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Elizabeth Boquet

Fairfield University, eboquet@fairfield.edu

Neal Lerner

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RECONSIDERATIONS: After “The Idea of a Writing Center”

Elizabeth H. Boquet and Neal Lerner

[I]n a writing center the object is to make sure that writers, and not necessarily their texts, are what get changed by instruction. In axiom form it goes like this: Our job is to produce better writers, not better writing.

Stephen North, “The Idea of a Writing Center” (438)

Nearly twenty-five years ago, in the pages of this journal, Stephen North issued a declaration, throwing down the gauntlet and defining a field. North’s “The Idea of a Writing Center” may be the only piece of writing center scholarship with which readers of *College English* are familiar if they are not current or former members of a writing center staff. In case it has been awhile—or maybe never—North’s basic message is as follows: English department colleagues have long relegated writing center work to the margins of the discipline, as well as physically placed them in dank basements and windowless cubbies. As a result, the full potential of writing centers as “centers of consciousness” (446) for writing has yet to be realized. North’s plea for understanding can be distilled to the quote with which this essay opened: a pithy expression of intent, ethos, and mission for the writing center. We’ll tell you what we are about, it says to its *College English* audience, on our terms.

Elizabeth H. Boquet is professor of English and former Director of the Writing Center at Fairfield University in Fairfield, CT. She has published two books with Utah State University Press: *Noise from the Writing Center* and *The Everyday Writing Center: A Community of Practice* (with Anne Geller, Michele Eodice, Frankie Condon, and Meg Carroll). She served two terms as co-editor (with Neal Lerner) of *The Writing Center Journal*. **Neal Lerner** is Director of Training in Communication Instruction for the Program in Writing and Humanistic Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He has served as co-editor (with Elizabeth H. Boquet) of *The Writing Center Journal* and is co-author (with Paula Gillespie) of *The Longman Guide to Peer Tutoring, 2nd ed.* His current project is *Writing and Speaking as a Scientist and Engineer*, a collaboration with two MIT colleagues, to be published by MIT Press.

Since its publication in September 1984, "The Idea of a Writing Center" has achieved status as "the single most important and most quoted essay in writing center scholarship," according to Christina Murphy and Joe Law ("The Writing Center" 65). In our estimation as the 2002–2008 editors of *The Writing Center Journal*, no article about writing centers has been invoked more frequently to identify, justify, and legitimize the work that writing centers do (or hope to do) in their institutions. Hardly a manuscript passed our desks without citing North. We believe, however, that this loyalty to North's original "Idea" (a commitment that, as we discuss later in this article, he himself has disavowed) has limited the work seen in the journal that North, with Lil Brannon, shepherded into existence in 1980. And, more powerfully, this loyalty has limited the reach of writing center scholarship beyond those basement walls that North decries. We assert that the writing center readers' reception of North's "Idea" has become an intellectual position that often substitutes for collective action and rigorous scholarship. In other words, the wide and uncritical invocation of North's "Idea" lets writing center workers off the hook in many ways. "Idea" offered a reading of the problem as one largely external to writing centers. Change, North asserted, needed to be applied to those misguided English department colleagues who have relegated writing centers to undesirable locales and aligned them with grammar drill. The "secret" of writing centers was waiting to be discovered, and the heroes behind this work were ready to receive their proper recognition. For writing center workers, the power of this position and of this identity has been remarkably robust. North's aphorisms have become a kind of verbal shorthand, a special handshake for the initiated, an endpoint rather than an origin.

As writing center historians, the two of us have long been curious about the phenomenon of "Idea." As caretakers of the field's future history, we have been more recently troubled by the lack of reach of writing center-related publications. During our terms as co-editors of *The Writing Center Journal*, we have seen dozens of manuscripts pass our desks, almost all of them bearing at least a perfunctory reference to "Idea." At the same time, we became more acutely aware of how rarely allusions to the journal that consumes so much of our own professional energies appeared elsewhere. We began to wonder about the interrelationship of these two observations. This article traces our investigation.

In what follows, we begin with a setting of the scene in 1984 and a close reading of North's "Idea," followed by a look at its effects on writing center research and progress in the more than twenty years since its publication. We take our cue from the field of reception studies, an area of inquiry that is concerned with such questions as the following: "What kinds of meanings does a text have? For whom? In what circumstances? With what changes over time? And do these meanings have any effects?" (Staiger 2). As noted, we see North's effort as having been a galvanizing force for writing centers, but also as one that has subsequently become an impedi-

ment to the scholarly moves for which he himself called. For those readers involved with writing center work, we offer this reading as a narrative of the field's epistemological trajectory; for those outside of writing centers, we offer this example as a cautionary tale of the ways in which one scholar—or, perhaps more to the point, one article or even one line—can come to define a field.

