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## A Tale of Two Writing Centers in Namibia: Lessons for Us All

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### Abstract

The pivotal role of writing centers in improving the quality of academic writing has been well documented by research. Although writing centers are commonplace in many countries, it appears that none existed prior to 2008 between South Africa and the Sahara. This article reports on the writer's assignment to start one in Namibia. The expectations of the challenges in this task, centering on training staff and tutors and acquiring resources, did not resemble the realities experienced, involving infrastructure, matrix management, hierarchy, and bureaucracy. Various paradigms for deconstructing these experiences, such as post-colonialism, culture clash, and 'contact zone' theory, all only partially explain the challenges encountered. These experiences in Namibia provide a case study of the politics of collaboration involved in implementing a writing center, and a microcosm of the challenges one might face anywhere. This account is thus 'glocal'; that is, locally derived but with global applications. Eleven specific guidelines can assist anyone contemplating a similar administrative assignment.

### Prologue

In early 2008 I flew from a university on the west coast of the U.S. to the southern African country of Namibia to start a college writing center. Eventually, that is exactly what I did. On 3 October that year the center opened to great fanfare in a sunny, repainted room with a central conference table rimmed by individual tutoring carrels. Five newly recruited and trained tutors and I welcomed guests, served refreshments, and distributed flyers. But this writing center was not the one I was sent to start. Getting from the planning stages of that original writing center at the original institution to the one that finally opened proved to be an adventure—both exciting and stressful—and therein lies a tale.

To begin: The job, posted in March 2007 on the English Language Fellows (ELF) website and sponsored by the U.S. Department of State (AY 2007), was to start a writing center at a technical college in Namibia, a developing country with the highest Gini Index (income spread) in the world and nearly the lowest population density. Although most American tertiary institutions have had them for several decades (Grimm 1996: 523), this apparently would be the first writing center north of South Africa and south of the Sahara, serving the 8000 students at the Polytechnic of Namibia in the capital city of Windhoek. Namibia consistently ranks near the bottom of southern African countries academically (Makuwa 2005: 171; Miranda et al. 2011: 175), including English skills, even though it adopted English as its official language in 1991. Creating a college writing center would be a small step in the direction of Namibia's goal to compete globally and achieve its 'Vision 2030' to establish a 'knowledge-based society' on the level of developed countries, as articulated by Founding President Sam Nujoma (Nujoma 2004: 9,10).

The pivotal role of writing centers in improving the quality of academic writing both in English classes and throughout a whole university has been well documented by research (Murphy and Sherwood 2008). Building on the paradigms of writing as collaboration (Lunsford 1991) and of

Vygotsky's (1978: 87) 'zone of proximal development,' research has also shown that trained tutors providing one-on-one assistance can greatly improve students' literacy skills and second language use (Casanave 2002, Harris 1995, Williams 2002: 84). Thus the value of creating a writing center at a tertiary institution in a developing country should be obvious. There are also well-documented processes for creating such a center, which include establishing a location and finding and training staff and tutors (Farrell 1989, IWCA 2013, Silk 1998). Namibia sounded like an ideal place to put these writing center principles into practice.

The ELF job description stated that the Fellow would 'provide essential guidance for the Center for Teaching and Learning [CTL] on setting up and running the center, training staff members, and collaborating with content-area lecturers' (AY 2007). The center itself, the brain-child of the CTL director and a former ELF, was 'scheduled to start offering full-fledged services in August 2007' (AY 2007). All funding for ELF assignments is provided by the U.S. State Department in response to specific project requests made by the host institutions. The position seemed a perfect match for my talents and background, which included more than thirty years teaching writing, first in regular English departments and later in English language programs for international students. Shortly after I interviewed at the TESOL Convention in March of that year, I was offered and accepted this assignment.

