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Attending to the Conceptual Change Potential of Writing Center Narratives

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I know what you want. You want a story that won't surprise you. That will confirm what you already know. That won't make you see higher or further or differently. You want a flat story. An immobile story. You want dry, yeastless factuality.

—Yann Martell, *Life of Pi*, 302

It's Tuesday of the first week of fall 2005 classes: a graduate student from China comes to the writing center in tears because she can't locate her sister who was traveling in hurricane-ravaged Louisiana; a colleague sends 60 students to pick up their papers from a folder he left on our front desk; a young man with Asperger syndrome applies to be a writing coach; a newly hired coach says she has to miss two weeks to care for an ailing grandparent; an experienced coach tells us he is overwhelmed by the tensions associated with working with one of our new hires, a person of a different race whom he had dated until the relationship ended badly; and then a student with learning disabilities, enrolled in a challenging first-year seminar taught by an inexperienced adjunct teacher, comes in for his first session. That's just Tuesday: what writing center director wouldn't long for a story of dry, yeastless factuality? But what often surround us instead are these rich bits of stories that reveal yeasty tensions surrounding the teaching of literacy in the early 21st century.

In this essay, I argue that these rich bits of stories that crowd our office doors and keep us awake second-guessing our decisions might serve a conceptual change function depending on the frames we choose for them. The conceptual change I have in mind is to offer richer accounts of literacy learning, particularly ones that put more

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emphasis on ways to mediate the structures that determine meaning and less emphasis on holding individuals accountable for figuring out the workings of literacy on their own. To narrate writing center work differently, we need to be aware of the ways moral frames function in narratives, particularly ones that function metaphorically, often below our level of awareness.

To illustrate the conceptual change potential of a narrative, let's say we connected the Chinese student desperate to find her sister in post-Katrina Louisiana with the appropriate on-line resources, provided cultural information about how businesses and government and non-government organizations function in emergencies, offered practice with appropriate ways of conducting phone or on-line inquiries, supported her courage, offered calmness and emotional support, and let's say she was successful pursuing those lines of inquiry and found her sister safe in another state. We might then wonder why she turned to the writing center and not to her advisor or to the international programs office for help. It is tempting to puff up a bit thinking perhaps the writing center was the place she trusted most, so we might use this story to confirm the supportive nature of the writing center and the competence of a particular tutor. And the story could stop there as a pleasant confirmation of the warm, caring, helpful nature of writing center workers, a confirmation that doesn't challenge the ways in which writing centers are theorized or the ways in which students who use writing centers are understood, or the ways in which we understand the literacy competencies that are important in a global world. It would be yet another story that reinforces a moral frame that supports the privileged actors in this scenario.

Such a frame also overlooks important details about what happened in that session. It may be true that the writing center was the place the Chinese graduate student trusted the most, but it is more productive conceptually to think in terms of the nature of the literacy task she brought to the writing center. In this particular case, we might think about how high the stakes were, how complicated the context was, how much cultural insider knowledge it demanded, what international website research skills it called for, what facility with listening to accented English in emotionally charged situations it required, and what global connection it illustrated. If conceptual change is our goal, then we might use this narrative to represent the complex cross-cultural mediation of a writing center session in ways that show the competencies that tutors and students practice when they work there and what it means to communicate in a global world where diversity is an increasingly salient feature.

This particular writing center narrative might gain further significance by being held in juxtaposition to the stories reported on public radio about unsuccessful post-Katrina evacuation attempts in situations where the rescuers were white Midwestern middle-class men operating and speaking with authority, and the rescuees were poor and black and living in shock in flood-ravaged neighborhoods in Louisiana. This juxtaposition illuminates the fact that in high-risk communication what matters first (and probably most) is not the correctness or even the accuracy of what we say but rather our systemic positions, our cultural and political histories, and the ways in which our potential interlocuters perceive those positions and histories. We might use this narrative to illustrate the reflexive self-awareness, the delicate negotiation of context, and the ability to work with varieties of world views and varieties of English that are the literacy skills required to communicate effectively in highly asymmetrical cross-cultural situations, something we often practice in writing centers but don't often articulate to those outside the writing center.