WRITING CENTERS CIRCA 1984

North published “Idea” at a key moment in writing center history. The 1970s saw a flourishing of writing centers nationwide as the Open Admissions movement brought larger numbers of underprepared students to higher education: writing centers were positioned as one-to-one solutions to meet the needs of these students (Boquet). Although conferencing or “laboratory” methods of teaching writing had long been offered (Lerner), writing center directors began for the first time to make moves toward professionalization, gathering in hotel rooms and hallways at the national meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), forming regional and national professional organizations, and creating two publications—one to foster connections among writing center directors (*The Writing Lab Newsletter*, founded by Muriel Harris of Purdue in 1978) and one to feature scholarship (*The Writing Center Journal [WCJ]*, founded by Lil Brannon and Stephen North in 1980).¹ These activities were largely modeled on the trajectory of composition as a whole, some thirty years earlier with the founding of CCCC and the creation of the journal *College Composition and Communication (CCC)*. Maureen Daly Goggin, describing those early years of CCCC and CCC, writes of a process that is equally applicable to the subsequent development of writing center scholarship and administration: “[T]he formation of a national organization, and its journal, held the promise of extending the political power and intellectual reach of those working in the rhetorical trenches of English departments across the country” (37). When writing center workers found themselves stuck in those trenches, similar moves toward professionalization seemed a logical form of escape.

In their “From the Editors” column of the inaugural issue of *WCJ*, Brannon and North described in more detail the ways that the journal contributors might help elevate the professional standing of writing centers through engagement with their intellectual promise:

[W]e recognize in writing center teaching the absolute frontier of our discipline. It is in writing centers that two seminal ideas of our reborn profession operate most freely: the student-centered curriculum, and a central concern for composing as a process. And it is in these centers that great new discoveries will be, are being, made: ways of teaching composition, intervening in it, changing it. Writing centers provide, in short, opportunities for teaching and research that classrooms simply cannot offer. *The*

Writing Center Journal fills the need for a forum that can report on and stimulate such work. (1)

In this laboratory for studying the teaching of writing, discoveries would also serve to counter the attitudes of "our profession as a whole," which often saw writing centers as "correction places, fix-it shops for the chronic who/whom confusers, the last bastions of bonehead English" (1). In response, "*The Writing Center Journal* will help combat this political inertia by serving as an outward sign of a growing professional legitimacy" (1).

Four years later, *WCJ*'s plan to lead writing centers out of the trenches was being vexed by the uneven quality and lack of rigor of submissions to the journal. Robert Connors pointed to some of these problems in his "Review: Journals in Composition Studies," which appeared in the issue of *College English* immediately prior to North's "Idea." In assessing *WCJ*'s first few years, Connors notes that North and Brannon aimed to create a journal for theory in a field that was primarily dedicated to practice, but the result of this positioning was that "in the Fall/Winter 1982 issue, the editors were forced to all but plead for manuscript submissions; they simply were not getting enough good essays" (360). By way of explanation, Connors proposes the following:

Wishing to transcend the *kaffeeklatsch* familiarity of the [*Writing Lab*] *Newsletter*, *WCJ* has not yet found a method of doing so that is congenial to its potential community of authors, and one suspects that until the background and professional status of the average writing center administrator and teacher changes, the problem will continue. (361)

Thus, four years after its founding, *WCJ*'s stated mission to affect the "background and professional status of the average writing center administrator and teacher" was not enough. North's strategy at this point was to take his argument out of the confines of *WCJ* and appeal directly to those professional colleagues who were outside of writing centers and, more important, who might view them as little more than triage stations in the battle against illiteracy. Writing center workers now had a spokesperson and a venue—*College English*—to bring these frustrations out in the open.

THE IDEA OF NORTH'S "IDEA"

To trace the influence of North's "Idea," we start with a close reading of the article itself. Murphy and Law describe it as "both a call for understanding and a call for separation" ("The Writing Center" 66). This move starts with North's opening proclamation—"This is an essay that began out of frustration" (433)—which sets the tone for the rest of the introduction and for much of the rest of the article. He announces his purpose for writing, and he delimits his audience. He specifically

excludes writing center staff from the intended recipients of his message, while issuing a scathing indictment to many readers who might otherwise have presumed themselves sympathetic to his message: “the members of my profession, my colleagues, people I might see at MLA or CCCO or read in the pages of *College English*” (433). By the end of his opening sequence, most *College English* readers have no choice but to admit that, for the purpose of this particular article, at least, “‘They’ [. . .] is us” (437).

Shortly thereafter, North turns his attention to his original purpose. “What is the idea of a writing center?” he asks (437). Several of his most frequently quoted observations appear in this section of the essay—that the writing center “defines its province not in terms of some curriculum, but in terms of the writers it serves”; that “writers, and not necessarily their texts, are what get changed by instruction”; that, finally and perhaps most famously, “our job is to produce better writers, not better writing” (438).

By the middle of the article, North returns to the concerns of his imagined audience, addressing what he calls the “practical” question of well-intentioned colleagues: “If I’m doing process-centered teaching in my class, why do I need a writing center? How can I use it?” North’s response is, essentially, that you don’t and you can’t. “Only writers need it,” he replies, “only writers can use it” (440). He enjoins classroom teachers and writing center staff to accord each other mutual “professional courtesy” (441) as they maintain their seemingly separate spheres. In other words, the difference between teaching writing in the classroom and teaching in a writing center is central to the identity that North asserts for his colleagues. However, this is not a separate-but-equal positioning, because writing center workers, as North demonstrates, have an advantage, based on their immediacy to students’ writing and the conversations about that writing, an immediacy that is not forthcoming to classroom teachers, with their necessary need for grades, classroom management, and bureaucratic trappings. The writing center is the ultimate point-of-need pedagogical scene.

