafting discourse, and these writers need one-to-one consulting to help them grow as writers and thinkers (Thompson, et al. 79). Embracing a stereotypical or lockstep way of proceeding or running a tutoring session is antithetical to *kairotic* thinking since each rhetorical situation changes based on subject, audience, writer, and purpose. Hawhee supports this idea well in her description of the concept: “the movements and betweenness of *kairos* necessitate a move away from a privileging of ‘design’ or preformulated principles” (24). While writing consultants should be professional and have a strong *ethos*, as Heath notes, we also want to nurture a sense of intellectual play that is important to learning. That sense of play, quick thinking, and brainstorming in consulting sessions is crucial to helping students see writing as something more than the act of slapping words onto screens or papers. Writers—and writing consultants—need to play with language, play with ideas, and play with details as they develop a sense of themselves as writers and broaden their appreciation of the possibilities inherent in a piece of writing. A sense of relational time or what the authors of *The Everyday Writing Center* call

“body time” complicates our view of how sessions should progress, as our writing consultants have pointed out (34).

The challenge—how do we teach *kairos*? John Poulakos underscores that important question: “Even if we assert the centrality of *kairos* in the early days of rhetorical theory, its teachability still emerges as a practical issue” (89). Klein, McDuffy, Black, and Heath all learned about the concept as we studied ancient rhetoricians, in particular Isocrates and Aristotle, and awareness of the concept and the search for connections to *kairos* helped them situate and enrich their writing center practice. Their examples support our contention that *kairos* is a core rhetorical concept that should be introduced into writing center courses to help tutors reflect on their sessions and develop a metacognitive awareness of *kairotic* moments they capitalized on and those that escaped them. Those of us who teach writing center courses can introduce the concept through Glover’s helpful article and then use various pedagogical approaches to bring out the “*kairos*-consciousness” he argues for (15). At our writing center, for example, we have had tutors write reflective memos about their own conferences or colleagues’ consulting sessions. Integrating the concept of *kairos* into those assignments would be a simple but fruitful step in helping them become even stronger reflective practitioners by learning from their missteps and successes.

Thompson, et al. assert that “tutors are flexible in the strategies they use, sometimes directive and sometimes not directive, based on their ongoing diagnoses of students’ needs” (81). The classical idea of *kairos* provides a conceptual model for that flexible style of tutoring, and the concept also offers a sound “analytic framework” for the work we do (Janetta 38). This concept of “opportune time” is a crucial heuristic and guiding principle that can be used for reflection and implementation of tutoring strategies. Both directors and tutors can use this concept of qualitative time to guide their work in conferencing and collaborating in the writing center since exhibiting *kairotic* thinking is adapting to rhetorical circumstances—audiences, writers, tutors, occasions, and situations that change from conference to conference, week to week, and semester to semester.

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