

"Privatized v. Academic Online Tutoring: A Proposal to Determine the Effectiveness of the Mary G. Walsh Writing Center Compared to Pearson-Smarthinking"

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ABSTRACT

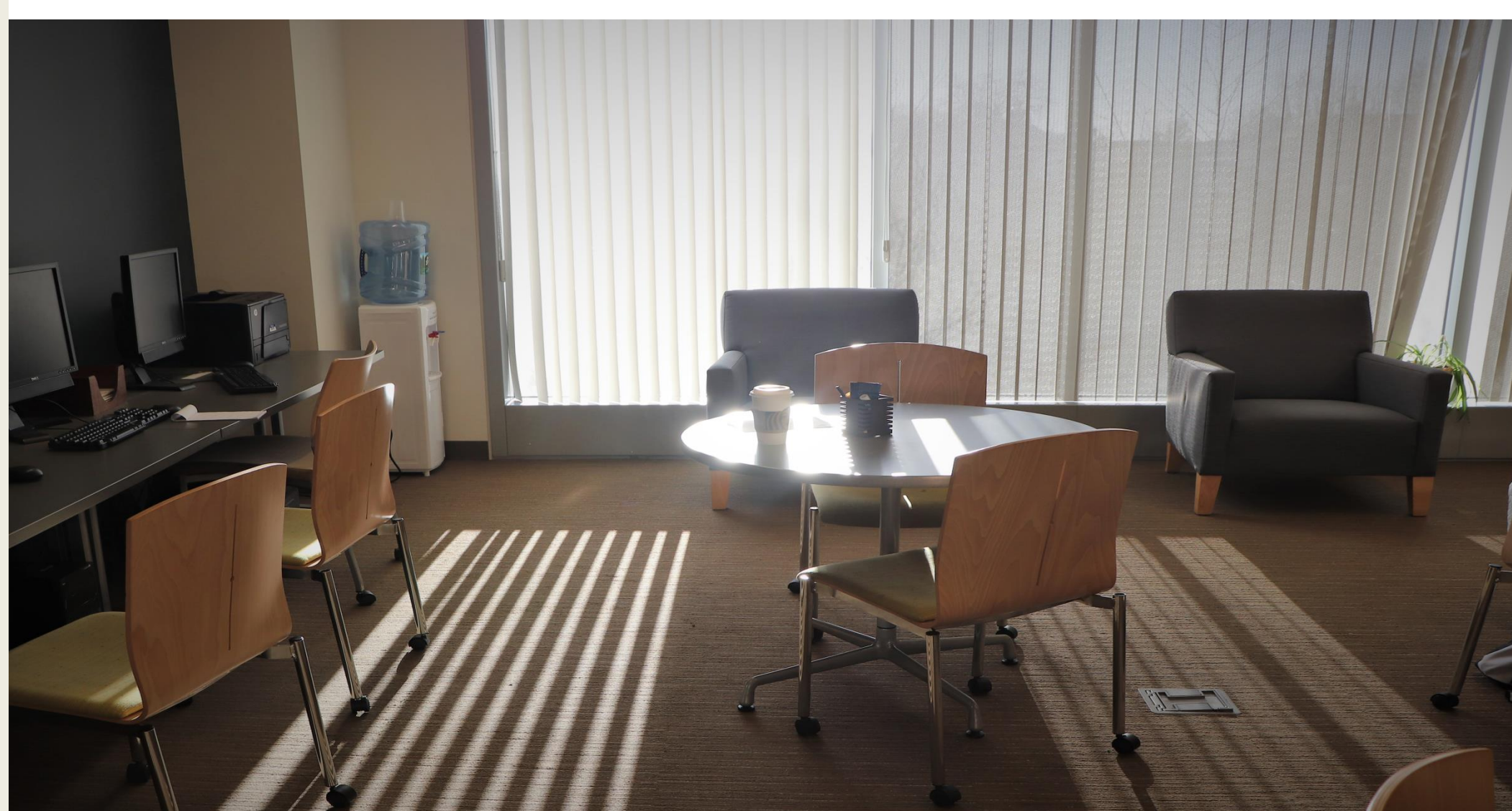
This proposal for an experiment (which is part of a larger study) will evaluate the effectiveness of the Mary G. Walsh Writing Center's online tutoring system when compared to that of Pearson Education's (known as Smarthinking Online Tutoring). The online interphases will be evaluated on their accessibility, reliability and sophistication. For the sake of clarity in this proposed experiment, an "effective" session will be defined as one that has both a high degree of student satisfaction and the presence of certain desirable "knowledge claims" (which will be identified and analyzed in the transcripts of the session(s) in question). It should also be noted that only synchronous sessions will be analyzed in this experiment. This experiment is primarily interested in discerning which online system (Pearson-Smarthinking or that of the Mary G. Walsh Writing Center) can provide the most complete virtual "tutor experience."