If conceptual change becomes a goal we set for ourselves, we might also examine those daily narratives for what we can learn about how systems function and how individuals are positioned and understood within those systems. When, for example, we listen to our respected and experienced writing coach describe the intensity of his difficulty working with our new hire, we might want to offer him protection and we might question our wisdom in hiring the new person. However, rather than respond immediately, we might instead think more about how these two people are positioned within the history of US race relations and thus discover more options for responding to his anxiety, particularly ones that focus on the relations within the writing center as a whole, ones that allow us to consider differences in cultural patterns of interactions, ones that allow us to reserve judgment, and ones that allow us to give both young people the guidance and practice they might need in negotiating failed personal relationships in the workplace. Further, we can ask ourselves what social system would lead parents to ask their daughter to miss school for two weeks at the beginning of the term or what system of support is available to inexperienced adjuncts teaching first-year students who have learning disabilities or what it means about writing center work when an applicant who can write and analyze text in more complex ways than many of his peers is not a likely candidate because of the ways in which his syndrome affects his ability to read social cues and interact with others.

Reframing writing center stories for what they might reveal about the systems that determine meaning is both an urgent and difficult task, given the current approaches to diversity in North American universities, approaches that position

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both educators and students as "tourists, voyeurs, and vagabonds," "consumers of multicultural and international differences," or "democratic civilizers and nation-builders" (Roman 79–84). This inadequate approach to diversity is compounded in literacy education by a historical and covert English-only policy that includes a "ritualized forgetting" that the US has always been a multilingual society (Trimbur 578). Within this context, the master narrative of literacy represents literacy as a neutral carrier of information, a matter of rules and conventions that once mastered can allow a poor kid to become president or at least improve his or her access to economic opportunities. This "common sense" narrative leaves no room for the arguments made by revisionist literacy scholars: literacy is a social practice that constructs our relations with others, often in dominating ways and always in ideological ways (Gee; Street; The New London Group). Brian Street, for example, reminds us that literacy "is always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles" and "is always contested" and "is always rooted in a particular worldview and a desire for that view of literacy to dominate and to marginalize others" (7-8).

But writing center work is not often narrated as the work of examining epistemological principles and unpacking dominant worldviews. Instead, it is usually characterized as providing individualized instruction. Victor Villanueva has cautioned the field that "[t]he ultimate reduction…is individualism. If everything is reduced to individual will, work, and responsibility, there's no need to consider group exclusion" (6). Characterizing writing center work as individualized instruction narrows the focus and obscures opportunities to acknowledge the challenges of communicating in unfamiliar cultural and linguistic contexts, especially when the stakes are as high as they are after a national disaster. It further obscures opportunities to acknowledge the other factors at work in those stories: how incomprehension often results from working outside of our familiar discourses; how communicating effectively has more to do with how we construe our current personal and historical relationships than it does with getting the words right; how strongly context influences interpretations; how the ability to make and interpret meaning can be semiotically specific; or how producing stylistically "correct" text has little to do with getting a point across. Instead, writing center work is encased in the popular narrative of literacy, which promises success to individuals who work hard and learn to communicate in clear, correct, unaccented English.

Within this master narrative of literacy, a writing center is understood as the last best chance to access this success. Thus, our work is characterized in reductive ways by colleagues ("I tell all my students to proofread their papers before they turn them

in. I don't care if they use the writing center or a roommate."); campus tour guides ("This is where you can get your papers fixed."); university presidents ("You are the heart of the university."). Writing center directors intentionally participate in that reduction when we write our yearly reports in ways that satisfy the need for numerical data to prove the value of the center (How many student visits? How many repeat visits? How many visits by students who speak more than one language?). Sometimes we unintentionally participate in that reduction when we use what Nancy Welch has called a "Moses" story to illustrate the value of the writing center. In these stories, a writing center tutor "leads his 'somewhat lost tutees' into the promised land of discovery and understanding" (213). When we explain what writing centers offer by characterizing students as "needing help," we reinforce a restricted understanding of literacy that privileges a mainstream, standardized, monolingual norm and that overlooks the work interlocutors must do to construe context and negotiate meaning.

The Moral Dimension of Writing Center Narratives

The conceptual change I am arguing for has a moral dimension. I believe writing center narratives can offer more complicated understandings of the literacies necessary for a new world order with attention to social justice. Working in institutions designed to produce workers for fast capitalism, literacy educators can conceptualize the literacy competencies of the new work order in ways that include the ability to read and write hybrid texts, to understand accented Englishes, to negotiate culturally different rhetorical and organizational strategies, to account for different interpretations of texts in different spheres, to develop a meta-level awareness of the contextualized nature of meaning making as well as the ability to predict patterns of uptake that are conditioned by historical legacies of colonization and exploitation and recent histories of social relationships (Mao; Canagarajah; Bawarshi). In other words, we can tutor literacy and represent the work of a writing center with attention to the structural frames of historical privileges and unequal social relationships rather than reduce literacy to an individual skill. We can be sure, as Bruce Horner suggests, that all students "learn to work within and among and across a variety of Englishes and languages, not simply to reproduce and write within the conventions of a particular, standardized variety of English" (570). If we conceptualize the work of a writing center in these ways, we can encourage students to attend to the historical legacies that shape meaning and tap into their desires to design a better future.

