

## KAIROTIC SITUATIONS: A SPATIAL RETHINKING OF THE BURKEAN PARLOR IN THE WRITING CENTER

Elizabeth Busekrus  
Missouri Baptist University  
[elizabeth.busekrus@mobap.edu](mailto:elizabeth.busekrus@mobap.edu)

### Abstract

The Burkean parlor has been integrated into the lore of writing centers, showcasing how writing centers have both conversational and collaborative elements. However, the ease for students to enter into the academic conversation is not as simple as this metaphor suggests. To rethink this concept, *kairos*, or the opportune moment, must be considered. This article will investigate *kairos* as spatial and how that conceptualization can deepen the Burkean parlor and the conversations within it. Breaking down the Burkean parlor into three stages—questions, metacognition, and choices—can benefit the practicality of the tutoring session. *Kairos* complicates each of these three points of the student writer's integration into the conversation. The creation of *kairos* depends upon the student and tutor being mindful of these conscious and unconscious interactions and understanding how to most effectively disrupt the spatial boundaries of the tutoring session. Connecting *kairos* into the Burkean parlor metaphor differentiates the perspective of the tutoring session, encouraging both student and tutor to become more aware of the spatiality of tutoring and to redefine these boundaries.

“Imagine that you enter a parlor...” begins Kenneth Burke as he describes his parlor metaphor for academic conversation (Burke 110-111). This metaphor pivots around the ongoing nature of dialogue. For many scholars, the Burkean parlor constitutes a movement beyond the writing itself and into more metaphysical aspects—definition of identity for the writer, expansion of knowledge in a discipline, and sharing of thoughts within a discourse community. Andrea Lunsford paired the parlor with collaboration, showing how the writing center as Burkean parlor results in critical, more nonconcrete thinking (3-4). These concepts define the Burkean parlor as a means of integrating with a discourse community or discipline of study. Traditionally, the Burkean parlor identifies conversation within this structured process: enter the room, listen, and plunge into discussion. This lore has guided my writing lab, as well as other labs and centers worldwide.

Readers will find that the Burkean parlor is not the main character in our story, though; this article is a story about the not-often-discussed theory of *kairos*. I will use this concept to complicate the lore-centric Burkean metaphor. Those unfamiliar with *kairos*, by the end of this article, will understand this concept and the benefit it enacts as a lens to our tutoring narratives and conversations. James Kinneavy defines *kairos* as “the right or opportune time to do something, or right measure in doing something” (80). When is the right

time to ask a question? To embrace the silence? To tell the student what to do? How can we know when the “right time” and “right place” is for an action? How do we create the circumstances to lead to these moments? Lunsford uses a note from one of her students to describe the Burkean Parlor Center: a place where “we are all making and remaking our knowing and ourselves with each other every day” (5). Within what Lunsford calls a collaborative environment, the tutor can model, tell, teach, inquire, and so forth, and out of this negotiation, the *kairotic* moment is constructed. Reflecting on this process, Carl Glover states: “Tutors must make an immediate judgment concerning how best to help their clients. In a sense, they must find the *kairos* point of the tutoring session, which requires a kind of double vision that looks for a balance between the abilities of the client and the demands of the paper” (159). Tutors must identify what to say and when (and sometimes not to say anything). This knowledge comes from paying attention to the student's verbal and nonverbal language and level of engagement. As tutors, we are taught flexibility, but *kairos* invokes more awareness to reach the “light bulb” moment that Glover references.

Our sessions are bound by *chronos*—a chronological sense of time, but our insights are wrapped in *kairos*—the moment. Tim Taylor et al. further highlight *kairos* in the writing center. Students come to the writing center “in the middle” of writing or thinking about their writing, and the conflicts in their thought process set the foreground for *kairos*. These tensions are depicted within the experiences, mindset, and perceptions of the student. Excavating these points involves student and tutor surfacing aspects of their identity, thus creating a conversation of *kairotic* potential. Focusing on *kairos* encourages writer and tutor “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” (Taylor et al.). *Kairos* comprises an intimate understanding of the situation and a reflection of choices, boundaries, and roles for student and tutor.