With the promise of 'full-fledged services in August 2007' in mind, I expected to arrive in January 2008 and find at least a fledgling writing center with space, staff (including tutors and office assistant), and some resources. Unfortunately, the reality I found upon my arrival was quite different from my initial expectations, as there was no space, no funding, no staff, and no tutors. In fact the entire writing center was still at the conceptual stage. After four months the situation at the first institution was unchanged due to lack of institutional support, so I went down the road to the University of Namibia and successfully started a writing center there.

My perceptions of the task possibilities evolved during my tenure in Namibia from idealism to realism, exemplifying Nancy Grimm's (2008: 5) argument for the 'conceptual change potential' of writing center narratives to make us re-examine 'how systems function and how individuals are positioned and understood within those systems'. Although my narrative is about trying to start a writing center rather than about issues occurring after a center is established, Grimm's encouragement to adopt multiple perspectives to explain behaviors fits my learning experiences.

The cultural and managerial challenges I experienced can be viewed from two meta-perspectives: on the one hand, they describe common problems of trying to implement any project (not just a writing center) in a complex and unreceptive environment, where bureaucracy, cultural differences, limited funding, and supervisors' limited administrative skills must be navigated. The master-servant relationships in post-colonial theory (Freire 1970); the Us-Them dichotomy and perceived need to mold the latter to the former (Said 1978); and the (wished-for) possibility of new intercultural entities, or 'contact zones' (Pratt 1991) are all applied in the following pages to my efforts in Namibia. At the same time they surely could also apply to a great variety of projects, not only academic ones, in both developed and developing countries, particularly those sponsored by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), which are inevitably more 'alien' to the recipient.

From a second meta-perspective, my experiences characterize the cultural climate in which most, and perhaps all, writing centers must operate. Much has been written about the 'step-child' status of writing centers in most U.S. universities (Barwashi and Pelkowski 1999, Boquet 1999, Grimm, 1996 and 2008). Their struggles for funding and legitimacy seem perennial, bringing frequent requests for assessments (Ganobcsik-Williams and Broughan 2011). Catering to the 'non-elects' or 'non-trads' in the student body (Boquet 1999: 471), their perceived mission of facilitating comprehensible writing is an embarrassment in the minds of ivory-tower academics, who want these students to become acculturated to mainstream academia as soon as possible. Many writing directors themselves argue that the centers should be 'safe houses' (Pratt 1991) where new and more democratic social contexts (Bruffee 1978) allow marginalized students to negotiate new cultural and linguistic patterns. Thus one might argue that the experiences of co-constructing knowledge, language, and meaning and of administering a writing center are similar. Others (Boquet 1999: 469, Devet 2011: 252), however, question the

'safe house' objective, perhaps feeling that acculturation to 'standard academic writing' is more important.

The marginalization of writing center clientele of course becomes exacerbated in the ESL/EFL context. Second-language writers must learn not only academic discourse patterns, but also the language itself, which inevitably impacts their self-identity in a sort of 'borderlands' existence (Anzaldúa 1987). Severino, Guerro, and Butler (1997) and Zotzmann (2011) explore these multilingual and multicultural issues in the writing teaching context. Although the need for writing centers is surely greater in second-language contexts, they are paradoxically less common outside the U.S. (Girgesohn 2012: 127).

Looking at my experiences from these two meta-perspectives could thus benefit nearly anyone attempting to create a new program in both developed and developing countries because the same issues exist everywhere in differing degrees. My focus on writing centers, however, makes my analysis especially relevant to writing center directors and other administrative personnel within an academic setting. In my own case I found out that far more is needed to start a writing center than just tables, chairs, and writers. Red tape can bind up anything, anywhere. As I point out, the similarities between a developed country and Namibia regarding writing center startups are substantial, the differences nominal.

The account which follows will describe and then analyze the difficulties I encountered at the first institution, deconstruct those difficulties from several perspectives, update the results of my efforts and final success, compare the creation of writing centers in the U.S. and other Western countries and in Namibia, and conclude with eleven guidelines for anyone contemplating a similar assignment.

