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Staking Institutional and Theoretical Claims for the Writing Center

[Spring 2011/Focus](#)

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

-Elizabeth Boquet

"What just happened?" I asked 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 centers. 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, a doctoral student studying writing center theory and pedagogy for five years, and the designer/coordinator of a new multi-campus writing center for three years. I had worked with countless students, considered every aspect of writing center work while learning the theory behind it, and negotiated with administration and faculty to establish our writing center as a democratic space within the hierarchical structure of the institution. So I had experience, and from that I had plenty to say. No question about it. 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 determine and convey what should matter to them most as they began thinking about establishing a writing center.

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 who were involved in a campus-wide initiative to incorporate Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC). 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.

In this formative stage of their thinking, I ultimately decided that my role was to introduce them to the very idea of a writing center. For me, this meant

planning my presentation and creating a packet of handouts and illustrations surrounding three key topics: the history of writing centers, the seminal scholarship in the field, and, most importantly the need for a new writing center to have a theoretical foundation. 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's crucial 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 college, 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. And so the conversation proceeded, being pulled from the theoretical to the practical and back again. The folks present weren't mean or hostile. It's just that they clearly weren't prepared to imagine this work as being informed necessarily by theory. Thus, they resisted my efforts to generalize and philosophize and, for the most part, looked at me through it all as if I had lobsters crawling out of my ears. Before I knew it, the session was over, and they were all scurrying back to their daily obligations.

I drove the first half hour back to work beating myself up for giving such a rotten, worthless presentation. "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 granddaddy 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 colleagues at my own institution throughout 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 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 through which all planning and decisions should pass. Without such a mission, a new writing center 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 with little writing experience and produce an easy “fix.” Very little learning would occur along the way.

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So, no, I convinced myself as I neared the turn off for my campus. No. I am not crazy. 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 for lunch). 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 guilty that, in a matter of minutes, they hadn’t had an adequate chance to wrap their heads around what to most of them were unfamiliar concepts—what I had learned, studied, and lived for over fourteen years?

It finally occurred to me that I should not have agreed to the suggested format for their ambitious request for information as this isn’t the stuff of a casual lunch chat. In fact, it’s a whole new way of thinking about institutional dynamics that takes far more than one hour to grasp. Even so, I took comfort in knowing that, at least, I had left them with plenty to consider about the importance of defining the writing center themselves rather than having it be defined by others. Far too many people charged with starting new writing centers are forced to learn the hard way because it hadn’t even occurred to them to identify their institutional and theoretical claims at the outset. In that sense, I hadn’t lead them astray at all.

Works Cited

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