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INTRODUCTION

In 1964, renowned Canadian communication theorist and philosopher Marshal McLuhan coined the phrase "the medium is the message" in his book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. McLuhan was famously (or perhaps infamously) a creator and purveyor of rather opaque philosophical statements and concepts, but in this particular instance the meaning he wished to impart was rather clear. That medium—the experience by which information is disseminated to and received by an audience—is just as impactful and transformative as the message itself. "Online tutoring" is unquestionably the most influential "medium" of the modern writing center and has changed the relationship between tutors and clients forever. But while the "medium" of online tutoring is/will be a constant of the proverbial tutoring landscape of the 21st century, the question still remains of who does it best? Which organizations are best prepared to meet the needs of students? Writing Centers who are affiliated with universities or "professional" tutoring agencies, such as Pearson-Smarthinking? It is precisely this question that the proposed experiment intends to address, the criteria of which and implementation of will be detailed/ expanded on below.

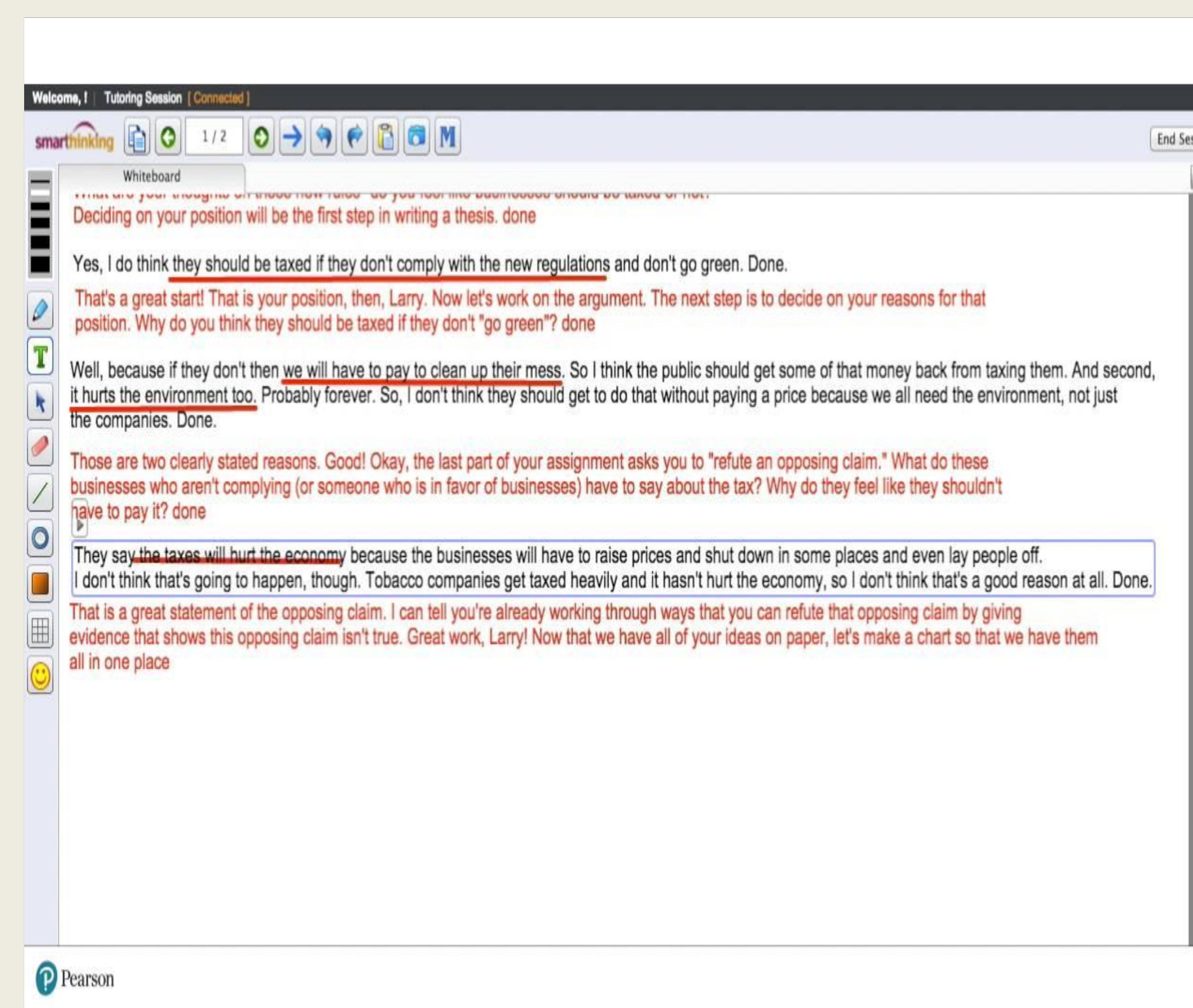


BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The concept that is the most central to this proposed experiment is that of **knowledge claims**. In his book *Reformers, Teachers, Writers: Curricular and Pedagogical Inquiries*, Prof. Neal Lerner of Northeastern University identifies the three primary types of **knowledge claims** that appear in a writing center: "**writerly knowledge**," "**emotional knowledge**," and "**role knowledge**" (Lerner, 2019). "**Role knowledge**" is arguably the most important **knowledge claim** (Lerner, 2019). While analyzing transcripts of student sessions, Lerner noticed there was a correlation between the presence of "**role knowledge**" claims and the "success" of the session (Lerner, 2019). When both tutor and tutee made and received role based knowledge claims they'd engage in an "**expression of values**" and as a result create an **unofficial curriculum** of sorts—establishing what each party wanted out of the session and as result leading to increased engagement and satisfaction (Lerner, 2019).

THE EXPERIMENT

The primary objective of this experiment is to determine how "successful" online sessions from both the Mary G. Walsh Writing Center and Pearson-Smarthinking are. A "successful" session is defined as (for the sake of this experiment) as one with a large amount of "**role knowledge**" based interaction between the tutor and tutee as well as a high degree of satisfaction on the part of the student. There will be two **groups** in the study, each will be comprised of **ten students**, for a total of **twenty**. **Group A**, in which the students will work solely with an online tutor from the Writing Center and **Group B**, in which the students will work solely with an online tutor from Pearson-Smarthinking. After both groups have successfully completed their sessions the transcripts of ALL sessions will be collected and the presence/distribution of **knowledge claims** will be noted. In addition, all participants from **Group A** and **Group B** will be asked to submit a 250 word written account of their experience(s) regarding their individual online tutoring sessions. Once all the data has been collected, sorted, and analyzed one of the two online programs—Pearson-Smarthinking or the Mary G. Walsh Writing Center—will be declared as the more "successful" one.