## **Challenges Analyzed**

At the first institution what had seemed like a manageable task from afar ultimately proved to be unmanageable due to unanticipated situational and cultural variables. Analysis of my experiences after returning home suggests four categories of these variables: infrastructure, matrix management, hierarchy, and bureaucracy.

### ***Infrastructure***

The first major challenge pivoted on the difference between most overseas English specialist assignments and my own assignment; that is, between teaching and advising on the one hand, and implementing programs and realigning infrastructure on the other. Most English Language Fellow positions and other overseas assignments involve teaching classes, writing curriculum, evaluating existing programs and suggesting new ones. If new programs are put in place, they are usually heavily funded by outside sources. In my case, however, starting a writing center required major realignment of significant parts of the institution's infrastructure—from inside. For example, this realignment included assessing needs; negotiating for space, furnishings, operating budget, staffing, and tutors; developing a tutor training curriculum; creating promotional materials; and providing computers, books, and other resources. Everything, except my time and a small materials allowance, had to be paid for by the host institution itself or the project would fail.

The complexity of my assignment can hardly be overstated. Many estimates are that getting a writing center up and going is an intensive three-year process (Emery 2008). More specifically, I was being asked to do all of the following in just ten months—in a developing country:

1. Learn about the needs of a particular student body, and create a program that would serve thousands of students, faculty, and even community members,
2. Get program approval and funding from the university's central administration,
3. Analyze costs in detail for each component of the writing center,
4. Create project management and scheduling charts,
5. Create and negotiate a capital budget for writing center space and furnishings,
6. Design a space configuration plan and arrange for purchases from vendors,
7. Acquire computers and arrange for network and phone connections,

8. Create and negotiate an operating budget,
9. Hire and train staff members to assist and provide continuity for the center,
10. Recruit, hire, and train tutors—after developing a curriculum to train them,
11. Negotiate and arrange writing center open hours and tutor scheduling,
12. Fund and provide computers, reference books, writing handbooks, training books and materials, DVDs, and other supplies for tutors to use in their work,
13. Network with major university departments and as many lecturers as possible to provide publicity and to encourage use of the new writing center,
14. Create PowerPoint presentations explaining various writing center functions,
15. Create a marketing plan and promotional materials; publicize the writing center, both on campus and in the larger community.

### **Matrix management**

A second challenge of my assignment was matrix management; that is, being accountable to numerous supervisors with differing agendas. Feeling mired in a managerial matrix of course can also happen in higher education institutions in developed countries, and great subtlety is needed to navigate it. In my own case, I answered to six managers:

- The U.S. Department of State
- Georgetown University in Washington, D.C.
- Regional English Language Officer (RELO) in Pretoria, South Africa
- Public Affairs Officer (PAO) in Windhoek
- Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) at the Polytechnic of Namibia in Windhoek
- Rector of the Polytechnic of Namibia

First, the U.S. State Department hired me as an independent contractor. Georgetown University administers the ELF program for the State Department and assigned me to administer a new writing center and make it self-sustaining within ten months. My RELO in Pretoria, a State Department employee, supervises and evaluates all ELFs in southern Africa and distributes special grant monies to promote English education in the region. The State Department's PAO in Windhoek promotes the U.S. mission in Namibia, distributes grants, and negotiates between stakeholders. Bringing the total supervisor number to six, my immediate superiors at my host institution insisted that hierarchical relationships be maintained and strict procedures followed. Their agendas sometimes did not fit well with the expectations of my American supervisors or with my own very Western penchant to 'get the job done'. This penchant was exacerbated by my own 'prep work' prior to my arrival of visiting writing centers in three different states in the U.S. and of boxing up more than \$7500 of my own resources, including four computers I intended to donate to the new writing center. As sometimes happens with foreign aid, the outsiders may have wanted the project more than the recipients did.