Social linguist James Gee locates all literacy learning and teaching within Discourses (capitalization his). Studying Discourses, developing meta-knowledge of them, is, according to Gee, a "moral obligation" (191). As he explains it,

> Most of what a Discourse does with us and most of what we do with a Discourse is unconscious, unreflective, and uncritical. Each Discourse protects itself by demanding from its adherents performances which act as though its ways of being, thinking, acting, talking, writing, reading, and valuing are right, natural, obvious, the way good and intelligent and normal people behave. (190)

Gee challenges literacy educators to study the "workings of Discourses" because "each Discourse is a *theory* about the world, the people in it, and the ways in which goods are or ought to be distributed among them" (191). As Gee explains, to hold a theory "that gives me or people like me an advantage over other people or other groups of people, then my continuing to hold this theory in a tacit and removed/deferred way is unethical" (20).

These "workings of Discourse" are available in the daily narratives that crowd our doors. Thus, how we use those narratives has a moral dimension. I can narrate my Tuesday morning in ways that call attention to the myriad demands I negotiate in my professional life or to bemoan the degree to which social issues complicate the work of teaching. To do so elevates my status in a system that already privileges people like me. Or I can use them to change conceptions of the literacy competencies needed for the twenty-first century, conceptions of the work of writing centers, and conceptions of the students who use writing centers. For example, most students come to writing centers because they are negotiating new disciplinary discourses where expectations operate at a tacit level or new cultural discourses that presume identities outside their lived experience or new languages and dialects in contexts that presume monolingualism. In other words, the "problems" are not located in individuals but in the difficulty of moving among systems. The "needs" are there because people who are comfortably embedded in systems operate on faulty assumptions, including the assumption that meanings are stable and that "perfect" communication (the transfer of thought from one mind to another) can occur.

As Gee points out, systems, whether political, linguistic, disciplinary, or cultural, tend to naturalize ways of thinking to the extent that it is difficult for those who are competent within the system to imagine being a novice within that system. Productive writing center sessions often focus on understanding that systemic context, on figuring out what shapes, complicates, and regulates what can be said and

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understood, on understanding what ideological forces are operating within it and whether these forces can or cannot be mediated. Successful writing center sessions involve a mutual construction of a reader, a context, and the mediation of an identity from which to write. Thus, 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. The bigger the gap between the two people, the more work that construction of meaning, context and identity might take. Even among ostensible "peers," some of the gaps to be negotiated include racial identity, gender identity, sexual identity, regional identity, distance from matriculation, and different disciplinary orientations.

The Conservative Moral Frame of Academic Work

To employ writing center narratives for conceptual change, we need to understand what impedes our ability to elaborate on the tensions in those stories. Much of what gets narrated in higher education is encased in a conservative framework that operates below our level of awareness. Cognitive linguist George Lakoff argues that moral frameworks come across as "common sense" and are embedded in everyday conceptual metaphors. In his book *Moral Politics, How Liberals and Conservatives Think*, Lakoff attributes the deeply polarized split in American politics to unconscious conceptual metaphors about the ideal family life, particularly whether the best kind of parenting is strictness or nurturance (x). He illustrates how conservatives use metaphors that evoke a strict father model while progressives employ metaphors based in a nurturant parent model. Reading Lakoff, I am struck by how strongly the strict father metaphor operates in higher education and how powerfully this metaphor influences conceptions of the writing center. In fact, Lakoff makes the point that academics, who are generally "thorough going liberal," (296) are often conservative in their intellectual life. Lakoff illustrates the ways that academic scholarship is conceptualized metaphorically as "strict father morality" in the following common precepts: intellectual authority is moral authority; lack of scholarly rigor is moral weakness; students are children and should not be coddled; the only way students can learn is to be given difficult assignments and held to a high standard of performance; high grades are rewards and low grades are punishment (296-297).

