BEYOND TUTORING: MAPPING THE INVISIBLE LANDSCAPE OF WRITING CENTER WORK

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In their call for papers for this special issue of *Praxis*, the editors speculate that most writing centers assume various roles beyond those implied by the triage model of fix-it consultations. We agree. As the call suggests, writing centers have long sought to "carve out a broader purview" for themselves—to extend writing center efforts both beyond the center's physical space and beyond enduring writing center master narratives about the primacy of individual instruction. Still, much of the writing center's extra curriculum, or what we call here *non-tutoring work*, remains hidden: for example, writing center scholarship provides anecdotal evidence of writing centers' work with faculty, but the scholarship rarely tells us just how prevalent such efforts are across the board or what other kinds of non-tutoring work we are engaged in. To borrow from the field of landscape architecture, what our field lacks is an aerial—and ultimately generative—vision of our non-tutoring activities, one that would "reveal aspects of the landscape that are invisible from the ground and offer an alternative to pictorial [read "local"] practices so common in landscape representation" (Czerniak 111). There are consequences to invisibility. We cannot theorize what we cannot see, although theories are always already there, shaping our identities and practices in ways that might or might not be acceptable to us if only we could see and name their contours. Viewing the writing center landscape from a different vantage point, then, gives us much more than an updated map: it challenges us to re-theorize who we are and what makes our work valuable.

To get at a global perspective on writing center work, we report here on data from our 2009 IWCA grant-supported national survey of writing center non-tutoring activities. Survey results indicate that writing centers across the board engage in a remarkable array of non-tutoring activities. Not surprisingly, at least some writing center non-tutoring work is designed to support what many consider a writing center's primary mission—the individual tutorial (creating a tutor handbook, for example). Much non-tutoring work, however, exceeds the boundaries of individual tutoring as both disciplinary narrative and practice and suggests a more expansive or simply different writing center mission and identity. To return to our landscape metaphor, the survey results helped us map writing center territory beyond the artificial, yet firmly entrenched, boundaries of tutoring and exposed contours in the landscape that challenged any fixed notion of a writing center. Thus, the survey findings invite us to wrestle with, perhaps re-conceive, as Jeanne Simpson suggests, what a writing center *is, might be, or could be* (4).

From Questions to Methods: Designing the Research Project

We began our project by wondering: "What kinds of non-tutoring activities do writing centers engage in?" Using our own experience and writing center colleagues' feedback as guides, we identified nine specific categories of non-tutoring work: resources, services, publications, hosting/sponsorship, instructional programming, research/assessment, digital community building/social networking, tutor

training, and collaboration/coordination. We then built an online survey listing seventy-two different activities under those nine categories. We also composed open-ended questions to query respondents about fund-raising efforts, non-tutoring activities they might drop, develop, or increase, and non-tutoring work they considered most important and successful.

After seeking and receiving IRB approval, our next task was soliciting participation from as many US writing centers as possible.[1] We decided that the best strategy would be to ask for participants on the Writing Center Listserv (WCENTER) and the Secondary School Writing Center Listserv (SSWC-L). On both lists, we posted a request to participate, a link to a video explaining our interest in the topic, and a link to take the survey. We requested that only directors complete the survey to avoid duplicate answers from the same institution. A few weeks later, we posted a second request for participation to both listservs. In all, we received 141 responses from a range of institutional types. (See Table 1: Institutional Affiliations.) Though not comprehensive—the St. Cloud Writing Center Directory lists over 1,500 US writing centers—we believe our sample is sufficient to provide a glimpse into an important facet of writing center work and identity (see Table 1).

Findings and Discussion

As we suspected, writing center professionals engage in many activities beyond the one-to-one tutorial. Respondents indicate doing activities in all of the nine categories and all but one of the seventy-two different activities we listed under these categories. Table 2 summarizes the number and percentage of responses to each activity (see Table 2).

Local variability narratives within writing center scholarship can lead us to believe that institutional contexts vary to such a degree that the only thing writing centers have in common is tutoring. And yet our survey findings certainly call those narratives into question. Over 60% of respondents indicated engaging in activities in eight of the nine categories (resources, services, publications, hosting/sponsoring, instructional programming, research/assessment, tutor training materials, and collaboration/coordination),

with resources, publications, instructional programming, research assessment, and collaboration/coordination garnering a colossal 93% or higher. The only category that fewer than half of respondents indicated participating in was digital community building.