### How Does Spatiality Connect with Kairos?

Each situation engages in spatiality to some extent. While the student and tutor may be present at one physical location, the conversation leads across many dimensions and planes of thinking. This traversing of boundaries illustrates how crucial *kairos* is as a spatial concept. An initial definition of *kairos* lies in Homer's *Iliad*, where *kairos* is positioned as "a critical, fatal spot on the body" (Hawhee, *Bodily Arts* 65). In the tutoring session, finding "[this] critical, fatal spot" means awareness of what is and is not a part of this identifying location. As time has passed, a shift occurred to focus on *kairos* as a moment rather than a place. Even Glover and Taylor et al. emphasize the temporal quality more. Rhetorician Hunter Stephenson explains his rationale for this shift: "While the temporal meaning remains relatively concrete in its connotation, the spatial meaning moves further towards the abstract. That is, although *kairos* as 'time' refers to a specific moment in which resolution is achieved, *kairos* as 'space' refers to an unspecified location (i.e., an indeterminate location within the universe) at which resolution is achieved" (5). Spatiality is indefinite; with the totality of the student's experiences and the tutor's experiences brought into the session, this space must be studied to fully reach *kairos* and effectively tutor a student beyond the confines of just the writing product. Creating this tension between student and tutor is a significant part of the process because it forces collaborative control on both parties.

*Kairos* adds value to the writing center and should be used as a lens for the Burkean parlor metaphor. Using *kairos* in this way can complicate both concepts and lead to fruitful transformations for writing center work and more effective tutoring practices. In this article, I will unpack a spatial understanding of *kairos*, which offers a rethinking of the Burkean parlor and a movement of the conversation to a more productive place so that tutors can recognize and create *kairotic* moments and apply them to the Burkean parlor.

In these Burkean parlor conversations, to develop the student as a writer we must attune ourselves to the right moment to act or say something, but the "where," or place and space, must be accounted for too. Space is the area of "the other," which a student has not considered. Place is commonly defined as a geographical space, rich with personal meaning, but places can lead to stagnation if the student does not reflect on the options between these places. *Kairos* depends on place and space. Dobrin states: "the very idea of space is dependent upon the 'things'—in this case the practices, the meanings—that occupy the places of those spaces" (17). We must have students recognize and reflect on their places to understand

space. In its historical definition, the spatial aspect is hinted. To know where that critical place on the body is, to know what the "opportune moment" is, I have to develop awareness of the surrounding elements. Nia Klein compares *kairos* in the writing center to removing training wheels from a child's bike—a moment of growth and a push for transformation (Taylor et al.). A moment of *kairos*—in the right place and space—can add more to the conversation.

### Where is the Practical in Kairos?

To describe *kairos*, we must enter this theory-driven Burkean parlor for the first time. The divide between theory and practice in the writing center has long been evident. In Lisa Ede's "Writing as a Social Process: A Theoretical Foundation for Writing Centers?," she argues: "As long as thinking and writing are regarded as inherently individual, solitary activities, writing centers can never be viewed as anything more than pedagogical fix-it shops to help those who, for whatever reason, are unable to think and write on their own" (7). Though frank, these words make the call that we need to "fight for the time" to theorize (11). Nearly fifteen years later, John Nordolf asserts much the same idea, encouraging reflection regarding how theory complicates our daily practices.

An example may be beneficial to show *kairos* in action. Unconfident in all kinds of writing, a student waltzed into the Writing Lab with the belief that his ideas do not matter to others. He had a thesis focused on stereotypes, and our discussion revealed his experiences with stereotypes and views on social media as a portal for furthering this issue. To develop the consciousness about his ideas more, I placed the writing aside and questioned him about how he personally could alleviate the problem. For this tutoring session, I emphasized his voice rather than the essay, which created a tension between his perception of writing (as a flawless work when first delivered) and my action toward his writing. By creating *kairos*, he was able to give his writing a fuller purpose. The tutor brings these unforeseen spatial elements to the surface, helping students recognize how accessible and durable their writing can be. The tutor must break the tension of these elements to create *kairos*.