Within the strict father framework, educators need to preserve "standards" and those individuals who seem to threaten the standards are the ones "sent" to the writing center. Within this framework, it makes sense to theorize writing center prac-

tice as individualized instruction and to continue to make the promise to "support the teacher's position completely" (North, "The Idea" 441). Historically conceptualized as sites of individualized instruction designed to support academic authority, writing centers have taken care not to undermine the father's rules by providing too much coddling (minimalist tutoring principles), while they pride themselves on being the friendly oasis (couches and coffee pots) in the strict land of the father. I believe the long-shelf life of this "anti-coddling" model, proposed by someone with a brief career in writing centers, is due to its perfect congruence with the strict father model. Writing center scholars, including North, have revisited these promises of complete support. North, for example, later argued for bringing tutors and teachers into a "tighter orbit" that would inevitably generate "new tensions as well as new opportunities" ("Revisiting" 16), but this revisiting is not often evident in tutor-education programs.

Within writing center tutor-training programs, the moral frame of the strict father is made operational in the ubiquitous minimalist model of tutoring. Jeff Brooks' "Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Student Do All the Work" is the one piece of writing center scholarship that most undergraduate writing tutors have read. As the title itself makes clear, this model of tutoring makes the individual student the primary focus of the tutorial (not discourse, not context, not cultural or linguistic differences). Minimalist tutoring principles encourage a hands-off model of tutoring based on the assumption that the job of a tutor is to "improve [the] writer" (83). Specialized advice about "defensive tutoring" is given to aid in "fight[ing] back" against "uncooperative students" (87). The minimalist model's emphasis on making the student "the primary agent in the writing center session" (83) doesn't take into account the vast differences in cultural and linguistic knowledge that are often at play in writing center sessions and the work it takes to mediate those differences. The minimalist model's bulleted and numbered lists and clear categories offer clear, strict guidelines, and no alternative "models" of tutoring have challenged it. It offers new tutors the assurance that they won't get in trouble if they adhere to its principles. Even though experienced tutors reluctantly admit to violating this model in practice, the strict guidelines inhibit the telling of alternative stories of tutoring and contribute to what Beth Boquet calls the "injunction not to reveal too much" (464) that is so prevalent in writing center work.

A minimalist model can do real harm when it is applied in the diverse interactions common in many writing centers. It can be interpreted to sanction withholding necessary cultural and linguistic information from students whose experiences and background do not match the assumptions teachers make about students. It

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overlooks the relational dimension of tutoring. It holds individuals responsible for meaning making and ignores the fact that competing discourses and shifting contexts consistently trouble meaning-making efforts. It suggests the primary problem of a tutorial is within an individual student when in fact the primary problem is moving between contexts where values and assumptions conflict yet operate tacitly, thus being unavailable for scrutiny.

Fifteen years ago, Anne DiPardo wrote an essay that illustrated the problems created by models of tutor training that focus so strongly on holding individual writers responsible. She presented a case study of the interactions between Morgan, an African American writing tutor, and Fannie, a Native American student. Throughout the semester, Morgan adheres faithfully to her training as she understands it, thus missing many chances to learn about Fanny's out-of-school literacies, identities, and passions. DiPardo called attention to how the model of collaboration advocated in that program had become "a set of techniques" or a "fossilized creed, a shield against more fundamental concerns" (140). According to DiPardo, this model shielded writing center tutors from the vulnerability and self-monitoring that might lead to more awareness of "ethnocentric biases and faulty assumptions" (142). She challenged those of us responsible for preparing tutors and future teachers "to think realistically about the sorts of guidance new tutors and teachers need if they are to confront these rigors effectively" (142). Unfortunately, because the frame of writing center discourse so strongly focuses on holding individuals responsible for problems that are systemic, DiPardo's essay did not have the impact it should have. In fact, when this essay was reprinted in the 1995 edition of *The St. Martin's Sourcebook for Writing Tutors* (Murphy and Sherwood), a short preface claimed, "Perhaps the essay's greatest value is the insight it offers into an *individual* student and tutor as they negotiate a relationship" (emphasis added, Murphy and Sherwood 55). Instead, I would argue that the essay's greatest value is the insight it offers into how the African American tutor and Native American student are caught in the racialized authority of a tutor-training program that restricts opportunities to create context and make alternative meanings.

