

THE RIGHT TIME AND PROPER MEASURE: ASSESSING IN WRITING CENTERS AND JAMES KINNEAVY'S "KAIROS: A NEGLECTED CONCEPT IN CLASSICAL RHETORIC."

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Introduction

In my experience working with tutors and college student writers over the last nine years, I am frequently reminded how important kairos is to my work. For example, a tutoring approach that might help Renee with her annotated bibliography draft won't necessarily help Kevin understand his research essay prompt. The difference lies not in the fact that they are writing different essays; rather, each writer presents a different rhetorical situation with unique audiences, circumstances, exigencies, and contexts. Even if both students were writing the exact same essay on the exact same topic, their experience, confidence, and attitude toward writing would present different opportunities in a tutoring session. Although patterns exist and I begin and close a session in routine ways, I am frequently reminded by crossed arms, furrowed brows, and deep sighs that a tutoring approach ignoring kairos results in little learning and growth for the student as a writer and me as a tutor. The relevance of the term to writing center work can also be witnessed in an administrative sense. For example, interrupting a session to suggest a different approach for a tutor might be helpful; however, I may be more persuasive if I more carefully choose a time to provide feedback on a consultation.

Kairos is a fascinating term with significance for diverse camps of rhetoricians. Different from *chronos*, the linear passing of time, kairos means a rhetor has found the opportune time to act and is acting in the appropriate measure. According to Richard Lanham, kairos refers to the "Greek word for time, place, circumstances of a subject" (94), and Eric Charles White suggests that the term "refer[s] to a passing instant when an opening appears which must be driven through with force if success is to be achieved" (13). White's definition originates from R.B. Onians, who claims in *The Origins of European Thought* that the etymology of kairos traces back to the accuracy required of an archer and the timing required of a weaver. The term also reflects broader philosophical debates. For instance, Plato, Isocrates, and Aristotle criticized Sophists such as Gorgias for accepting the

idea that "two antithetical statements can be made on each subject" (Herrick 43). However, many critics of sophistry generally overlook the fact that the Sophists used the concept of kairos to help them determine which statement is true in a specific circumstance. Kairos sets itself apart from more technical aspects of rhetoric because a rhetor may possess eloquence and know much about an issue, but unless an individual knows when—and when not—to implement a rhetorical strategy, the rhetor may lose a significant opportunity to persuade.

Kairos is particularly applicable to rhetoric and composition scholarship because significant developments and shifts in the field reflect the concept. If we consider the work of composition scholars in the past forty years, we will likely note the value placed on context and specific pedagogical, political, cultural, and ethical climates. The discipline 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. In terms of assessment scholarship, a topic this essay will address in writing centers, the importance educators placed on context allowed composition scholars to wrest the control of testing, evaluation, and assessment away from educational measurement experts who sought assessments transcending difference and divorced from realistic writing situations (Huot). An example of such work can be found in *A Guide to College Writing Assessment*, where Peggy O'Neill, Cindy Moore, and Brian Huot specifically outline the multiple layers of context involved in writing assessment. Educators can improve pedagogy, they argue, through situating an assessment in both local contexts and larger professional, disciplinary, rhetorical, and institutional contexts (8).

Scholars such as Carl Glover have hinted at the connection between kairos and writing center work. Glover uses the "proper measure" aspect of kairos to describe writing center tutoring and administration, and he reminds us that hard and fast rules about refusing to make any kind of directive comment or

mark on a student's paper may fail to respond to kairotic moments in a tutoring session where such feedback could facilitate learning. Instead, he suggests, "Tutors with a sense of kairos will learn the right time and the right way to intervene in a paper" (18). In a 2009 *Praxis* article, Tim Taylor, Nia Klein, Kristi McDuffie, Fern Kory, Devin Black, and Serena Heath reflect on their writing center experiences and discuss how they "have developed a strong kairos-consciousness" and "how kairos can work as an essential guiding principle for promoting strong professional development." Even without writing about kairos specifically, many writing center scholars address the term. In "The Idea of a Writing Center," for instance, North reacts to the assumptions many educators had about writing centers; in many respects, he was arguing against an akairotic moment for writing centers—a moment fixated on correctness. He instead envisioned a more complex and dynamic context where teachers, students, and writing center professionals all played a part (53). Further examples can be found in more recent scholarship and inquiry. The May/June 2013 edition of *The Writing Lab Newsletter* features tutors and administrators sharing stories about how they respond to various opportunities in their writing centers including developing processes to better facilitate learning amongst English Language Learners (Enders) or creating opportunities to transform perceptions of a writing center (Schultz).