Matrix management can insulate the various stakeholders, causing communication breakdowns from missing or inaccurate information. Neither I nor the PAO had been informed that my effort to start a writing center at this institution was not the first attempt. No inquiries were made by my American supervisors regarding the progress (or lack thereof) of the center prior to my arrival. My immediate supervisor at the Polytechnic requested that I not bother to discuss the planned writing center with deans in other departments, even though I felt that publicity was vital for its success. In a similar vein, the Rector asked me not to bring the PAO 'into further discussions on this matter [of starting a writing center] because we must respect his position and [...] his time is highly valuable' (Rector of the Polytechnic 2008). Thus I tried to satisfy six managers with different agendas. As in this case, 'territorial' issues among administrators can sometimes lead to islands of power and isolation.

### **Hierarchy**

One of the biggest challenges in fulfilling my assignment was surely cultural. Coming from an alleged 'land of equality', I was naïve about the hierarchy and bureaucracy of some African institutions and thus was unprepared for the asymmetrical power relations at my assigned school, which led to various managerial difficulties. But not only at this institution; indeed, with the highest income spread in the world (the Gini Index) Namibia has equality in the language of its Constitution, but very little in its society, although many groups are trying to change this

imbalance. Tribal leaders continue to have enormous power within their domains, and women have few rights.

Exemplifying a top-down management style at my first institution, the Rector made all the important decisions. He was called 'Rector' or 'Doctor,' seldom by name. Only deans or directors normally made appointments to speak with him, and his decisions were referred to as edicts. I was forbidden to speak with him by my immediate supervisor for the first three months I was there. Thus I could not go forward with my assigned project because only the Rector could approve it. I finally got an audience only through the PAO (who administers US taxpayer aid). Throughout the meeting, the Rector never addressed me directly but referred to me only in the third person.

### **Bureaucracy**

While a complex hierarchy can lead to managerial problems, the bureaucracy I experienced created a maze of procedural challenges that were seldom spelled out. I was not prepared for the number of hurdles I would have to jump: I complied with requests to submit a writing center program proposal, cost analysis, project management and schedule chart, marketing plan, space configuration plan, and staffing plan, but the movement forward was extremely slow. My efforts to recruit peer tutors had to go through the 'proper channels and procedures' (Rector of the Polytechnic 2008), which were not explained to me. During a long-awaited meeting to shortlist candidates for two writing center staff positions, I was informed that affirmative action guidelines in the Namibian Constitution require offering positions first to previously disadvantaged Namibians, as long as they are minimally qualified, in very strict order depending on ethnic affiliation and gender. These criteria can make demographics more important than job training and experience. Still nothing went forward. Just a week or two after this interview meeting, the center was put on indefinite 'hold'.

Although I felt that I might be strangled in all this Namibian red tape, I know it can sometimes choke progress in any country. A good administrator has to learn how to peel it off.

### **Deconstruction**

Looking at these four challenges to the task of starting a writing center, namely, infrastructure, matrix management, hierarchy, and bureaucracy, they can now be placed—and perhaps explained—within a larger paradigm. Several possibilities come to mind. Again one needs to recall Grimm's (2008: 5) admonition to maintain the potential to make 'conceptual changes' as we re-examine 'how systems function'. All the perspectives enumerated below explain the difficulties partially, but none of them wholly.

### **Post-colonialism**

The most obvious and comprehensive paradigm is colonialism, or more precisely, post-colonialism (Freire 1970, Said 1978), which helps explain the political climate in the country, in my assigned institution, and in writing centers generally. To start with the larger perspective of the country, it sometimes seemed to me that its history of apartheid has engendered a sense of entitlement in its new leaders, who may themselves have previously been 'socially, economically, or educationally disadvantaged by past discriminatory laws or practices' (Constitution of Namibia 1990: 16), and a sense of acceptance of the plight of others who continue to be disadvantaged. Such attitudes may explain the millions spent on government edifices while hundreds of thousands of Namibians barely survive in the rural north. The Marxist Paulo Freire (1970 Ch. 1, Para. 8) comments on this phenomenon in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

[...] during the initial stage of the struggle, the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors, or 'sub-oppressors'. [...] Their ideal is to be men; but for them, to be men is to be oppressors [...]. The colonized man will first manifest this aggressiveness which has been deposited in his bones against his own people.