How to Attend to the Narrative Frame

So how do we attend to the frames of writing center narratives in ways that focus on conceptual and systemic change rather than individual change? In particular, how do we do that when the embedded moral frame of the system functions to preserve authority and is resistant to change? Lakoff contrasts the strict father moral framework with what he calls a *nurturant parent* framework, one that incorporates

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attachment theory, or the recognition that healthy adult behaviors derive from a child's secure attachments with caregivers. Within this framework, it is understood that qualities like strength, confidence, and self-reliance do not arise from "letting a child go it alone" but rather from regular and supportive interaction. According to Lakoff, a nurturant parent model emphasizes open communication, listening, verbal give and take as well as expectations for mature behavior. Of interest to writing centers is that Lakoff's nurturant parent model acknowledges that meanings are variable and communication is never perfect, so it places special emphasis on "constant communication, interaction, and discussion" (Lakoff 377). Lakoff also makes it clear that values like hard work, self-discipline, and personal responsibility are not absent from a nurturant parent model, but they are understood differently. Within a nurturant parent model, standards and discipline mean

> you grow up with a *responsibility* to be empathetic and caring to those around you. *Discipline* is a no-nonsense matter: people you care about depend on you. There are *standards* of care and you must learn to meet them. Doing that is *difficult* every step of the way. You have to *work at carrying out your responsibilities*, and when others depend on you, you have to be *disciplined* enough to meet your responsibilities.
> (emphasis added, 234-235)

The nature of the responsibility, discipline, standards, level of difficulty and character of work that Lakoff describes above are characteristic of high quality writing center interactions. But rarely are they narrated thusly because of the tenacious hold of the strict father framework. Lakoff observes that conservatives now "own" the idea of morality and that "it is time to take it back" (419).

However, given Lakoff's criticism of the unelaborated nature of the nurturant parent model, my own unease with the ways nurturance has historically been linked with a feminization of work (already a long-standing problem within writing center work), and my resistance to perpetuating the political polarities of Lakoff's models, I stop short of suggesting that writing center narrators embrace metaphors that reveal this alternative model of family. My aim instead is to propose a number of ways we might attend more deliberately and critically to the conceptual change value of narratives. First, however, I would like to examine a writing center narrative that illustrates both the intellectual work of what Lakoff calls the nurturant model and also the self monitoring and vulnerability that DiPardo identified as essential to good practice.

In "Negotiating the 'Subject' of Composition: Writing Centers as Spaces of Productive Possibilities," Stephen Jukuri relates three writing center narratives in

ways that demonstrate that the learning in a tutorial is never unilateral. Jukuri focuses as much on his own developing understandings as he does his three students, Carla, Li, and Dan. In each story, he examines his responsibilities and the character of his interactions, the amount of information shared and withheld, the self-monitoring and questioning of conventions he discussed. In each story, the reader can see Jukuri "disciplining" himself in terms of his responsibilities to the student. With Carla, for example, he withholds a comment about his familiarity with her neighborhood because of his concern that she might figure out his relationship to his partner whose mother lives there and that this information about his sexual identity might become a distraction from the work they were doing on her assignments in a computer-intensive composition course where, as a returning student, she spent her entire first class period "just trying to figure out what a 'mouse' was" (52). With Li, Jukuri examines his own feelings of being intimidated by the grammar workbook that Li insisted on using during their sessions in order to respond to the "constant stream" of Li's questioning: "[I]nstead, we spent our time on exercises that he took very seriously—and I, fumbling to explain how more than one grammar construction is possible depending upon the intention and context of the sentence, was questioned constantly on matters of correctness...by myself as well as by him" (56). With Dan, a white American student with little if any interest in talking about writing and a faltering commitment to academic success, Jukuri sustains empathy and works to find a point of connection, which he finally discovers after eight weeks of sessions might be computer programming. Jukuri, drawing on his previous experience of majoring in computer science, offers analogies between the details of writing computer programs with clear comment lines and writing academic papers with clear "comment" statements that elaborate and connect arguments.

Jukuri's narratives demonstrate a commitment to understanding what writing means to his students and a desire to negotiate a relationship between those students and the institutional positions available to them, "not only to occupy and employ a multitude of subject positions but to gain some control over their construction, to negotiate their terms, to re-create them, and to open up new fields of possibilities" (60). The "work" in this case is not conceived of as "help," nor are the individuals perceived as "lacking" or "having problems." The "standards" that Jukuri holds himself responsible for achieving are not arbitrary institutional standards but his personal standard of intellectual commitment to his students predicated on the hope that through their interactions, the students might achieve some control over their relationship with the institution. He monitors himself more than

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his students so that they might achieve that. Jukuri's narrative illustrates the mediational work of communicating across difference, the reciprocal learning that occurs in long term writing center relationships, and the repertoire of communication competencies that develop as a result of negotiating rather than regulating difference. Narrating through a Foucauldian frame that examines how systems position "subjects," Jukuri illustrates through his stories the extent to which institutional authority did not enable the meaning-making efforts of the students he was working with.

