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Introduction to "The Polarities of Context in the Writing Center Conference"

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by Neal Lerner

Writing center theory and practice can be read in many ways. There's the tension between directive tutoring and non-directive tutoring (Brooks), the question of focus on the writer versus the writing (North), and the contradictions between a writing tutor as a peer or as a representative of institutional authority (Trimbur). Each of these conflicts offers a lens to view the whole sweep of writing center history, from its origins as "a laboratory method" of writing instruction (Carino, "Early Writing Centers"), to writing centers' at-times role "as remedial agencies for removing students' deficiencies in composition" (Moore 388), to contemporary notions of writing centers as counter-hegemonic sites that challenge reductive notions of literacy instruction (Boquet; Grimm). As I try to make sense of writing centers and their history—and their futures—I come back to these various tensions seemingly hard-wired into the DNA of writing center work.

But the more I think about it, the more I think I don't quite have it right. And the more I think that Joe Janangelo did have it right over twenty years ago.

Janangelo's article "The Polarities of Context in the Writing Center Conference" appeared in *WCJ* in 1988, and in that piece, one he wrote as a graduate student at New York University (more on that point later), Jangangelo identifies what to me is likely *the* central tension in writing center work: local versus general context. While other authors have explored the tension between the local and the general (e.g., Carino "Writing Centers"; Geller et al.; Harris), Janangelo highlighted this topic much earlier in the pages of *WCJ*.

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After reading his article, I buzz with questions: Are the phenomena we see in our writing centers truly local or are they indicative of trends in other centers? Does the research on our centers help us understand only our local sites or does it explain many sites? Is learning in writing center tutorials truly "situated" or indexed to the details, rhythms, and realities of individual context or are there lessons to be drawn and applied to many other learners in different contexts? Or on a more applied level and in many ways the focus of Janangelo's article, how might we (or should we) generalize from one tutoring session to the next?

In a style that has come to characterize for me the very best of academic prose on writing centers, Janangelo seamlessly weaves personal anecdote, theoretical references, and key questions to explore the "polarities of context in writing center conferences." We are introduced to Janangelo's student Eric, a philosophy major whose writing for Janangelo represented ways of finding meaning through texts, meaning that Janangelo felt he could guide Eric toward. Eric's resistance to Janangelo's efforts, however, frustrated both teacher and student, leading Janangelo to conclude that "All we did was cancel each other out and lock ourselves into the impasse of our own language systems" (18). Janangelo then contrasts his interactions with Eric by introducing Lynn, "a part-time business major and a full-time waitress" (18) and non-native English speaker who came to their conferences with the authority of knowing the scientific content of her writing but was looking to Janangelo for genre knowledge. In this interaction, both participants could offer something to each other, each was teacher and learner. And, interestingly, the familiar contexts of Janangelo's conferences with Eric, including shared knowledge about readings and cultural affinity, did not lead to the kind of reciprocity he found working with Lynn.

As we extract meaning from conferences and engage in the natural process of extending that meaning to other conferences and other contexts, we would be wise to be both skeptical *and* accepting of such extensions. What I have in mind is the kind of critical inquiry that is essential for the improvement of educational practice at any level, whether the individual tutorial, the class, the program, or the entire school. In looking back on his essay, Janangelo told me that

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"as a teacher and a WPA, I think it's good for students to widen their audience and to work with as many students, tutors, and teachers as possible so they can create and experience new creative contexts. As a person, it strikes me that context can also occlude communication and learning . . . too much history and too many shared/contested meanings can yield frustration because the words and silences are freighted." Janangelo's essay teaches us to disrupt the familiarity of context and to extract the elements of our work that are unique to individual context and that which might be extended to the next session, center, or research study.

Now a final word about Joe Janangelo's context for writing his article. As I noted, he was a graduate student at NYU at the time, and like many leaders in the field of writing studies and writing program administration (Janangelo is Immediate Past-President of the Council of Writing Program Administrators and was Chair of the 2009 WPA Summer Conference), writing center work can be found early on in their histories. To me, there's a deep context there, one that connects writing center directors, tutors, and writers past and present, and one I hope will connect with new readers as *WCJ* represents Joe's essay. Finally, the last words of this introduction belong to Joe, further testament to the deep connections and overlapping contexts of writing center work: "I thank Neal Lerner very much for his attentive reading and for asking such intriguing questions. I also thank Lil Brannon (for whose course I wrote the paper), Jeanette Harris (who offered supportive feedback as editor of *The Writing Center Journal*), and Mickey Harris who was so kind and generous to me at my first Writing Center conference and who has continued to be that way at every conference and in every interaction ever since."

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