Throughout his work Freire argues that a new pedagogy is needed, characterized by *conscientization*, or critical consciousness of one's historical and political situation with the goal of creating a democratic society. Part of the reason for this new pedagogy is for new leaders not to treat their subordinates in the same way they were treated.

Another perspective on my difficulties, implicit in any post-colonialist framework, is an 'Us-Them' dichotomy. As explained in Said's canonical *Orientalism* (1978), this attitude reduces people to two homogenous groups, alien to and critical of each other even in contexts where colonialism did not exist before. In this reductivist view, you are either the oppressor or the oppressed—or both, depending on context. Equality does not seem to be an option. In my own case, as a foreigner, I could not expect to be part of any in-group, though most colleagues were friendly and helpful. I was, after all, an invited guest. I was seldom sure, however, if I was being perceived as a member of the oppressed or as another oppressor. While the government's decision to make English the official language of Namibia may have been strategic in terms of global competition and linguistic equality (Nujoma 2004, Makuwa 2005), it may have been seen by some as an imposition, leading to ambivalence regarding validation of English as the language of professional, academic, and official communication.

The post-colonial attitudes I experienced in my Namibian assignment are perhaps a case in point of the prejudices that most writing centers experience in academe the world over. In 'Post-Colonialism and the Idea of a Writing Center,' Bawarshi and Pelkowski (1999) expose similar acculturative forces in U.S. institutions. They also argue that 'acculturation [to an academic environment] becomes a means not only of precluding the Other, but also of validating the academic culture to itself' (Bawarshi and Pelkowski 1999: 81). With the exponential growth of higher education in the past thirty years, writing centers have sprouted up to serve the needs primarily of students outside the academic mainstream (Boquet 1999). Too often these needs are perceived as embracing the 'cultural literacy' (of Us) as defined by the controversial champion of the Western literary canon, E.D. Hirsch (1988), or more classically by Matthew Arnold (1869: Para. 3) as 'the best which has been thought and said in the world'. Students from non-academic sub-cultures are instructed both subtly and overtly to abandon their own cultural and linguistic patterns (Them). A new identity, combining academic and non-academic cultures, or Us and Them, is not an option in post-colonial thinking.

### **Culture Clash**

Attributing my difficulties only to trying to function in a post-colonial setting is simplistic and incomplete, however. Many foreign scholars and administrators function quite well in such settings. Perhaps it was more of a culture clash between the emphasis on procedures and protocol at one African institution and my own very Western goal orientation, intensified by what I perceived to be the expectations of my Stateside supervisors. All generalizations oversimplify, but some have noted that, based on cultural norms, Africans and Westerners tend to think differently about power relations and time among other concepts (Hamminga 1997). A writing center on the American or European model at this tertiary institution could have created a new intercultural entity, or 'contact zone;' that is, 'social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism' (Pratt 1991: 33). A contact zone between the Namibian and Western cultures and among the diverse stakeholders could have been created, incorporating Western writing pedagogy with African rhetorical norms and Namibian cultural differences and higher education goals. The result could have been a unique agency uniquely positioned to improve students' literacy. Regrettably, this did not happen. Much has been written in the U.S. about the ability of writing centers to create such contact zones which validate diversity while deconstructing the literacy of the hegemonic academy, as for example, in a *festschrift* for Mary Louise Pratt (Wolff, 2002). Freire's pedagogy of *conscientization* described above is a similar concept.

Racism and sexism might also be considered part of this culture clash. Racism is outlawed by the Namibian Constitution, but I found it to be a stratified society based on skin color and ethnicity. In a country where women are still sold into marriage, gender discrimination is also endemic, radically more so than in the U.S.. Were part of my difficulties caused by the perceptions of me and my behavior as a white American woman? At the least, these three characteristics were no assets for me in Namibia.