While kairos seems appropriate for discussing what occurs in writing centers, scholarship in the field has only recently begun to theorize the importance of context in assessment. This doesn't mean that practitioners are failing to develop thoughtful assessment projects investigating issues directly relevant to their writing centers; recent editions of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, *Praxis*, and *Writing Center Journal* provide numerous examples of useful and well-designed assessment practices (Lape; Canard-Salvo and Spartz; LaFrance and Nicolas). The field as a whole, however, lacks scholarship that *theorizes* assessment in a way assisting writing center tutors and administrators in responding to the kairotic exigencies they encounter. While the recent publication of *Building Writing Center Assessments that Matter* seeks to fill this void, much more scholarship is needed to construct theoretical options for writing center practitioners. My aim here is to propose such a theory, implementing James Kinneavy's influential essay, "Kairos: A Neglected Concept in Classical Rhetoric." Kinneavy's essay is particularly appropriate for such an endeavor because it theorizes a concept essential to writing center work and because Kinneavy also

theorized the term for the teaching of writing and administration of writing programs.

In "Kairos: A Neglected Concept in Classical Rhetoric," Kinneavy explores the shifting importance of kairos and argues for application of the term to college writing programs. In applying kairos to composition studies, he argues that composition programs can incorporate five dimensions—or what he calls "consequences"—of the term: ethical, aesthetic, epistemological, social, and rhetorical. This essay will explore how these consequences impact writing center assessment. Two of the consequences, kairos' epistemological and ethical consequences, overlap well with common practices already engaged in writing centers and provide important reminders of issues to consider when designing and implementing assessment projects. The remaining consequences, particularly the social and rhetorical consequences, can help us develop writing center assessment projects with more depth and can help us reframe and theorize assessment in writing centers. To illustrate the potential impact of Kinneavy's work with kairos in a writing center context, I will explain how his concepts influence my work as the Writing Center Director at a small university in Southern Ohio.

Epistemological and Ethical Consequences

With respect to the epistemological ramifications of kairos, Kinneavy claims that composition programs and teachers should focus on global rather than local concerns and consider how situational and cultural contexts impact a student writer. Kinneavy also argues that kairos possesses an ethical consequence. Through framing the "right measure" aspect of kairos as an issue of choice, Kinneavy argues that kairos operates as an ethical issue because different choices lead to possibilities that can make a material impact on individuals. In applying an ethical notion of kairos to a writing program, Kinneavy suggests that curricula "must take into account the value system of the situational context of the writer and reader" (98). Doing so, he argues, would require writing programs to make their curriculum and pedagogy relevant to the writer's major and social situation. Kinneavy argues that this turn to the specific context of students represents a significant change that puts students into contact with moral and ethical issues relevant to their lives and disciplines.

Kinneavy's epistemological and ethical consequences of kairos provide two important considerations for assessing in writing centers. First, writing center directors and tutors should expand their

notion of context and investigate different influences on their work. Second, when conducting assessments, writing center practitioners should use what they learn to make more effective and ethical tutoring and administrative choices. For example, in my role as director, I have found it tempting to think of context as simply the tutors, students, my department, my institution, and the countless number of tasks, meetings, and daily events that make up much of my time as director. However, the Writing Center also exists in other contexts that often overlap and even compete. The Writing Center impacts and is impacted by the community, my discipline, and various political, cultural, and socio-economic contexts. If I embrace these contexts and their relationship to the Writing Center as potential sites for inquiry and assessment, I can develop projects that seek to understand better the relationship between my writing center and various stakeholders. Furthermore, such knowledge helps me make informed, ethical choices that take into consideration a nuanced understanding of the Writing Center and its relationship with different stakeholders. Again, these are not novel approaches to engaged members of our discipline. However, considering assessment as an epistemological and ethical enterprise encourages practitioners to develop a rich understanding of the relationship between the writing center, institution, and community.

Social

In writing about how the social consequences of kairos impact the teaching of writing, Kinneavy argues that composition programs should encourage political and social awareness and ask students to make connections between their experience and important political issues in society and in their discipline (99). Encouraging a political consciousness in students and their writing, Kinneavy suggests, continues the pedagogical importance of kairos in classical rhetoric. In order to prepare students to participate in a healthy debate of ideas, classical rhetorical training emphasized the significance of kairos to help students consider multiple positions and find opportunities to engage (or withhold from engaging) in an argument. In many respects, as socially engaged members of our profession, we attempt, as classical educators did, to prepare individuals for active participation in a more fully realized, yet still problematic, ideal of democracy. By working with students to prepare contextually appropriate arguments for specific audiences and by guiding students toward writing that is critical, politically sensitive, and aware, we seek to prepare

writers not only for academic and professional engagement, but also civic engagement.