The consideration of these key differences between classroom teachers conferencing with their students and tutors conferencing in the writing center continues in the next section of the article. North celebrates the nature of talk most dramatically, and he champions the flexibility afforded by the writing center setting: “We can question [. . .] We can read [. . .] We can play with options [. . .] We can both write [. . .] We can poke around in resources [. . .] We can ask writers to compose aloud while we listen, or we can compose aloud, and the writer can watch and listen” (443).

Finally, although some scholars have referred to North’s “Idea” as a hopeful articulation of writing center work (see, for example, Roskelly and Ronald 8–9), he begins the concluding section of the essay with a concern that he has painted, per-

haps, “too dismal a portrait of the current state of writing centers” (445), an identity that is too burdensome for writing center professionals. He clearly worries that writing centers have taken on too much in their zeal to be all things to all people—Writing across the Curriculum centers, outreach programs, grammar mavens. “None of these efforts to promote writing centers,” North states, “suggest that there is any changed understanding of the idea of a writing center. Indeed it is as though what writing centers do that really matters—talking to writers—were not enough” (446). By his concluding paragraph, North strikes a somewhat optimistic note, even if he appears wary in the face of the evidence that he has presented. “If writing centers are going to finally be accepted,” North writes, “surely they must be accepted on their own terms, as places whose primary responsibility, whose only reason for being, is to talk to writers” (446).

“Idea” offers *College English* readers and, by extension, writing center professionals those terms of acceptance. North even traces his narrative back to “a tutor called Socrates,” setting up shop in a busy Athens marketplace (446). North exploits the power of myth-building in an effort to persuade his *College English* audience. He invokes Socrates as much for the scene of his teaching as for his method. Perhaps as a result, North’s article is championed more for what it tells us about the places that writing centers occupy (different in fundamental ways from the classroom) than for what it tells us about writing pedagogy. In this story, writing center workers have history on their side, moral high ground when it comes to student learning, and even classical rhetoric in their favor. All that stands in the way—and has maybe always stood in the way—is the ignorance of campus colleagues, a misconception of what writing centers are and what they do. Here is what we are about and who we are, North told his *College English* audience; his writing center colleagues were quick to nod in agreement. As far as fulfilling his stated goal—to persuade his intended audience as to the purpose and identity of writing centers—the evidence is quite discouraging.

THE RECEPTION OF “IDEA”

Because *WCJ* is the primary periodical for extended scholarly inquiry in writing centers, the idea of “Idea” has, in many ways, controlled the discourse that surrounds writing center theory and practice more generally. As we started our research, we assumed that North’s “Idea” has been invoked more frequently than any other piece of writing center scholarship in the pages of *WCJ*, and the numbers confirm this notion: in the 195 articles that have appeared in *WCJ* since 1985 (under five editorial teams, including ourselves), “Idea” has been cited a total of 64 times—that is, in almost one of three articles published, which is the highest rate for any cited work. (*WCJ* is published twice per year.) Analyzed another way, in the 40

issues produced during this twenty-year period, 32 issues (or 80 percent) have contained a reference to “Idea.” Also important to note is that these are not multiple publications by the same authors, all paying repeated homage to North. Instead, the 64 articles were written by 60 unique authors, attesting to the widespread invocation of his “Idea.”

In our introduction to this article, we offered key questions in reception studies as described by Janet Staiger—“What kinds of meanings does a text have? For whom? In what circumstances? With what changes over time? And do these meanings have any effects?” (2)—and we use these questions to show how “Idea” has largely been received in an uncritical way, primarily as a way for authors to establish ethos through alignment with the most attractive elements of North’s “Idea.”

To address Staiger’s questions, we examined each of the 64 references to “Idea” in the issues of *WCJ* published between 1985 and 2005. We created a database of the passage or passages from the article in which the reference appears; in a sense, we wanted to capture the context for each of these references and understand how North’s “Idea” corresponded to the larger point that the authors make. Next, we conducted a content analysis of those passages, summarizing the topic being addressed (e.g., writing center pedagogy, writing center identity, writing center role vis-à-vis the institution or larger field).

In terms of the overall picture, citations to North are remarkably stable over time. If we break the twenty-year period into five-year intervals, we see that, after an initial “slow” period (a time during which most *WCJ* articles contained few or no citations), the subsequent five-year periods have been very consistent in the citation of “Idea”:

Time Period	# of references to “Idea”
1985–1989	9
1990–1994	17
1995–1999	20
2000–2005	18

In addition to frequency of use, *WCJ* authors have also been quite consistent in how they have used North: 45 of the 64 uses of “Idea” (or 70 percent) cite the reference just once in their article, an indication that its most typical use is to align the author with North’s position. We also found only five instances of “Idea” being used in what John Swales calls a “non-integral” citation, in which only the author’s name in parentheses is offered. Instead, directly quoting from “Idea” (as do 42 or 66

percent of the authors) to invoke the powerful presence of North's voice is the dominant move.