## **Final accomplishments**

When it became clear after five months that I was not going to get the job done at all, I looked around Windhoek and gained approval for several 'outreach' projects that may have done more to improve Namibians' English and achieve State Department goals than a writing center. These included working with journalists at the country's only independent daily newspaper, organizing in the rural north the largest English teachers' conference in the country's history, and assisting the Women's Leadership Center with empowering marginalized Namibian women to write about their experiences in a male-dominated society. Thus I was 'successful' after all—just not in the ways originally planned.

I also went to the Language Center at the University of Namibia (UNam), the country's only accredited university, and actually succeeded in starting a writing center there, bolstered by ideas I gained from the annual Summer Institute for the International Writing Center Association (IWCA) held in Wisconsin that year. At the new institution the director's first comment was 'I see in you a great opportunity'. I received welcome support, including adequate space and furnishings, paid tutors and volunteers, permission to create and teach a tutor training course, and enthusiasm from the Director and staff. Space, furnishings, and tutors already existed at UNam and did not require new funding. Allowed to be largely self-directing, I recruited volunteers from the community to assist the tutors, taught the training course, and scheduled consultation hours.

This support was refreshing, but it also had some glitches, such as no computers except the four I donated, and no internet. I was promised an office telephone and computer but did not receive them. Although many in the U.S. and European writing center communities would argue for the 'necessity' of electronic equipment, such expectations turned out to be folly in a developing country. The students who became peer tutors were already working for very low wages for the lecturers as teaching assistants. Adding writing center tutoring to their job descriptions made them less available for these other duties, which caused some complaining from the Language Center faculty. The tutors needed training, more than they received, but the time period required to get a training course approved for academic credit was discouraging. Although Language Center staff were supportive, there was much need for information and promotion of writing center services to them and to the university at large. I found a common perception among nearly everyone at both the campuses that the main mission of a writing center is to provide assistance with sentence-level grammar and coherence. While this function is important, particularly for struggling EFL students, the scope of a writing center can be much broader, as explained below.

After its much publicized launch in October 2008, UNam's Writing Excellence Unit continues today as a permanent fixture of the Language Center, with plans to double its size and offerings. One department head and one lecturer serve as directors. Writing center tutors have been relieved of most of their former duties to grade papers for lecturers, although there is some overlap. As an epilogue to my tale, it is also important to note that, perhaps influenced by the successful establishment of Unam's Writing Excellence Unit, the Polytechnic of Namibia, the original host school, finally opened a writing center a year later in the basement of its beautiful library with a coordinator and two tutors. Therefore, there are now two writing centers in Windhoek, the capital city of Namibia. They can be accessed through the following websites: [http://www.unam.na/centres/language/writing\\_unit.html](http://www.unam.na/centres/language/writing_unit.html) and <http://www.polytechnic.edu.na/centres/ctl/writing%20centres.php>.

## **Starting Writing Centers in Western Countries and in Namibia**

### ***Similarities***

With the caveat that each writing center is unique, it can nevertheless be argued that starting one at a tertiary institution in the U.S., in Namibia, and nearly anywhere else has important common threads. Indeed, that claim has been the thrust of this entire article. First, as already discussed above, startup tasks at any institution include initial needs assessment and approval of the writing center concept, getting approval for capital and operating expenses, education

and promotion among constituencies, recruiting and training staff and tutors, and procuring resources. And at any point the whole process can become lost in a maze of bureaucracy or even mismanagement. Moreover, funding problems seem to be ubiquitous at writing centers all over the world.