Each category yielded results worthy of detailed discussion; however, given space limitations here, we will focus on the two most compelling trends—writing centers as sites of pedagogical diversity and writing centers as sites of record keeping. We wanted an aerial view of writing center work, zooming out to see what was and was not happening across the country. The trends discussed below reflect the complexity of our findings as related to writing center missions and identities: pedagogical efforts demonstrate our (perhaps surprising) commitment to teaching writing in multiple sites, with multiple methods, and for multiple audiences, while our fastidious record-keeping hints at internal and external tensions surrounding appropriate and acceptable writing center work.

Writing Centers Embrace Pedagogical Diversity

As we have suggested, writing centers are often conceptualized as merely sites for one-to-one tutoring and thus as leaders in individualized instruction. Our survey results do not dispute that notion, but do call into question the received notion that writing centers *only* provide one-to-one instruction. In fact, directors responding to our survey report using a wide variety of pedagogical practices in their centers, which far exceed the boundaries of one-to-one instruction. One-to-many instruction, for example, is widely used in centers: 84% of respondents indicated their centers offer student workshops, 59% offer faculty workshops, 13% offer community workshops, 17% host lectures, 22% offer credit-bearing courses, and 13% offer non-credit bearing classes. Collaborative group pedagogy, where participants teach one another, is less frequent, but still present: 18% have language-learning conversation groups, 10% have graduate student writing groups, 8% offer faculty writing groups, and 13% offer some other type of writing group. Writing centers also create and distribute

handouts (89% of centers surveyed), offer ESL or grammar drills (39%), and tutoring manuals (69%), all of which might be used by a learner in the absence of a tutor or teacher.

Thus, the aerial view provided by the survey allowed us to see some universality or diversity in writing center work that is sometimes hard to distill from individual accounts. For example, the use of student workshops in writing centers was the activity that received the third highest response rate (only record keeping and handouts received higher responses). Descriptions of writing center workshops appear in some of the earliest writing center publications and continue throughout the decades.[2] Yet the anecdotal nature of such scholarship has never clearly demonstrated the overwhelming popularity of one-to-many instruction in writing centers. Moreover, in our open-ended questions, respondents occasionally indicated the degree to which workshops trumped tutoring work. For instance, one respondent noted: "We consider consulting only one of a suite of services we provide. We reach far more writers through workshops than we do through consultations." Thus, the survey results have provided us with a different perspective on the work, or the *primary* work, of writing centers.

Writing Center Records and Research

Of the seventy-two activities we listed in the survey, none gained a greater response than record keeping (93% of directors indicate their centers keep records of tutorials). Like the popularity of workshops for students, the push for record-keeping in writing centers began early in writing center publications with admonitions "to adopt a systematized form of record-keeping, including not only a record of time spent, but also the nature of remedial study or assignments, with specific page references or descriptions where possible, and some assessment of the progress of the individual student in these specific exercises" (Walker 7).[3] Writing centers have heeded the calls for keeping track of tutoring sessions—frankly, we were surprised that the number of centers keeping records was not closer to 100%.

However necessary internal reporting is, we could not help but feel frustration at the gulf between those writing centers that collected records, often for internal reporting (46% of writing center directors publish reports), versus those writing centers where administrators or tutors were collecting data or interrogating practices in the name of research. The number of writing centers that collect data for record-keeping purposes far exceeds the number of writing centers in which faculty (39%), graduate students (24%), or undergraduates (35%) conduct research on writing center theory, pedagogy, or administration. In these data, we hear the perennial story of writing center directors caught between the desire to conduct knowledge-making research and the imperative to "keep good records." We are reminded of *The Everyday Writing Center* in which the authors write, "we can discern that at the heart of meaningful writing center administration lies not efficiency, marketing, or record-keeping (these are peripheral matters in fact), but the leaderful, learningful, stewardship of a dynamic learning and writing culture and community" (Geller, et al. 14). We understand and yet regret that institutional practices might force directors' hands in this case by rewarding impressive numbers—not impressive scholarship—with increased funding. Many a writing center director, we suspect from these numbers, sacrifices research for those activities like record-keeping which bear more immediate fruit, but which prevent us (and others) from (re)imagining writing centers as sites of leadership rather than support.