We also found that "Idea" achieved landmark status fairly quickly; within only a few years, its claims had been incorporated into the scholarly consciousness of the writing center community. For example, by 1990, Lex Runciman could open his *WCJ* article with the following: "In the years since its publication in 1984, Stephen North's 'The Idea of a Writing Center' has become widely recognized as the most succinct and successful single-article discussion of writing centers and their functions" (27). Four years later, Marilyn Cooper characterized "Our job is to produce better writers, not better writing" as "the axiom which has become a writing center mantra" (100). By 1996, Peter Carino described North's "Idea" in terms that placed it squarely in the realm of Kuhnian "paradigm shifts":

North's "Idea" marks, I would argue, a shift to a more politically assertive and theoretically sophisticated discourse. Though before "Idea," essays in early numbers of *WCJ* and in Olson's *Writing Centers: Theory and Administration* address similar issues, North's attempt at self-definition, appearing in *College English*, crystallized them, galvanizing the community and promulgating the mission and practice of most writing centers to a larger audience. (44, f.2)

No surprise that, by 1999, Anis Bawarshi and Stephanie Pelkowski characterized "Idea" as "Stephen North's landmark and now classic essay" (44).

Although references to "Idea" have asserted and established its importance—and, perhaps, thus made it *de rigueur* to cite it—our analysis of the uses of "Idea" also show a remarkable rhetorical consistency. Our content analysis of the passages of the *WCJ* references to "Idea" shows authors, by and large, reasserting writing center identity and institutional role. In 50 of the 64 articles, authors make explicit claims—supported by passages from North's "Idea"—of the role of the writing center ("Our job is to produce better writers, not better writing.") or institutional identity ("We are not here to serve, supplement, back up, complement, reinforce, or otherwise be defined by any external curriculum."). It may not be a surprise, of course, that "Idea" is used this way: the central focus of North's article was to assert a "new" identity for writing centers in the eyes of the English faculty who had been mischaracterizing these spaces as "basement fix-it shops." What is a surprise, however, is how this assertion of identity has needed to be offered repeatedly for more than 20 years, which is an indication that asserting to other *WCJ* readers is, indeed, not enough to enact change and, by extension, that North's assertion to *College English* readers was not enough. For example, Muriel Harris begins this invocation of identity in the first *WCJ* article to cite North's "Idea" following its publication in 1984:

What does go on in tutorials in an ideal writing lab? Talk and more talk—and a lot of writing. [. . .] The tutor in this lab has had enough training to recognize that writing

is a process, that errors need to be prioritized, that editing skills are important only at the last stage of a piece of writing, that the tutorial is a dialog and not a lecture, and that the tutor's job, as Stephen North phrases it, "is to produce better writers, not better writing" (438). (7)

Five years later, Bonnie Devet offered that "Stephen North contends that in the ideal writing center the tutors' goal is 'to make sure that writers, and not necessarily their texts, are what get changed by instruction'" (78). Five years after that, Mary Trachsel argued that "[t]he widespread perception among writing center personnel that their work is devalued in the academic marketplace emerges in published complaints that writing centers are academically marginalized and especially vulnerable to budget cuts and layoffs. [. . .] In 1984, Stephen North's 'The Idea of a Writing Center' made a similar point" (32). And ten years after that, in 2005, this assertion of identity, by no means settled, reemerges in Harry Denny's application of queer theory to writing center practice:

Producing better writers, to extend Stephen North's aphorism, involves understanding the manufacture and dynamics of identity, a process that involves ongoing self-discovery and reconciliation with collective identities and discourse communities. Just as the writing process is individual and recursive, so too is the process of coming to terms with and reinventing one's identity. Writing centers inevitably find themselves at the crossroads of that journey for students, tutors, and the other professionals that inhabit their spaces. (40)

Even though the articles from which these passages are excerpted consider very different aspects of writing center work—from the observation and evaluation of tutorials to the politics of identity—they each rely on a shared ethos of that work assumed to have been articulated by North. In this way, they confirm what Harris and Kinkead (*WCJ* co-editors at the time) observe in an interview with North and Brannon that is featured in the tenth anniversary issue of *WCJ* (11.1, 1990). Commenting on the reverence held for "Idea," Harris observes, "It has been a real touchstone for everyone. But they may not be saying exactly the same thing. It's just sort of the way people used to cite Aristotle or Kenneth Burke—I'm putting you in good company. But in writing centers that's the way they invoke your name" (Harris and Kinkead 12).

Harris's reading mirrors our own assessment of the way that North's article has been taken up in the field. Very few authors venture substantive engagement with the text; most make passing reference early in their articles to confirm a commonly shared understanding. Clinton Lockett, for example, who describes his attempts to work with faculty at Marquette University in a 1985 *WCJ* article, aligns himself with North in this way: "I knew that the Writing Center's main concern had to be with meaning—a view that reflects my own and that coincides with the theory of Stephen North, who believes that Writing Centers must be more than 'fix-it shops'" (21).