If *kairos* makes this much of an impact on changing the conversation, it should be recognized. Without *kairos*, there will be "little learning and growth for the student as a writer and me as a tutor" (Scott). The field of composition studies "has consciously attempted to move away from scholarship and pedagogies envisioning a timeless, transcendent, and akairotic or context-less concept of writing and the teaching of writing" (Scott). Context affects what is

written and what is discussed in the tutoring session. Rickert describes the relationship *kairos* positions in the writing process: “The writer is written by the environment, considered as the most singular, concrete moment. . . . in a quite literal sense I must say that I am being written by what I have written” (“In the House of Doing” 920). What was written and said prior to and during the tutoring session continually rewrites the tutor and student, but the student and tutor have the power to code this space, giving it meaning.

By noting what the student thinks and believes through the student’s attitude, talk, writings, and behaviors during the session, I, as the tutor, can start to have a better idea of the student’s places. *Kairotic* potential can be identified through an unveiling of these places, specifically when:

1. A diversion from the typical session occurs due to the student;
2. The student appears resistant regarding a topic or writing style; and/or
3. The student is narrowly focused on one angle of the writing.

After this initial step of recognizing *kairos*, a few practical techniques can be brought to the table to further the Burkean parlor, which are highlighted below.

*The listening stage: questioning the discourse.* A tutoring session starts and ends at certain time stamps, but as Burke notes, “the discussion had begun long before any of them got there” (110). Usually, the person entering into this theoretical parlor does not fully understand the academic dialogue taking place and their part in it. Within the writing center setting, part of this assimilation, this invention of the university to use David Bartholomae’s term, involves using questions as a tool for engagement, dialogue, and guidance. Thompson and Mackiewicz conducted a study regarding questions in the tutoring session, pointing out that “along with stimulating understanding, questions are vital linguistic components of an educational conversation” (39). Questions provide direction for the tutoring session and for what will be accomplished during that time frame. For writing centers, the Socratic questioning method remains a regularly used tool. Rose et al. state that many studies have been conducted as to the success of Socratic dialogue (55). In this way, “productive questions while using overt participation strategies enhances the cognitive environment in the classroom” (Tienken et al. 32). For students, questions become a way to think and engage in the conversation. Within Thompson and Mackiewicz’s study, questions which established commonality in knowledge between the student and tutor and those which led students toward a specific

path were the most common moves discovered (46). Looking at this perspective, tutors use questions to assist students in understanding academia and guiding them toward that discourse community.

The goal of the Burkean parlor is to assimilate students into the conversation, but *kairos* works to disrupt. Within the Burkean parlor, this process is framed as straightforward, a logical step-by-step progression toward understanding the topic and writing at hand. However, the student and tutor must negotiate and surface their different places in the tutoring session. Highlighting these tensions causes students to reflect on their places more and have more meaningful writing, one with more ontic weight.

Within the parlor metaphor, each question adds relevance to the subject at hand; the questions give flow to the conversation and build off one another. While this process benefits the student writer, *kairos* gives more depth to questioning. Employing this model is much like bringing the “Trickster” into the picture as questions that may not appear directly connected to the writing assignment. For this mindset, “the possibility of learning and of being transformed by such moments lies in what sense we make of that flash of vision the Trickster moment gives us of ourselves, our convictions about who we are, what the world is and how and why it is just that way” (Geller et al. 30-31). Chaos leads to these insights, a change in the places we know and an investigation of possible spaces to explore. A *kairotic* question can either start this disruption or highlight a disruption already brought into the session, facilitating a dialogue that expands on the cognitive processes of the student writer. Disruptions key on students’ practiced places—their worldviews and values, process of writing, and their overall perspective on their essay topic—asking questions that cause students to rethink them.