Both DiPardo's and Jukuri's essays illustrate a tradition in writing center scholarship of using narrative in the interests of social critique and transformation. The field of writing center studies also has a growing tradition of encouraging a critical approach to narrative. Lisa Ede, for example, reminded the field that narratives in themselves are not liberating. She writes, "We need to recognize that simply telling the story is no more automatically progressive or enabling than is the act of inviting students in a classroom to draw their chairs into a circle, rather than sitting in a traditional block of teacher-directed chairs" (126). More recently, Jackie Grutsch McKinney made the point that we need to be more critical about the narratives of home that we invoke to describe the work or atmosphere of writing centers. Contributors to Lynn Briggs and Meg Woolbright's edited collection, *Stories from the Center*, enlisted writing center narratives to "offer insights into theory, thus enlarging our concepts of the field" (xvi). In their 2007 book, Anne Geller, Michele Eodice, Frankie Condon, Meg Carroll, and Beth Boquet enlisted everyday "disruptions" to narrate the provocative learning that occurs in writing centers. Unfortunately, if readers' frames of interpretation are conditioned by more powerful narratives of individualism, the value of these contributions can be misconstrued. Thus, we need to change the conceptual frame of literacy work to one that acknowledges systemic influences on the work of meaning making.

Interestingly, business leaders have recently turned to narrative as a tool for this kind of conceptual change. In their 2005 book, *Storytelling in Organizations: Why Storytelling is Transforming 21st Century Organizations and Management*, Stephen Denning, John Seely Brown, Laurence Prusak, and Katalina Groh explain that organizations all over the world are interested in the use of narrative as a change agent. Their book illustrates the power of narrative for shifting conceptual lenses, sparking motivation, and transmitting values. There is reason to be skeptical about this enthusiastic embrace of narrative, but also reason to pay attention because, as John Seely Brown notes, stories have "tentacles down into the implicit and the tacit" (Brown, et al. 61), and the right story can "entice [people] to look at the world

a certain way and approach their work differently" (Brown, et al. 93). Unlike academics, business leaders are not interested in written narratives but in oral ones. For example, Denning observes that it is not necessarily the story itself but the act of storytelling that seems to motivate change. Thus, he advises finding stories that are short enough to convey orally in minutes, noting that they must be positive and they must be true (Brown, et al. 119-124). I can think of occasions where Denning's advice might be applied to offer richer and more complex understandings of the structural work of literacy, occasions such as tutor education workshops, conversations with colleagues, relatives, and fellow passengers, conference talks, and orientation meetings with new faculty. Those bits of stories that crowd us first thing in the semester contain the germ of transformation if we can situate them within frames that call attention to how meanings are situated in privileging systems. In the following section, I offer starting points for attending more deliberately to the conceptual change potential of writing center narratives.

1. Examine the motive for narrative.

Min Zhan Lu has argued that the use of personal narrative in academic writing is subject to abuses that "limit our understanding of identity politics and encourage a politics of sectarianism" (173). According to Lu, these abuses include using narrative for revelation and recitation rather than revision; using narrative to establish ourselves as authorities in ways that prevent the investigation of our complex relations with systems of oppression; and using narrative to reverse "the hierarchy between theory and lived experience without challenging the dichotomy" (173-175). As an alternative to these abuses of narrative, Lu proposes using narrative in the interests of critical affirmation, a term she borrows from Cornel West to represent the use of reading and writing to offer "hope and courage as well as vision and analysis" at a time when this nation is at a "crucial crossroad" (173). Lu explains that writing narrative for critical affirmation means thinking critically about the purposes our narratives serve, particularly whether they challenge oppression, attend to privilege, approach difference respectfully, and affirm agency across difference, or whether they simply justify and reinforce already privileged perspectives (173).

Nancy Welch has demonstrated how tutor educators can encourage a more critical approach to the narratives that tutors write. She explains how she engages tutors in the work of "returning" to their stories of tutoring to "refigure" and "revise" (216), particularly to reflect "on the rubs...between suppressed and official tutoring tales" (206). Welch suggests specific ways of doing this: inviting tutors to

write fuller accounts, cautioning them not to pack "a week's worth of tutoring into single paragraphs;" not to use "we" as the story's protagonist; not to evaluate their session but rather provide more details to incorporate multiple perspectives; and finally, to expect that this work will be "unsettling" because the sessions under reflection might turn out "to be not so hot after all" (212).