Whether "theory" or "maxim" or "mantra," North's quotable moments in "Idea" have long offered a way for *WCJ* authors to assert an identity and discuss the need for change while confirming, ultimately, the struggle to bring change about. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that a few *WCJ* authors have offered critical reassessments of "Idea," not the least of whom is North himself.² In "Revisiting 'The Idea of a Writing Center,'" which appeared in *WCJ* in 1994, North characterizes his earlier piece alternately as "a romantic idealization," "a highly visible version of our mythology," and "a public idealization" (10). He portrays the writing center community as "bound by 'The Idea of a Writing Center' to the extent to which we have endorsed it" (10). The effect of this endorsement is "to make it harder for us to disown or renounce what may be its less desirable legacies" (10). The end result may be to wind up "agreeing to serve as the (universal) staff literacy scapegoat," a position that gives the writing center precious little "power to alter what we believe are flawed institutional arrangements" (18). Finally in "Revisiting," North turns his gaze inward—not just from presenting an image and understanding of writing centers for the larger English department audience that he addressed in "Idea," but also from any sort of activist position—essentially conceding that all he had the possibility to change and, by extension, all any of us can change are local circumstances. North writes, "institutional arrangements seem to me too idiosyncratic, and writing centers' political visions too varied, for me to tell you where I think 'we'—all writing center people—are going. But I *can* say where I'm hoping *our* writing center will head" (15). That vision, as North described at the time, was a limited one: a writing center that was "the center of consciousness, the physical locus—not for the entire, lumbering university—for the approximately 10 faculty members, the 20 graduate students, and the 250 or so undergraduates that we can actually, sanely, responsibly bring together" (17). It was an assertion of identity, but—unlike the grand vision that North offered in "Idea"—in "Revisiting" the vision narrows and the identity is much more local than global.³

Unlike "Idea," North's limited vision as expressed in "Revisiting" prompted several extended critical pieces in relatively close succession. In the next issue of *WCJ* (Spring 1995), Cynthia Haynes-Burton responded in a newly instituted "Letters" section, calling "Revisiting" "a cynical and defeatist alarm" (181) and accusing North of promoting "a fortress mentality" for writing centers (182). This battle imagery continues, as she claims that North has "surrender[ed] to the forces he suggests need altering" (182). In his response to Haynes-Burton, North extends her military rhetoric in his opening sentence, in which he suggests that their differences are mainly "tactical: a disagreement about means, not ends" (183); he speaks of winning improvements, of "strengthening [their] position for subsequent negotiations" (185). He portrays his revised idea of a writing center as one piece of a hard-fought institutional battle that lasted for fifteen years. Talk of creating a professional identity for writing center workers or of elevating the field's scholarship is nowhere to be

found in North's "Revisiting" or in his responses to critiques of it. Instead, his tactics have become localized, and he has essentially conceded his role as a pioneer for an emerging discipline.

So how did the writing center field, as represented in the pages of *WCJ*, receive North's "revisit"? In the 18 issues of *WCJ* that followed the publication of North's "Revisiting," 11 articles reference it in their Works Cited sections. However, over that period, 18 other articles cite only "Idea" and not "Revisiting." When articles use both, a fairly common approach is to position North's disappointment expressed in "Revisiting" as a reason to try that much harder to achieve the ideals expressed in "Idea." For example, Paul Collins starts his article, "The Concept of a Co-operative," with contrasting quotations from "Idea" and "Revisiting" and then adds:

I feel pangs of both disappointment and recognition when reading the above quotations. Disappointment, because Stephen North's original vision for student writing seemed so limitless in possibility and respectful of the student intellect; recognition, because it has become obvious that writing centers, while still an integral part of North's vision of a writing community, are fundamentally unsuited for the full burden that North initially placed on them. [. . .] But North did not misjudge what a writing community should be as much as where it should be. [. . .] One possibility for North's Athenian marketplace is in a writing co-operative. (58–59)

Thus, writing center teacher-scholars seem unwilling or unable to embrace a writing center narrative that runs counter to North's original "Idea," even if it comes from the originator himself. In "Idea," North ushers in a postcolonial moment for writing centers, leaving us with a clear demarcation of the before and after, the moment at which writing centers began to cohere—or were colonized, depending on the perspective. And despite North's "Revisiting" of this position ten years after "Idea," for most of the writing center audience, it is "Idea" that continues to hold sway.

"IDEA" BEYOND THE WRITING CENTER

Of course, North wasn't writing "Idea" for a writing center audience. Had he wanted to direct the argument to them, he could have published the article in *WCJ* (which was sorely lacking manuscripts in those early years). North clearly wanted to reach an audience in the generalist journals in the field. As part of our study of the reception of "Idea," we turn to the NCTE-affiliated journals that meet such criteria, in order to determine how well North fared with this mission.

Our tracking of the citation of *WCJ* articles in *College English* and *CCC* offers evidence of a perceived lack of relevance of writing center work to English studies and, more specifically, composition studies. In some sense, the external audience that North aimed to persuade in 1984 might now accept writing centers as impor-

tant pedagogical sites, but accepting them as intellectual sites takes the struggle to a whole new level, one in which writing centers are largely invisible.⁴ This invisibility is reflected in terms of how rarely references to “Idea” have appeared in *College English* and *CCC*: from 1985 to 2005, authors in *College English* have cited “Idea” just twice, first in an article by Jeanette Harris, former co-editor of *WCJ*, in which she reviewed four writing center-related books, and more recently in an article on the history of the teacher-student writing conference by one of us (Lerner). North’s “Idea” has had a presence in *CCC* that is slightly greater but still slight, having been cited in four articles over that twenty-year period or, on average, once every five years (and one of those four publications was by one of us; see Boquet).