A second similarity is the common perception that a writing center should function primarily as 'a one-stop grammar fix-it shop,' or a place where someone who is 'no writer' can make sentences that are 'complete, perfect, and grammatical' (Welch 1999: 54, 61), notions that most directors would like to dispel. Nearly all the lecturers I consulted at both institutions, regardless of their subject specialty, expressed this view. But as U.S. writing center expert Grimm (2008: 9) puts it, "the 'help' writing centers provide is not simply fixing a comma splice like using spit to pat down an unseemly cowlick. Rather, the work of a writing center is a matter of being available mentally and emotionally to engage in the mutual construction of meaning with another'. It should involve dialectical engagement and not just remediation (Boquet 1999: 468). Such views have also been expressed on the other side of the Atlantic in Björk *et al.* (2003). This work can include academic literacy in writing and reading, understanding assignments, organizing and structuring written documents, researching and documenting, thesis statements, and writing strategies and process. Two of the best-known guides for these multifarious tasks of writing-center tutors are Ryan and Zimmerelli (2012) and Raftery and Bruce (2011).

South African writing center director from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Chirag Patel (Patel and Clarence 2009) concurs with Grimm regarding 'grammar fixing.' In Patel's words, 'Briefly, we don't teach grammar. [...] first, if we did, we'd very quickly end up being seen as a proofreading and editing organization [...]. Second, often [...] grammar problems are the result of a deeper problem, which is a lack of understanding of basic concepts [...] or what the question is asking of them [...]. Working on concept and structure is achievable in the consultation time [...] working on grammar [...] isn't, really'. A colleague, Clarence, at another South African writing center comments that:

if students are making errors that are impeding a clear understanding of their work on the reader's part, we will explain the kinds of errors they're making, why they're problematic and how to correct them—but we get the student to do the corrections. This isn't teaching grammar so much as it is making students aware of the different convention between their home language and English—like concord for Afrikaans speakers and definite articles for isiXhosa/isiZulu speakers. The awareness often helps them to make these improvements, as they improve their deeper understanding of what goes into writing a clear, well-structured, coherent piece of work. (Patel and Clarence 2009)

A third similarity among writing centers everywhere is, paradoxically, their diverse clientele. Much has been written about cultural diversity and marginalization among writer center visitors (Bawarshi and Pelkowski 1999, Grimm 1996 and 2008, Papay 2002). Many are 'basic writers,' using Mina Shaughnessy's (1977) term for those with sentence-level problems, perhaps because of their non-literate and/or non-English-speaking backgrounds. Students in Namibia are no less diverse than in the U.S. and Europe even though the country hosts few international students. However, Namibia is home to nearly thirty ethnic groups, each with its own native language, making for great variations in L1-L2 transference, along with profound cultural differences. Most students in Namibia are also marginalized since the elites generally attend college in South Africa, or more recently, China (*The Namibian* 2009).

In response to the diverse clientele in Western writing centers, many directors have stressed the need for centers to function as 'safe houses' where students can confront the discourse patterns of the dominant culture and forge new voices in their own writing, born of a '*mestiza* consciousness' that does not negate their origins (Bawarshi and Pelkowski 1999). These students should not be asked to shed their identities like so many snake skins, but to maintain their integrity while adapting to academe. Using Mary Louise Pratt's (1991: 33) concept of a 'contact zone,' these writers argue that writing centers are better equipped than any other campus organization to help students navigate the alien culture of academe. The centers thus become 'cultural mediators' (Pratt 1991: 40), a role ascribed to several in South Africa visited by Twila Yates Papay (2002). As she puts it, 'Learning how to maintain the writing center as safe



house while welcoming confrontation and delaying negotiation might enrich any center' (Papay 2002: 19). Surely this function is needed just as much in Namibia's nascent writing centers.

### **Differences**

Although this article has underlined essential similarities, looking at the differences involved in starting writing centers in developed and developing countries, such as Europe, the U.S. and Namibia, is perhaps more instructive for people contemplating a similar assignment. Perhaps the most important difference is that the crux of the success of any program in a developing country is its local sustainability. Far too much well-intentioned foreign aid in Namibia and elsewhere succeeds only while the foreign personnel are there to make it work. Then everything becomes defunct because repairs and local knowledgeable managers are not available. For a writing center to become sustainable in a developing country, it needs infrastructure and locally trained staff. Sustainability is usually less of a concern in Western countries because if one person cannot do a job, another trained staff member can quickly step in.