One such “practiced place” may mean a student’s understanding of the vernacular of a certain field, such as exercise science. Perhaps this student understands the jargon of this discipline and deliberately implements it into a literature review. Without directly intending to, the student forms sentences with confusing meanings. The tutor asks common questions: “What do you mean here?” or “Do you mean x, y, and z?” or “Perhaps x is what you are trying to say.” The student and tutor then dialogue to uncover what the student’s message is. At one point in the conversation, the student remarks, “I have always been taught in research papers to state my opinion and then explain how one of the sources is supporting that claim.” When a student’s comment or reaction appears to diverge slightly from the conversation, the moment is infused with *kairotic* potential. The tutor can probe

the student on the reasoning behind this teaching with a question such as “Why do you think you were taught that way?” or a discussion of the impact of this essay structure on the student’s messages. All forms of questioning lock on the disruption and use it as the foundation to move the session in a disruptive, yet mindful direction.

*Metacognition: It’s all a game of identity shifts.* After some initial questions to be in the Burkean parlor, the novices begin to “put in [their] oar,” gauging “the tenor of the argument” (Burke 110). These individuals integrate more into the community. The writer advances deeper into the scholarly discipline. Each discourse community demonstrates typical knowledge sets, and the novice perhaps mindlessly agrees with what is said, following the constraints of the field. During one of my writing workshops, students used the following thesis statement template to analyze a short story: “Through literary element 1 and literary element 2, the author argues x about the short story.” Formulaic thesis statements tend to go unexamined by students. “Through imagery, the author argues about loneliness” was one student’s thesis. He had not imagined anything beyond the template, but he understood the story and the literary analysis format well enough to “put in [his] oar” (Burke 110). Meeting with him one-on-one later, I continued this discussion organically.

When tutoring, we often move within this game, such as in constructing a thesis statement. Plato, in *Phaedrus*, describes his viewpoint that “writing can only repeat (itself), that it ‘always signifies (*semainei*) the same’ and it is a ‘game’ (*paidia*)” (Derrida 65). In contrast, Derrida believes “play is always lost when it seeks salvation in games” (158). Derrida affirms this deconstruction process, showing how the game constricts while play continues to find new ideas. As students gain knowledge about how to construct ideas within academia, they form rules and mindsets, which solidify into places. Demonstrated above in the student’s discourse is this place: the thesis template. The student may feel disinclined to resist the notion of what to include within the thesis, thinking of this area as common knowledge.

*Kairos*, however, moves the conversation into a metacognitive state. This process of becoming more metacognitive “includes a variety of self-awareness processes that help learners to plan, monitor, orchestrate, and control their own learning” (Nodoushan 1). Instead of only gaining a breadth of knowledge via the traditional Burkean parlor, metacognition unearths deeper knowledge, causing students to understand their writing, thinking, and learning process more. These moments of tension,

such as in the thesis statement example, when the student only sees one way of understanding a concept, an idea, or a process, are filled with *kairos*. Meta-strategies invoke a reflection on the principles of a process or concept (What are the components of a thesis statement? What does a thesis statement in a literary analysis look like?); the student’s understanding regarding its fit into the big picture (What is the purpose of a thesis statement?); any prior connections the student has had (What have you been taught about thesis statements? What do you believe to be true about them?); and the impact of this process or concept (How does the thesis statement connect to your writing identity?). These are the spaces that are unsaid. Using meta-strategies to highlight these *kairotic* spaces can cause students to rethink and grow as writers and scholars.

*A consideration of the possibilities: A disruption of perceptions.* Throughout this process of growth, as the student develops a writing voice and explores more than one angle on a topic and/or within a discipline, this student takes a side regarding what to believe. Burke shows this segmentation: “Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you” (Burke 110). With *kairos*, all choices, not only those inherent to the conversation, become options. This collaborative environment signifies resistance because other perspectives are brought to attention. *Kairos* should function as “a moment of decision that leads to an epistemological transformation that ungrounds old knowledge and discloses new knowledge” (Petruzzi 352). This ungrounding is “situationally contingent” (Covino and Jolliffe 7). If the situation, the tutor, or the writer is unwilling, however, *kairos* will not happen. Allowing for openness of collaborative thought allows students to feel more comfortable in sharing their ideas. This vulnerability also presents opportunities for tutors to give students more choices since they may be more willing to listen to a nonjudgmental ear. These choices should disrupt what the student thinks and can be given through discussion, visualization, or a creative writing activity that highlights the multiplicity of perspectives.