Our data also revealed that others shared our frustration: though 131 writing centers indicate that they keep records, only eight respondents indicated in the open-ended responses that such record keeping is "important." For us, these numbers raise several important questions. First and perhaps most obvious, if we do not consider record-keeping valuable or important, why do so many of us spend valuable time doing it? Are we expected to do such work? Or do we do such work primarily because others are doing it? Second, if we do such work and/or are expected to do such work, why do we continue to do it in such a way that renders it "unimportant"? Are we, as the authors

of *The Everyday Writing Center* caution against, neglecting to present our work as "more than simply nuts and bolts" (Geller et al. 115)? If so, how might we begin to write the kinds of reports that we value—the kinds of documents that report "the things we want our institutions and our profession to value," reports that do transformative rather than structural (status-quo) work (Geller et al, 121)? We do not have the answers to these questions, but we think the data make such questions hard to ignore.[4]

Conclusion

We presented our survey's initial findings at the IWCA@CCCC Collaborative in San Francisco, and one audience member in particular from that venue has remained in our minds as we crafted this article. After patiently listening to what we found interesting and important about our project, she questioned our entire premise. Quite politely, she asked: "Why do you want to know about this? What's wrong with tutoring?"

For the record, nothing is wrong with tutoring. We are both avid readers and contributors to the scholarship on tutoring and tutor training. As Harvey Kail admits in an article in which he questions the burgeoning discipline's exclusive focus on one-to-one tutoring, "tutoring works" (2). And yet tutoring is not all we do. We wanted to know about non-tutoring activities because they are part of the landscape of writing center work, albeit a largely invisible terrain until now. While it is not up to us to say whether writing centers ought to engage in (more) non-tutoring work or not, whether they should or not is a question raised by our findings and one we think is worthy of discussion. The point is that we *are* engaged in a range of non-tutoring activities, and our findings give us a

mirror with which to see this work. How does non-tutoring work fit with our goals and missions? How might it alter our goals and missions? How might it alter our identity?

Should writing center professionals find a fit between non-tutoring activities and their aims, as we think they might, we would like to see these non-tutoring activities more fully theorized. Much of the existing literature on non-tutoring activities (where it does exist) would fall under Stephen North's definition of lore: it simply describes *what works* (23). What the discipline needs is empirical, historical, and theoretical discussions that render experience more complex and ultimately more usable. Along the same lines, we need scholarship on training writing center professionals to engage in non-tutoring activities effectively. If, for instance, workshops are key to our mission, we ought to know best practices for planning and executing workshops in order to train our staffs accordingly. Likewise, if record-keeping is something we must do, then we must figure out how to make this endeavor worthwhile.

We suspect this decade might mark a turning-point in writing center history, one in which writing center identities and roles expand. The first step, one we hope this survey encourages, is recognizing that the "purity" of the writing center mission—the focus on one-to-one tutoring—is already more complicated than our disciplinary narratives suggest. Ultimately, we would like to see a richly-textured and nuanced vision of writing centers and writing center work: one that accounts for practice on the periphery, that pushes writing center professionals to pay critical attention to such practices, and that prompts potential revision of writing center theory, theorizing, practice, identities, and missions. In other words, we seek a richer (and more realistic) map of the writing center landscape.

Table 1: Institutional Affiliations of Respondents (N = 76)

Type of Institution	% of respondents
Public College or University (4 yr +)	39%
Private College or University (4 yr +)	38%
Community College (2 yr)	14%
Public and Private High School	8%

Table 2: Summary of Survey data (N = 141)

Type of Resource	Respondents
Writing Handouts (Online or Paper)	126 (89%)
Online links to other Writing Centers or Writing Resources	112 (79%)
Computer Use in Center	103 (73%)
Lending Library for Writing and Reference Texts	65 (46%)
ESL/Grammar Drill Resources	55 (39%)
Room Rental or Use by Other Groups	32 (23%)
Plagiarism Detection Programs	10 (7%)
Laptop/Equipment Checkout or Lending	8 (6%)
Other	24 (17%)
Total offering at least one resource	**139 (99%)**

Type of Service	Respondents
Editing/Proofreading	26 (18%)
Language-Learning Conversation Groups	25 (18%)
Grammar Software/Equipment for Individual Learning	25 (18%)
Grammar Hotline	21 (15%)
Test-Taking Station or Test Monitoring	15 (11%)

Photocopying, Printing, Binding	14 (10%)
Other	19 (13.5)
Total offering at least one service	**86 (61%)**