Citations of North’s article, arguably, are not a fair measure of the extent to which a writing-centered consciousness is represented in these major journals. For that, one might reasonably look to see how often reference to any article from *WCJ* appears in the Works Cited lists of published articles. What we found was disappointing: in the 154 issues of *College English* from 1985 to 2005, only five articles have appeared in which the authors cited something from *WCJ*, none since 1998; in the 84 issues of *CCC* over that period, only seven articles have made reference to a publication appearing in *WCJ*.

This conspicuous absence was first commented on in North and Lil Brannon’s 1990 retrospective account of the field, published in *WCJ*:

Scholars writing for *CCC*, *College English*, *Rhetoric Review*, or *Composition Studies* rarely cite [writing center] work to enrich their own understandings, yet *The Writing Center Journal* is filled with scholarly references to the field of composition and English studies. People who work in writing centers are still, for the most part, talking a lot to each other and little to the viable. (qtd. in Harris and Kinkead 9)

North and Brannon’s assessment has remained true during our term as editors, a time during which *WCJ* articles have regularly cited sources appearing in *College English*, *CCC*, *JAC*, and *Research in the Teaching of English*, whereas references to writing center work in the pages of major journals in the field of English studies remain practically nonexistent. One explanation for this absence is the perceived narrowness of issues that are germane to writing centers; however, during our terms as editors, *WCJ* authors have taken up such topics as classical rhetoric (Ianetta), legal studies (Weaver), discourse analysis (Gilewicz and Thonus), teaching and learning English as a second language (Myers), critical race theory (Villanueva; Condon), queer theory (Denny), and management studies (Geller).

Certainly, one could argue that the creation of a journal specifically devoted to writing center scholarship has something to do with the lack of writing center work in the pages of more generalist journals. However, North and Brannon founded *WCJ* in 1980 precisely because writing center issues were not represented in the literature of the field as a whole. As Lil Brannon recalls about that time,

There were almost no avenues for extended pieces on the writing center. We had the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, which had been going for a few years. But *CCC* and *College English* at the time hadn't published anything on writing centers. And it didn't look like they were going to. (qtd. in Harris and Kinkead 3)

Seventeen years after that statement and twenty-seven years after the founding of *WCJ*, Brannon's description still describes the terrain fairly accurately. Writing center scholarship is lumped together—as concerned only with writing centers—rather than discussed alongside other scholarship when authors are imagining composition's geographies, performing identities, or liberating pedagogies—all topics taken up recently in *College English*. This represents an absence that is a loss not only for writing center scholars but for the entire field of English studies, whose scope is narrowed as a result.⁵

One possible reason for this lack of impact is that, although *WCJ* authors take up a variety of theoretical frameworks and topics that are germane to teaching writing as a whole, the perspective is largely an etic one, an application of ideas or theories developed outside of writing center work to one-to-one tutoring. Much harder to find is an emic theory or model, one developed by research that is conducted in writing center settings that could act as a lens to examine other teaching-learning contexts. Stephen North was aware of this dilemma as far back as 1984, and in his other writing center-related publication that year, his chapter entitled “Writing Center Research: Testing Our Assumptions” in Gary Olson's collection, *Writing Centers: Theory and Administration*, North called for such research and the subsequent creation of knowledge that research on writing centers would produce. Read against each other, “Idea” and “Writing Center Research” provide an ironic counterpoint of sorts, a challenge to English department colleagues versus a challenge to potential writing center scholars, a declaration of independence versus a declaration of ignorance. More important, the difference in reception of these two articles—strong for “Idea” and weak for “Writing Center Research”—is a testament to the ways that a key piece of scholarship can function as a manifesto, framing an identity through aphorism.

THE IDEA OF WRITING CENTER RESEARCH

In his chapter for Olson's collection, North makes clear to his writing center audience that simply exalting the writing center's main mission—talking to writers—is not enough, which is, of course, contrary to what he suggests in “Idea.” Instead, in Olson's collection North urges his writing center audience to conduct scholarship.⁶ In the opening section of “Writing Center Research,” North connects his readers to the larger world of composition studies and its research agenda. But North also creates a rather dire situation for writing center professionals: “[In contrast to] our

classroom counterparts [. . .] we are considered by our contemporaries to be at best unconventional and at worst ‘ad hoc’ and essentially futile” (24). In other words, the separation that marks “Idea” is not necessarily a good thing. According to North, research on the work done in our writing centers will potentially overcome these prejudices, build legitimacy, goodwill, and all of the trappings that come with academic status. The rhetorical move for North is to convince his writing center readers to see themselves as academics with research agendas, questions worth investigating, and attainable methods for exploring those questions. Failure to develop a research base for tutorial interaction, North suggests, would further entrench the marginalization that he decried in “Idea.”

In his chapter, North offers a research agenda for his readers, noting that “writing center research must begin by addressing this single, rather broad question: What happens in writing tutorials?” (29). Later, North follows up with specific questions and methods, such as categorizing types of tutorials, identifying “effective” tutoring, or comparing “tutorial content with written products” (32) in order to see the specific effects of writing center work. Finally, North reminds readers of the ultimate purpose of this research: “to make writing centers work better for the writers they serve” (33). A secondary gain, however, would be to “challenge” the assumptions of faculty who “do not believe that writing centers work” (33). Research is thus both a means of improving practice and a way to defend that practice to a skeptical audience.