POTENTIAL ISSUES

While hopefully comprehensive, there are a few issues that will inevitably effect the validity of this experiment. The first is the **small sample size**. With a mere **ten students per group (twenty total)**, any trends that might appear in this experiment will not necessarily be present in the student population as a whole. While the study will reach definitive conclusions about that data that is received, it will not profess to be valid in a universalistic sense—merely within the confines of the experiment. The second issue is the **lack of standardization regarding submissions**. It is possible that one set of tutors (those charged with serving **Group A** or **B** exclusively) will receive a greater amount of "challenging" assignments. To account for this circumstance the experiment will acknowledge all correlations (positive or negative) between the presence of **knowledge claims**, student satisfaction, and the amount of difficult assignments both the tutors and students are faced with. The final and perhaps most challenging issue the experiment faces is any conscious or unconscious **favoritism towards Salem State University** the students might harbor. All of the participants will be students at Salem State University. The only way to mitigate any potential favoritism on their part is to ensure that they receive no compensation for their participation in the experiment.

IN CONCLUSION

This proposed experiment will require two groups of students (**Group A** and **Group B**—comprised of **ten students** each, **twenty in all**). **Group A** students will schedule an online appointment with the Mary G. Walsh Writing Center; **Group B** students will do the same with Pearson-Smarthinking. After both groups have completed their sessions, the transcripts from all sessions will be collected. The transcripts will then be analyzed and the **knowledge claims** that are present will be identified (in a manner similar to that of Neal Lerner's study). The students will also be asked to submit a 250 written account of their experiences. The primary issues that will effect the validity of the experiment's conclusions are: **the small sample size, the lack of standardization with the assignments students will submit to the tutors, and any conscious or unconscious favoritism students may harbor towards Salem State University and its facilities**. As previously mentioned, any conclusions that experiment reaches will only be valid within its confines. However, hopefully this experiment will inspire others to conduct their own research and either prove or disprove the experiment's findings.

REFERENCES

- Lerner, Neal. (2019). *The Hidden Curriculum of Writing Centers. Reformers, Teachers, Writers: Curricular and Pedagogical Inquiries* (114-124). Logan: Utah State University Press.