A second difference is that when working with organizational infrastructure in a developing country, one should understand that slower progress is acceptable and normal. Contributing to this slowness, some supervisors, including those in academe, may have their own agendas pivoting on power and status issues, with less concern about the beneficiaries or functioning of the whole enterprise. As a result, information and communication are often lacking or unclear, which in turn make the proper channels for getting things done opaque, especially to a foreigner.

Third, regarding writing center personnel and users, the differences between developing and developed countries are also instructive. Tutors themselves as well as students may lack adequate food or transportation to school. One of my tutors regularly had no food by the end of a week, so I brought extra sandwiches. Reflecting Namibia's overall low academic attainment (Miranda et al. 2011: 175), many Namibian university students have basic literacy issues far more extreme than in most developed countries. These may need addressing before higher-order structural concerns can be considered, although many writing educators question this sequence. The universal key is to assess a student's needs at the beginning of a tutoring session and to educate potential users about diverse writing center functions.

Lastly, regarding physical infrastructure, capital budgets in Namibia sometimes seem easier to acquire than operating, perhaps because these often come from foreign donors. On the other hand, resources such as books were very hard to obtain because of expense and shipping. Most classes at both institutions where I worked did not use textbooks for this reason; instead they used photocopied study guides created by the lecturers. Computers and internet were scarce or even nonexistent, and only a handful of students owned laptops. Where internet did exist, it was very slow and prone to viruses. I have smiled at all the discussion in the TESOL Second Language Writing Interest Group (2009) about the 'necessity' of computers for teaching the writing process. As I learned at the Namibian teachers' conference, their necessities revolve around water, food, and electricity. Foreign benefactors are less likely to donate these because they cannot be 'seen' the way an edifice can.

### **My Advice and What I Learned**

To anyone contemplating a similar assignment in a developing country, I make the following eleven suggestions in roughly chronological order. More could probably be extrapolated from this article, and many surely apply to those working at institutions in developed countries who must deal with bureaucracy and management problems:

1. Have few, if any, expectations of what you will find upon arrival. Do not rely upon the representations made in the job description because they may not be as you expected or could change by the time you get there.
2. Make preparations that could be applied in a number of settings, and keep your eyes open for interesting alternative projects, such as those that I pursued, if your initially assigned project falls through.

3. Be sure to do a 'needs assessment' shortly after arrival and adapt your program plans accordingly.
4. Expect progress in starting your program to take at least twice as long as you might anticipate. Satisfy yourself with even small changes for a few people as signs of your success.
5. Strive for the maximum that you can muster of flexibility and patience.
6. Understand and respect the complex hierarchies and relationships that characterize institutions in different parts of the world.
7. Learn about and follow all procedures exactly. (Mind your p's and q's.)
8. Be wary of matrix management and of a project that cannot go forward without funding, resources—and commitment—from the host.
9. Consider using competition among institutions to start programs to help students.
10. Remember local sustainability will determine the long-term value of all your effort.
11. Learn all you can about the culture of the society and institution from a variety of sources before you arrive.

### **Would I Do it Again?**

The question naturally arises, given the many challenges I experienced, would I do it all again? The answer is an unqualified 'yes' because of all that I learned, both professionally and personally. For starters, I became well versed in writing center theory, pedagogy, and implementation, and I have been asked to start a writing center in another developing country. I received encouragement for my research efforts, making presentations at conferences and writing several articles. I learned how to deal with students and community members of great ethnic and cultural diversity. I learned that I can teach a class with no curriculum or materials provided to me. I had never before worked with students too poor to eat on many days, nor with teachers who lack water, food, electricity, and housing. As a result of these experiences, I now have a much deeper understanding of educational issues in a developing country, and feel that I have made a positive contribution to the education of this country's writers.

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