Taken together, North’s two publications offer a sophisticated rhetorical analysis of the state of writing centers circa 1984, and they certainly tell a different story about writing centers than “Idea” does alone. North challenges *College English* readers to explore their ill-conceived assumptions about why writing center work is remedial; North challenges readers of Olson’s collection to explore their perhaps naïve assumptions about why or whether writing center work is effective.

Over twenty years later, given how rarely writing center-related articles have found their way out of *WCJ*, we can’t help but conclude that both audiences’ sets of assumptions—*College English* readers’ notions of the lack of relevance of writing center work and “Idea” readers’ unsupported contentions for the efficacy of one-to-one tutoring—haven’t changed much. The righteousness of “Idea” ironically became an ossifying force for the assumptions inherent in writing center work, assumptions that, in “Writing Center Research,” North was calling for the field to test. “Idea” began to dominate the pages and Works Cited lists in *WCJ*; in contrast, North’s plea to and for writing center scholars went largely unheeded: only seven *WCJ* articles from 1985 to 2005 reference “Writing Center Research,” in contrast to the 64 articles that reference “Idea.”

We believe that progress has been made in understanding “what happens in writing center tutorials” (North, “Writing Center Research” 28) and in improving

the institutional standing of writing centers and those who direct and work in them. Increasing numbers of graduate programs offer courses that are specifically geared toward writing center theory and administration, and, perhaps as a result, more theses and dissertations about writing centers are being written—from the two that appeared in 1985 to the sixteen that came out in 2005. Yet just as composition studies has been critiqued for uneven scholarship and a lack of production of rigorous research (Haswell), writing center research has not met the challenge that North offered in 1984.

We are not necessarily calling on the field to turn the clock back twenty years and take up North's call. Certainly, both the landscape for composition studies and institutional expectations for accountability have changed. With the increased emphasis on assessment and with advances in technology, more research is being conducted on the nature of one-to-one teaching in a variety of settings, although much of that writing center research is being circulated in internal documents and rarely finds its way into the published literature. Outcomes assessment has moved beyond the classroom, affecting every college and university program. Writing centers are no longer exempt, if they have ever been, from the expectation of such research. North's most powerful maxim in "Idea"—"Our job is to produce better writers, not better writing" (438)—turns out to be prescient, if a bit oversimplified. Research into the effects of writing centers on students' writing is rare for many methodological and practical reasons, given the wide variety of variables that contribute to students' texts, but such research no longer seems so strictly off limits simply through blind adherence to North's dictate. A statement that initially offered a rationale for distinguishing the concerns of the writing center from those of the classroom—where evaluation of written products was inevitable—no longer works at such cross-purposes with institutional culture. Many institutions refine assessment instruments in an effort to determine precisely this: whether writers themselves have been changed by the instruction offered at our colleges and universities.

Nevertheless, as institutions require more of the very kind of research for which North called in 1984, the journals in our field publish as little of it as ever. *WCJ* is no exception, and this article should not be interpreted specifically as a call for it. Instead, readers might consider it a plea that the lore circulating in writing center studies move toward "practice as inquiry" (North, *Making of Knowledge* 33) and beyond. As the most controversial of North's categories of knowledge making described in his 1987 book, *The Making of Knowledge in Composition*, lore is "concerned with what has worked, is working, or might work in teaching, doing, or learning writing" (23). Essentially practice without critical reflection, lore may be an inevitable outcome of educational practitioners working under difficult conditions. Ironically, North's "Idea" itself has become "lore-ified"—a handy collection of statements about writing center identity and ethos, always at the ready to support writing center workers but with little explanatory power.

AFTER "THE IDEA OF A WRITING CENTER"

We began this article by considering "Idea" not only as an explication of an important aspect of writing center history but also as an occasion to consider more deeply the ways in which the venues for sharing ideas shape what we come to know about important aspects of our field. Those venues, of course, are not static repositories. As we have demonstrated with our tracing of the reception of North's work, the ways that publications are produced, read, and reproduced provide a rich source for future investigations. The histories of our field often focus on pedagogical and intellectual trends—such as expressivism, social constructivism, or postmodernism—but much work remains, we believe, to investigate the knowledge-making process as a function of the production and reception of our field's literature. In other words, we do not believe that the writing center audience's reception of "Idea" is a process unique to that audience or to that key article.

Given our study of North's "Idea" and our six-year term as editors of *WCJ*, we realize better now than ever the extent to which professional scholarly leadership shapes the trajectory of a field on a micro and on a macro level. In short, the reception of "Idea" led to an imbalance in the scholarship of the field; this particular article exerted undue influence and either did not leave enough space—or others did not enter spaces that were left by it—in any substantive way. We might ask, at the macro level through venues such as this one, which voices are being granted influence and at whose expense? Certainly, this question is one that we often ask in regard to literacy practices, classrooms, and testing. Asking this question of ourselves is perhaps what reception studies might contribute and others might pursue.