Type of Publication	Respondents
Website	102 (72%)
Brochures	96 (68%)
Bookmark, Stickers	78 (55%)
Reports	78 (55%)
Posters	60 (42%)
T-shirts, Pens, Pencils, Mugs, Promotional Items	48 (34%)
Bulletin Board	47 (33%)
Newsletter	33 (23%)
Video, Slidecast	22 (16%)
Blog	11 (8%)
Podcast	10 (7%)
Newspaper Column, Articles	8 (6%)
Other	20 (14%)
Total offering at least one publication	**132 (94%)**

Type of Hosting or Sponsoring	Respondents
Parties, Open Houses	55 (39%)
Writing Contests	26 (18%)
Lectures by Faculty, Visiting Scholars	24 (17%)
Conferences, Research Symposiums	24 (17%)

Other Writing Groups	19 (13.5)
Readings, Open Mics	16 (11%)
Dissertation/Thesis Writing Groups	14 (10%)
Faculty Writing Groups	11 (8%)
Summer Camps	3 (2%)
Spelling Bees	1 (1%)
Other	26 (18%)
Total involved in at least one	**102 (72%)**

Type of Programming	Respondents
Workshops/Presentations for Students	119 (84%)
Workshops/Presentations for Faculty	82 (59%)
Workshops/Presentations for Staff	41 (29%)
Classes for Credit (Taught in writing center)	31 (22%)
Workshops/Presentations for Community	21 (15%)
Non-Credit Classes	18 (13%)
Other	7 (5%)
Total offering at least one type of programming	**131 (93%)**

Type of Research or Assessment	Respondents
Record Keeping	131 (93%)
Student Satisfaction Surveys	109 (77%)
Director Evaluation of Tutors	89 (63%)
Student Demographics	81 (57%)
Research by Faculty on Writing Center Theory, Practice, or	55 (39%)

Administration	
Independent/In-house Assessment	54 (38%)
Research by Undergraduates on Writing Center Theory, Practice, or Administration	49 (35%)
Research by Graduate Students on Writing Center Theory, Practice, or Administration	34 (24%)
Research on Writing Center and Retention, GPA, Pass/Fail Rates	32 (23%)
Other	12 (9%)
Total conducting at least one type of research/assessment	**136 (96%)**

Type of Digital Community	Respondents
Facebook	25 (18%)
Wikis	13 (9%)
Blogs	12 (8%)
Social Photo Sharing	5 (4%)
Social Video Sharing	5 (4%)
Myspace	3 (2%)
Twitter or similar	3 (2%)
Social Bookmarking	0 (0%)
Other	15 (11%)
Total offering at least one type of digital community	**52 (37%)**

Type of Training Product	Respondents
Manuals or Handbooks	97 (69%)
Lesson Plans	42 (30%)
Videos	21 (15%)
Other	24 (17%)
Total offering at least one type of training product	**111 (79%)**

Type of Collaboration or Coordination	Respondents
Individual Faculty or Departments	110 (78%)
First-Year Composition	92 (66%)
Other Tutoring or Support Services	90 (63%)
WAC, WID, or CAC	86 (61%)
University Library	83 (59%)
Disability Services	54 (38%)
TA Preparation	34 (24%)
Student Groups	34 (24%)
Residence Halls	27 (19%)
Teacher Education	20 (14%)
National Writing Project	8 (6%)
Other	13 (9%)
Total writing centers involved in at least one of these	**136 (96%)**

Notes

1. Though there is a vibrant international writing center community, we decided to focus this initial study on US centers.

2. See Nairn; Devet; Patton; Siegele; Wolcott; Loris; Stroud; Richardson; Mills and Nesanovich; Einerson; Fishbain; Truscott; Covington, Brown, and Blank; Arkin; LeBlanc; Dvorak; Adams and Adams; LeBlanc and Nelson; Keil and Joyhanyak; Bauso; and Kail.

3. See also Harris; Bird; and Alexander.

4. One answer that comes from our data involves comparing the number of centers collecting data on sessions (93%) versus those centers that are engaged in assessment (38%). If centers assess student or staff learning outcomes rather than just count bodies and hours—as suggested by Joan Hawthorne in "Approaching Assessment as If It Matters" and Isabelle Thompson in "Writing Center Assessment: Why and a Little How"—the work might become more meaningful, useful, and valued.

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