

PRAXIS ORIGINS

Sue Mendelsohn
Columbia University
suemendelsohn@columbia.edu

Eliana Schonberg
University of Denver
eliana.schonberg@du.edu

In celebration of its tenth year, the founding editors of *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*, Sue Mendelsohn and Eliana Schonberg, reflect on its early days.

Praxis: A Writing Center Journal has Joan Mullin and a bike crash to thank for its origins. In the spring of 2002, Undergraduate Writing Center (UWC) director Lester Faigley invited Mullin to serve as an outside evaluator. In her report to the center's administrative team, she posed the question, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" The UWC was one of the largest writing centers in the country, with an energetic and well-supported staff, but, as Mullin pointed out, it needed a vision of its future. Her challenge echoed the questions graduate student administrators of the period were asking themselves: what did they want to be when they grew up as professionals?

Sue Mendelsohn: During its adolescent period, the UWC had evolved in isolation from other centers, and as I worked with the other graduate student assistant directors and the staff to develop a vision for the UWC, I wanted the center to become a leader in the larger writing center community, a community that I was eager to claim membership in. I was beginning to question how I would enter into that national conversation after graduate school. The traditional advice to build a professional network by meeting people at conferences wasn't working for me. I couldn't shake the feeling that I was bothering the scholars I admired with small talk. But *Praxis* became a way that I could meet great writing center researchers on even ground: me as editor and them as writers.

With these goals in mind, I drafted a proposal to raise the UWC's national profile. Among four initiatives included in the proposal was a two-line description of "a newsletter for consultants," and *Praxis* evolved from this humble beginning. We wanted an e-journal that could serve as a listening post for emerging issues. The immediacy of web publication would let us speak to hot topics like technologies, economic downturns, and the new wave of community writing centers in a way that the established print publications weren't designed to do. I

obtained support from UWC faculty and staff to pilot an online newsletter and assembled a team of five or six stalwart consultants to work on it.

Eliana Schonberg: Sue's enthusiasm initially drew me to this project. I wasn't sure if this newsletter/journal she dreamed up would amount to anything, but it seemed interesting and a way to learn about the inner workings of the writing center. Over the course of a few editorial meetings, we chose a theme and announced the call for articles. Sue and I began to line up authors by reaching out to people whose work we admired.

Sue: The correspondence with those first authors proved formative. I remember conversations with Eliana about how we could sound like journal editors rather than graduate students and what the *Praxis* editorial voice should be. We combed through those early emails word-by-word, cheering when we finally got it right.

Eliana: True to writing center-form, but surprisingly to me as a newcomer to the field, those scholars we admired – Elizabeth Boquet, Pam Childers, Frankie Condon, Michele Eodice, Michael Erard, Dawn Fels, Beth Hewitt, Jeanette Jordan, Jon Olsen, Tiffany Rouscoulp, Vicki Russell, David Sheridan, and many others – responded generously, sharing their views on the state of the field or contributing articles, reviews, and interviews to our fledgling publication.

Sue: Two weeks before the first issue was to launch, however, a terribly-timed (and downright terrible) bike crash changed the course of *Praxis*' development. Riding my bicycle home from an afternoon of editing articles, I crashed and was knocked unconscious. I found myself laid up with a broken collarbone and a concussion just when the real editing work needed to be done. The first issue was derailed.

Eliana: Lynn Makau and I, along with other members of the editorial collective, stepped in with

PRAXIS ORIGINS

Sue Mendelsohn
Columbia University
suemendelsohn@columbia.edu

Eliana Schonberg
University of Denver
eliana.schonberg@du.edu

In celebration of its tenth year, the founding editors of *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*, Sue Mendelsohn and Eliana Schonberg, reflect on its early days.

Praxis: A Writing Center Journal has Joan Mullin and a bike crash to thank for its origins. In the spring of 2002, Undergraduate Writing Center (UWC) director Lester Faigley invited Mullin to serve as an outside evaluator. In her report to the center's administrative team, she posed the question, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" The UWC was one of the largest writing centers in the country, with an energetic and well-supported staff, but, as Mullin pointed out, it needed a vision of its future. Her challenge echoed the questions graduate student administrators of the period were asking themselves: what did they want to be when they grew up as professionals?

Sue Mendelsohn: During its adolescent period, the UWC had evolved in isolation from other centers, and as I worked with the other graduate student assistant directors and the staff to develop a vision for the UWC, I wanted the center to become a leader in the larger writing center community, a community that I was eager to claim membership in. I was beginning to question how I would enter into that national conversation after graduate school. The traditional advice to build a professional network by meeting people at conferences wasn't working for me. I couldn't shake the feeling that I was bothering the scholars I admired with small talk. But *Praxis* became a way that I could meet great writing center researchers on even ground: me as editor and them as writers.