Furthermore, the imbalance left by "Idea" is one that needs to be addressed by those who are directly involved in writing center work—directors, tutors, or researchers—all of whom have a responsibility to go beyond mere assertions of identity. Such assertions have long been marked as a struggle against perceived marginal status, as exemplified by the title of the 2007 winner of the International Writing Center Association Scholarship award: *Marginal Words, Marginal Work? Tutoring the Academy in the Work of Writing Centers* (Macauley and Mauriello). The function of scholarship to achieve status is, of course, a long-standing academic tradition, at least when it comes to the path toward tenure, promotion, and other institutional rewards. Achieving individual institutional status is far different than achieving institutional status for a writing center or writing program. And achieving status for an entire field based on the reception of its scholarship is fraught with difficulty. Nonetheless, the lesson from North's "Idea" is that such status cannot be grounded in the words of one theorist, from one article, from one line; instead, it is represented in richly textured accounts that are concerned with the full scope of literacy studies, as befits the complexity and richness of writing center sites and the people who populate them. That research in this area has been dominated by lore and

speculation, controlled in many ways by the words of its founding father, and confined to specialized journals, and largely to one journal, is surely contrary to North's grander vision.

This imbalance is also vexing, given that writing centers are sites rich with promise for the full range of scholarly inquiry. To fulfill that promise, writing center scholarship must manage, more often than it does now, "both-and" rather than "either-or": How much more might we actually know about the context for writing in writing centers had North's "Idea" and "Research" been pursued with equal vigor? As we reconsider North's legacy to the field of writing centers, those of us in composition studies must also ask how the field is currently responding to the question of what happens when students write. We must seek this information not only because our annual reports, accrediting agencies, or funding agencies expect it—but because it is our scholarly work and the sites where it happens are the intellectual breeding grounds for our research.

These challenges particularly resonate in light of recent attention being paid to the changing nature of literacy practices and the impact that such practices now have or will have on teaching in twenty-first-century colleges and universities. As Kathleen Blake Yancey writes, "Never before has the proliferation of writings outside the academy so counterpointed the compositions inside" (298). It will take all of us who are invested in literacy education, in all of our settings, to maximize the potential of these exciting new opportunities. Our field can no longer afford, if it ever could, to have forged a separate peace between classroom and nonclassroom teaching. There is no separate but equal. Few sites are as rich with promise for understanding the everyday practices that students bring to their academic writing as the writing centers on our very own campuses. (See Geller, Eodice, Condon, Carroll, and Boquet for an exploration of these everyday practices in writing centers.) Maintaining physical and virtual spaces where students write in the company of other writers, work at the point of their own needs, talk about why writing matters and in what contexts it continues to matter—although these are not ideals of writing centers only, they *are* ideals of writing centers. Thus, a thorough study of these contexts for teaching and learning can offer the larger field a rich body of knowledge. As such, we must ensure that the work that is proceeding in these sites is integrated into our research streams and our mainstream scholarly conversations. We cannot know what we need to know without them.⁸

NOTES

1. For a "personal history" of these events, see Kinkead.

2. The first published critique of North's "Idea" came in a 1992 issue of *The Writing Lab Newsletter*. Nancy Grimm takes issue with North's political naïveté about writing center talk existing in a relatively

value-free zone. Such talk, Grimm contends, is imbedded in the ways that institutions regulate "correct" speech and writing and is relatively uncontested by notions, such as North's, of a writing center "community" that projects warm and fuzzy acceptance rather than substantial analysis. For Grimm, the goal of writing center researchers "should be to open a dialogue with English departments and with the institution as a whole, to rethink the way we practice literacy, to renegotiate a relationship with teachers of writing" (6).

3. The only other article published in *WCJ* to engage the content of North's message substantively is Lisa Ede's "Writing Centers and the Politics of Location: A Response to Terrance Riley and Stephen North," published in the Spring 1996 issue, a mere three issues after North's own revisit of his claims.

4. Certainly, a large number of notable composition scholars started their academic careers working in or writing about writing centers. We also acknowledge that published work on writing centers has appeared and continues to appear in a number of other scholarly venues, including journals such as *Composition Studies*, *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, and *Praxis*; books; and, perhaps most commonly, edited collections; however, we believe that the perceived insularity of this scholarship is ultimately unproductive for understanding the more general issues that it speaks to and for advancing the status of writing center professionals as a whole.

5. As an example of the segregation of writing center publications, Harris's review of five varied books on tutoring and teaching writing served as evidence for her that "Writing Center Scholarship Comes of Age." An alternative is a review that reads these books against and with other texts that take up similar topics that are not exclusive to writing centers, including the effects of technology on teaching writing, writing across the curriculum programs, and postmodernity in higher education.

6. North actually pursued this argument even earlier, in a 1981 article published in *The Writing Lab Newsletter*. In an admittedly harsh tone, North wrote, "I'm here to tell you that the PROBLEM, in capital letters, is that we don't know the fundamentals. That when it comes to teaching writing in individualized ways, one to one, *we don't know what we are doing*" ("Us 'N Howie" 5).

7. Thanks to John Schilb for pointing out this irony.

8. Thanks to Rebecca Jackson, Katherine Valentine, Derek Owens, Melissa Ianetta, John Schilb, and two anonymous *College English* reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this essay.

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