Only narrowly focusing on a social convention commonly held by others restricts *kairotic* invention. James S. Baumlin shows the *kairos* struggle in these cases:

When successful, *kairos* undermines *prepon* by changing the status quo; in contrast, *prepon* strives to regulate *kairos*, thereby weakening the latter’s capacities for effecting change. In a sense, *kairos* and *prepon* enact a dialectic between freedom and formal restraint; stated rhetorically, *kairos* and

*prepon* pit an individual's powers of invention against the formidable constraints of social convention and audience expectations. (159)

Resisting and working with *prepon* or *decorum*, *kairos* inspires collaboration. First, tutors must note areas where students exhibit narrowness. From that area, tutors can collaborate with students, seeing what their perspective and reasoning is behind this belief or value. The tutors can then lay out some other options and with students, can view these various choices (spaces which the student perhaps has not thought about) and determine if it would be effective to redefine their places.

### Conclusions and Further Implications

These acts of reflection disrupt what the student normally thinks (their solidified places). Instead of viewing writing from one narrowed view of reality, the student and tutor can unmask these realities and spaces around the writing, leading to *kairos*. Scot Barnett reiterates this ideology through Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty's theories, discussing the impossibility of conceptualizing place in writing due to the "unclaimed experiences" that occur below "the threshold of conscious awareness." (page number needed) Nuances of space and place become created when we explore other identities. When tutoring those in the writing center can use examples from the student's essay and dialogue with the student, asking questions that break down the student's cultural, ethical, personal, and topical (in terms of the writing assignment) places and require them to look at the space of "the other." *Kairos* occurs when students become more aware of what they think and why, considering other choices.

Scott positions this idea of choice in his theoretical underpinning of *kairos*, using Kinneavy's categories of *kairos* to understand how this concept works in writing programs: epistemological, ethical, social, rhetorical, and aesthetic. In illustrating the various aspects of *kairos*, he claims: "The Writing Center impacts and is impacted by the community, my discipline, and various political, cultural, and socio-economic contexts." In this way, Scott encourages writing center practitioners to reflect on writing programs and assessment with these shades of *kairos* in mind. While Scott uses *kairos* as applicable in a larger context, his call to action asserts the necessity of *kairos* in the writing center and provides an approach to tutoring.

Both Scott and Kinneavy construct a comprehensive picture of *kairos* except for the exclusion of one category: ontological or the nature of being. For something to have ontic weight, it must be

analyzed according to four categories: "coherence, durability, causal efficacy, and accessibility" (Davis 24). In the tutoring session, Kinneavy's categories and this conception of "ontic weight" become more apparent. For the student who wrote about stereotypes, he did not see the ontic weight of his writing, at first. To him, the grade and his grammar marked the worth of his ideas. By keying on the impact of stereotypes in his life and in others and making the learning experience authentic, he addressed his biases, his conception of ignorance and education, and his perspective on his writing. He had not considered these spaces before, and his awareness and confrontation of these tensions provided a *kairotic* opportunity. We embraced *kairos*, giving him the opportunity to reflect and see the ontic weight of his writing more clearly.

Pairing this theoretical lens with the Burkean parlor creates more complexities and provides more of an understanding of what *kairos* can do in the writing center. We have to learn to identify *kairotic* potential so that we can learn more, grow more, and further our understanding of ourselves and the world, and of our writing. Hawhee describes *kairos* as an unpredictable, surprising force, one whose movements nobody can forecast in advance (*Bodily Arts* 70). By recognizing *kairos* in the moments when the student diverges from the conversation or exhibits a narrowed conception, the tutor and student can use questioning techniques, metacognition, and collaboration to rethink perceptions and behaviors. Playing this game of *kairos* transforms the space-place boundaries of the writing center, and ultimately, the writing, the tutor, and the student, disrupting the norm and leading to the invention of something new.

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