Kinneavy's work can change how we assess arguments we engage in consultations through inquiring into how such arguments impact other social groups. For example, at the beginning of the Spring 2013 semester, a tutor at the Writing Center worked with a student writer who presented a Pat Robertson-inspired argument about how Hurricane Sandy proved God's displeasure with our society's changing attitudes toward homosexuality. The tutor spoke with me afterward about the session and confessed that she initially wanted to either tiptoe around the argument and deal with lower order concerns or tell the student to leave the Writing Center. I admired the tutor for recognizing that such responses failed to acknowledge the kairotic moment available and the degree to which the student writer perceived his audience. Specifically, his argument failed to acknowledge an audience or a social environment other than the one he inhabited. In the session, the tutor asked questions to prompt the student writer to place the context of writing in conversation with the various social contexts impacted by such an argument. Approaching the student's argument by asking him about his audience and who might be impacted by his claims helped the tutor avoid shutting the writer down and instead allowed her to question the writer's logic and reasoning in a way that put the emphasis on audience and the social impact of his argument. The writer resisted, but he finished the session asking himself uncomfortable—but necessary—questions about his claims and how they impacted others. In a political environment fraught with polarization, assessing arguments in a way that avoids dismissal and invites writers to think about the social implications of their claims can help students who visit the writing center become more compassionate and reasonable members of society.

Writing center directors can also engage Kinneavy's social consequences of kairos by developing assessment projects that explore the relationship between writing centers, institutions, and communities. For me, considering the social implications of kairos means looking beyond the typical forms of assessment such as tutor or writer post-session satisfaction surveys. Such surveys can be helpful, but as James Bell has noted, post-session surveys typically don't provide much information that can help a writing center improve its practices. By engaging the social implications of kairos, I might instead assess how my writing center responds to the needs of my institution and community. The writing center at which I work is situated at an Appalachian serving institution of approximately 4500 students,

many of whom come significantly underprepared for college. Knowing this and many other political and social factors helps me train my tutors and develop assessment projects sensitive to these issues. An example should help clarify what I mean here. Ohio's recently proposed funding formula increases emphasis on graduation rates and retention (Bloom). The changes seem particularly onerous for our institution and the students we serve because the revised funding formula would counter-intuitively work to punish schools most in need of resources to improve. These obstacles and the political machinations behind them, which comprise in part the social and political context of my writing center, provide me with a kairotic opportunity to advocate for my writing center through assessment. One example of such a project is a joint effort with my university's assessment department. We have begun collecting data about the Writing Center's impact on retention by accumulating student identification numbers and identifying how many students who visit the writing center ultimately graduate. This and similar assessments provide examples of how the Writing Center's social and political context presents kairotic opportunities to engage in assessment projects that help the tutors and I understand the position of our writing center. Additionally, by developing assessment projects that inquire into the social, cultural, and political context of the Writing Center, I also build strategic partnerships with other departments and stakeholders on campus.

Rhetorical

James Kinneavy notes that kairos remains one of few terms upon which classical rhetoricians agreed in terms of its importance. Pythagoras, Aristotle, Isocrates, Plato, and Sophists such as Gorgias each argued in one form or another that kairos existed as a cornerstone of rhetoric (81-2). In applying a rhetorically informed concept of kairos to a composition program, Kinneavy claims that writing programs should dispense with expository writing assignments with little connection to students' majors, experiences, or contexts. Instead, he argues that writing programs should provide students with opportunities to "establish a real audience distinct from the classroom situation" (103). The field of composition studies as a whole has made significant pedagogical changes in this direction in the 25 years since Kinneavy's essay appeared. However, his suggestion to make our students' arguments and our knowledge reach beyond academia resonates today. For example, despite concerted efforts to further slash funding for higher education at the state level or

implement No Child Left Behind style learning evaluations in colleges and universities, the field of composition studies finds itself playing catch-up to articulate to a more general audience what scholars know about writing and the teaching of writing. Much like the field of composition studies has expanded its audience and shared its knowledge, assessment projects in writing centers can also reach out to more and different audiences.