With these goals in mind, I drafted a proposal to raise the UWC's national profile. Among four initiatives included in the proposal was a two-line description of "a newsletter for consultants," and *Praxis* evolved from this humble beginning. We wanted an e-journal that could serve as a listening post for emerging issues. The immediacy of web publication would let us speak to hot topics like technologies, economic downturns, and the new wave of community writing centers in a way that the established print publications weren't designed to do. I

obtained support from UWC faculty and staff to pilot an online newsletter and assembled a team of five or six stalwart consultants to work on it.

Eliana Schonberg: Sue's enthusiasm initially drew me to this project. I wasn't sure if this newsletter/journal she dreamed up would amount to anything, but it seemed interesting and a way to learn about the inner workings of the writing center. Over the course of a few editorial meetings, we chose a theme and announced the call for articles. Sue and I began to line up authors by reaching out to people whose work we admired.

Sue: The correspondence with those first authors proved formative. I remember conversations with Eliana about how we could sound like journal editors rather than graduate students and what the *Praxis* editorial voice should be. We combed through those early emails word-by-word, cheering when we finally got it right.

Eliana: True to writing center-form, but surprisingly to me as a newcomer to the field, those scholars we admired – Elizabeth Boquet, Pam Childers, Frankie Condon, Michele Eodice, Michael Erard, Dawn Fels, Beth Hewitt, Jeanette Jordan, Jon Olsen, Tiffany Rouscoulp, Vicki Russell, David Sheridan, and many others – responded generously, sharing their views on the state of the field or contributing articles, reviews, and interviews to our fledgling publication.

Sue: Two weeks before the first issue was to launch, however, a terribly-timed (and downright terrible) bike crash changed the course of *Praxis*' development. Riding my bicycle home from an afternoon of editing articles, I crashed and was knocked unconscious. I found myself laid up with a broken collarbone and a concussion just when the real editing work needed to be done. The first issue was derailed.

Eliana: Lynn Makau and I, along with other members of the editorial collective, stepped in with

the initial intention of saving Sue's project--ensuring that her recovery wouldn't be hindered by anxiety about the health of the journal. As it turned out, the accident forced the journal to evolve from one individual's vision to a truly collaborative effort. For me, the process of working with these texts and corresponding with this group of authors sparked an interest beyond the short-term crisis. I was at a graduate school crossroads. Having recently changed dissertation topics to focus on translation theory in addition to poetics, I was re-energized by my scholarship but anxious about my professional prospects. Now the point-person for *Praxis'* correspondence with authors, I was struck by the openness of writing center professionals all over the country. I began to realize that these were the sorts of people I wanted to call permanent colleagues. While *Praxis* provided Sue a vehicle to try on her professional persona, it helped me redefine my professional identity, expanding beyond translation theory and literary criticism to include writing center theory and practice.

Sue: I returned to the UWC after a week in bed, expecting to see that first issue as I left it: a mish mash of partially edited pieces and messy webpages. Instead, I found Eliana and Lynn Makau hunched over an iMac, putting the finishing touches on the issue. And from this period, *Praxis* found its collaborative ethos. The journal came into its own as not merely a project to serve the needs of the UWC or its editorial board, but as a forum for emerging conversations in the field. We were able to move from start-up conversations to the writing center work that we were excited to talk about.

Eliana and Sue: Now, ten years later, our experience with *Praxis* remains with us. We each direct our own writing centers and love the profession. In addition to launching each of us in this field, the journal granted us full membership in the scholarly world of writing centers. More than that, *Praxis* cemented a burgeoning friendship. We are still one another's first call when a thorny issue comes up in our respective writing centers. Our work taught both of us how to co-write successfully and how rare it can be to find a truly well-matched coauthor. Even when we're not coauthoring, we continue to be each other's first reader and editor.

In *Praxis'* decade of life, we played a small role. We were thrilled when Zachary Dobbins and then Eileen Abrahams stepped into our editorial shoes and

further thrilled to see the series of smart, dedicated writing center consultants who followed them. We're happy to say now that *Praxis* is no longer ours. What it has become – an established, respected peer-reviewed publication – is a credit to the writing consultants who found their own purposes in it. We continue to be delighted by what these writers, editors, graduate students, and undergraduates, have made *Praxis*, and we are grateful that *Praxis* still thriving through their efforts.