The narrative approaches advocated by Lu and Welch provide opportunities to access and examine the ideological work of literacy education. Welch observes that these closer examinations can show us how literacy and conversations about literacy are

> informed by gender, by class, by the discourse communities we're coming from or working against; how masculinity can be an exercise of power in a tutorial and how social class—the seemingly open ended questions that mark middle-class pedagogical discourse—can also be an exercise of power or else a problematic stance of complacent "neutrality." (213)

This close attention to the motives for and details of writing center narratives provides opportunities to reflect on the worldviews and epistemological principles that underwrite writing center work with literacy.

2. Examine the tools of sense-making

Interpretive tools are just as inscribed in a moral framework as are narratives. Literacy researchers Sarah Michaels and Richard Sohmer illustrate this in a chapter in *Multiliteracies* called "Narratives and Inscriptions: Cultural Tools, Power and Powerful Sense-Making." In this chapter, they return to an earlier research study that offered invalid conclusions because of the limits of traditional interpretive tools. They begin their new chapter with reference to Toni Morrison's Nobel Prize acceptance speech. In this speech, Morrison tells a story about the interaction between some teenagers who challenge a wise, old blind black woman, asking if the bird they hold is alive or dead. Just as the audience expects closure to the story with the focus on the wisdom of the old woman, Morrison surprises them by extending the narrative with a focus on the teenagers' response to the old woman. The teens tell the old woman that her answer to them is "indecent in its self-congratulation;" they ask her why she didn't "delay the sound bite, the lesson, until you knew who we were" (qtd. in Michaels and Sohmer 269). "Until you knew who we were" is Morrison's point; her story is not an argument for narrative itself but rather for bringing divergent perspectives into contact to make meaning.

Following Morrison, Michaels and Sohmer argue for the need to critically examine the tools of sense-making, a need made urgent by their commitment to productive diversity. To illustrate, they show how the original research study, done in the interests of social justice, with concern for "understanding and intervening in the lives of 'non-mainstream' kids," presented results that "unwittingly [did] real harm" (272). Their reexamination of the study reveals that the tools of interpretation (which serve dominant interests) caused the researchers to draw faulty conclusions. The familiar tools of interpretation led the first researchers to conclude that only one of the fourth-grade students in the study (a mainstream student named Nathaniel) had mastered the difficult concept of seasonal change (the tilt of the earth and the earth's revolution about the sun cause seasonal variation.) Using different interpretive tools, Michaels and Sohmer realize that Nathaniel was simply parroting textbook information, which was (they realized in revisiting) faulty. Because he sounded smart, he managed to convince the researchers in the original study that he was "doing science" even when he completely missed the mark in his understanding of the scientific concept. Having reframed their approach, they discovered that the non-mainstream students who sounded confused, incoherent, and magical in their thinking were actually trying to square their experience of the world with the text's explanation (277). With dismay they realized

> What was never examined was the fact that the discursive tools (of comparison, quantification and categorization) that [the original researchers] were using to give voice, ostensibly, to these "non-mainstream" students, to explore their logic and cogency as thinkers, were, in the end, not particularly helpful. But they worked very well in establishing what Nathaniel was doing. The danger...is that these tools, when naturalized, seem transparent, innocent, and disinterested—just doing their jobs—in the service of social science, that is, "truth." (280)

As Michaels and Sohmer make clear, the familiar tools of sense-making allow for only a particular kind of sense. Unfortunately, these tools of interpretation are not material objects that can be traded in at the local hardware store for new ones. They are invisible mental frameworks that impose meaning on narratives. They even signal whether a particular narrative is worth telling.

Although we may desire stories that suggest exactly "what to do" in the many complex situations confronted in a writing center, these are not the kind of stories that allow us to alter our conceptual frameworks. In today's complex world, we are better served by stories that expose the myriad ways that linguistic and cultural differences complicate communication contexts. As Lisa Ede suggests, we ought not

turn away from stories that discomfort us because "the site of dissonance can often be the site of inquiry and of enriched understanding" (112-13). The tutoring situations that are not clear, not comfortable, not coherent in familiar ways are the ones that call for closer inspection.

3. Examine the Context More than the Characters

Given the theorization of writing center work as individualized instruction, it is common to interpret narratives by speculating on what the "characters" within the story were thinking, and this speculation can stop us from asking more important questions, questions about what assumptions, beliefs, and expectations caused a story to happen. If we resist the urge to interpret another individual's motivation or thinking, we can pay more attention to what a narrative reveals about the expectations and assumptions regarding literacy and learning in higher education. We can understand the characters as social agents when we focus on the social context that positions them. Deborah Brandt, in comments about her research on the patterns of literacy in the US, explains, "The first thing I now do with an interview script once I transcribe it is to pulverize it, to transform it from a conversation with another whole human being into empirical evidence of how literacy works" (43).