Embracing the rhetorical nature of kairos in writing center assessments provides directors with opportunities to identify strategic partnerships, share disciplinary knowledge with others, and use assessment to make more persuasive arguments that might improve the institutional resources our writing centers receive. As the first Writing Center Director at my institution in several years, I worked with tutors in my first year to help them obtain an understanding of foundational tutoring concepts. In the beginning of the fall semester, I asked tutors to read and discuss important scholarship in the field, but I still observed problematic tutoring practices in the Writing Center. When I initiated an observation assessment program, however, I found myself with a number of kairotic opportunities to persuade tutors to expand their abilities and move away from fixing grammar, punctuation, and syntax and instead move toward a focus on asking questions to help a writer develop. After observing each tutor, I wrote a summary of the session and provided encouragement and suggestions. However, the most useful and persuasive component of the observation assessment came in the discussions about the summary that followed. Those conversations became a pedagogical and rhetorical opportunity for the tutors and me because we learned more about our work and were able to persuade each other to look at tutoring and our writing center differently. These are conversations directors engage in routinely; however, we can look at these discussions as not only opportunities to learn from tutors and train and develop them, but also kairotic opportunities to learn and to persuade tutors to reexamine their work.

Writing center assessment also provides directors with kairotic opportunities to persuade administrators and other stakeholders. By looking at assessment as a way to better understand our work, we can make assessment serve our writing centers and draw attention to the good work we do. As I noted earlier, my institution is currently under pressure to increase retention and graduation rates. By seeing this pressure as a kairotic opportunity, I have been able to identify stakeholders with whom I can work to develop assessment projects. Furthermore, working with these

stakeholders allows me to share my disciplinary knowledge with them and develop an understanding of the writing center with administrators and faculty in other departments. The aforementioned work I have done in my institution's assessment department, for example, has persuaded some administrators that the Writing Center at my school is concerned about and active in addressing the institution's struggles. In another example, I recently surveyed the faculty at the university in hopes of assessing and understanding the perceptions and attitudes toward writing at my institution. While the data of the project provided useful information, the assessment itself opened up kairotic opportunities to discuss writing and share disciplinary knowledge that can develop a healthy conversation about writing pedagogy and the place of the Writing Center at the institution. In short, assessment provides us opportunities to make arguments about the work we do while simultaneously providing us strong evidence in which to ground our claims.

Aesthetic

I will close by exploring Kinneavy's ideas about the aesthetic consequences of kairos. Kinneavy confesses to a poor understanding of the aesthetic nature of kairos; however, he argues that composition programs can make the reading of literature and writing of and about literature an important component of a composition program. While his recommendations are imperfect, we can think about assessment in aesthetic terms if we consider Kinneavy's reminder that Plato used the kairotic concept of "proper measure" to define beauty and goodness. Plato's definition of beauty hinges on the idea of "balance," and I think balance might present a useful metaphor to think about assessment in writing centers. A majority of assessment scholarship in our field emphasizes practical and useful measures to improve the work we do, and I think such scholarship is important. However, when we fail to balance the practical and useful with theoretical approaches to assessment, we will likely miss opportunities to develop projects that can help us explore more fully the relationship between writing centers and their multiple stakeholders. For example, while satisfaction surveys are a useful and ubiquitous component of most writing centers, they often fail to provide a realistic representation of what happens in a writing center session. A student arguing, for example, that Hurricane Sandy indicates God's displeasure with our society's evolving attitudes toward homosexuality, may very well feel dissatisfied in a session where a tutor

asks the writer to examine his argument from different perspectives. Dissatisfaction and discomfort, in that case, may very well be signs of progress for a writer. However, we have few projects seeking to understand that kind of work in our writing centers.

We need assessments that help us see that kind of complexity and strike a balance between staying true to the intricacies of our work and providing arguments relatable to other stakeholders. We also need assessments that help us balance the expectations of our colleagues in other disciplines and the knowledge our field produces. In the least, our assessments can help us understand the expectations of our colleagues, and, as has been the case here at my institution, an assessment may very well provide an opportunity to open a dialogue about writing, writing pedagogy, and the perception of the Writing Center at my institution. If we balance our work with recent scholarship in our field and use the material situations and the social, cultural, and political context of our writing centers as the starting point of our assessment projects, we make each project responsive to the here and now. And if we construct our assessments as a process contributing to scholarship in the field, balancing continuously the social, cultural, and political context of our writing centers and generating new projects of inquiry, then we come full circle. Our assessment projects then can develop a dynamic wholeness about them that is, in a word, beautiful.

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