Following Brandt, narrators of writing center stories need to resist the urge to interpret individual students' behavior (e.g., lazy, unmotivated, unprepared, resistant, dependent) and instead think about the individuals as social actors, to pay attention to how students and their writing coaches are positioned within the relations of literacy work and how those social, cultural, and political roles enable and/or constrain them. Paying attention to what *happens* when people function within those roles will generate more creative responses than telling what *happened* in a particular instance. As Morrison suggests, we can delay the sound bite, put alternative worldviews in juxtaposition to the familiar, and engage the narratives that, as Martell suggests, allow us to see "higher or further or differently" (302).

In her essay, "The Subject is Literacy: General Education and the Dialectics of Power and Resistance in the Writing Center," Judith Rodby offers an example of this attention to context. She also indicates the challenges we can expect to encounter when we frame narratives this way. Rodby's narrative is about a tutorial involving a bilingual Mexican American student, the son of field workers, who was working on a revision of an essay for a general education class with a tutor who was a "senior English major who wanted to write a novel" (225). Rodby situates her narrative within the context of a generalized anxiety within American universities about "who students are, who students should be, and who students become

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because of their college education" (221), as well as within the context of the general education program at the university where she works. This particular student was frustrated with an assignment that required him to theorize leisure in terms of "activities" rather than in terms of spending time with his grandmother. If there is a "moral" to Rodby's story, it's not about the motivations or work ethics or strategies of this pair of students but rather about the need to rethink the aims of general education in the context of the increasing diversity of students. Rodby focuses on the discourses operating in the scene—"those of the tutor, the assignment, the recreation course, the textbook...academic discourse in general" (229)—all of which failed to "hail" this particular student. Rodby also illustrates that writing critically about authoritative discourses is not easy. Academic authority is protected by routine practices and assumptions that work against critiquing the structures that inform our work. For example, Rodby reports she is troubled when she realizes well into the process of studying this tutorial interaction that she hadn't informed the professor that she was now writing about the problems created by this assignment; she expresses concern about who all should be involved in "interpretations of problematic situations," and she ponders what our moral obligations are to the individuals involved "when we write bad news in our final rendering" (233). Additionally, she realizes that the tutoring program itself had tried "to mitigate or even ignore completely the dynamics of power, subjectivity, and resistance" (233). All of these concerns demonstrate how difficult it is to question the authority that has been invested in the general education program, in the professor, in the readings and assignments of the general education course, and in the design of the tutoring program. At the same time, her essay demonstrates how important it is to write about the social contexts that complicate literacy learning, particularly if we aim to improve educational access.

Conclusion

In *Life of Pi*, Yann Martel's character, sixteen-year old Pi, finds himself a sole survival of a shipwreck in a lifeboat with a 450 pound Bengal tiger. Prior to his ordeal, as a youth, Pi investigated the religious stories and practices of his native Hinduism as well as those of Catholicism and Islam. After his ordeal, he doubled majored in religious studies and zoology, writing one thesis on the cosmogony theory of a Kabbalist and another on the thyroid gland of a three-toed sloth. It is Pi's life-long pursuit to hold competing narratives in tension with one another to enhance his understanding, and it is this experience that contributes to his ability to survive his ordeal. He could imagine and productively engage the tiger's perspective.

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Near the end of the novel, Pi is interviewed by two maritime inspectors (characters reminiscent of Inspector Jacques Clouseau) whose job it is to understand why the ship sank. (Their concerns remind me of questions about why students can't write.) So Pi offers his narrative, complete with the Bengal Tiger, whom he names Richard Parker. He senses his interlocutors' impatience with his story, hence the epigraph I use to begin this essay. So Pi offers them another one, a story with few surprises. In the end, they embrace his first story, calling it an "unparalleled" story that offers them "courage and endurance" (319).

The daily work of writing centers engages with multiple narratives about literacy embedded in tasks and assignments. If we use a conceputal frame that encourages us to pay more attention to the nature and consequences of these tasks, we too can find ways to not only feed the tiger but also explore the social and political dimensions of literacy education. We can enlist the uninvited narratives we trade in daily to conceptualize a new literacy education, one that cultivates the communicative competencies that globalization demands, and more importantly, one that addresses the legacies of colonization, racism, heterosexism, sexism, and monolingualism that are carried in fast capitalism.

Acknowledgements

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