Weaving Knowledge Together

Writing Centers and Collaboration

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FOR

Mark and Pete

Joe

Ingram and Owen

Phil and Blake
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Introduction
The Editors

In a 1996 review article in *College English*, Elizabeth Rankin contrasted the method and epistemology of two recent books on writing pedagogy, describing one as "grounded in the experience of student writers and teachers" and the other as "academic." Rankin's labels highlight one of the leading sources of tension in composition research—the tension between practice and theory—a tension that echoes in writing center research and publications.

We confront the ugly side of this tension when we acknowledge that, although they may appear in the *Writing Center Journal* or the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, articles exploring writing center theory rarely appear in the more widely circulated composition journals such as *College Composition and Communication*, *College English*, or *JAC: A Journal of Composition Theory*. We see its ugliness when we acknowledge that, even in universities, writing center administrators are often underpaid, untenured faculty. We see it when we acknowledge that, even in an era in which the definitions of literacy are being questioned, writing centers are still called on to function as sites of remediation.

This tension is not necessarily ugly, however. Rather, once acknowledged, it rests uneasily, pushing us forward to critically examine our practices. Initially, publications concerning writing centers were driven by practical concerns. Even the staunchest pragmatists, however, could not ignore the call for a more critical understanding of the work writing centers do. Theorizing about what we do allows us to make connections with one another; to draw explicit connections between composition theory, writing programs, and writing centers; and to make writing center goals explicit. Most important, good theorizing demands that practitioners become more self-reflexive; it demands that we examine how writing centers function as parts of larger institutions.

Through self-reflection and careful examination of our practices, we can explore whose notions of literacy writing centers privilege; who can successfully assume academic literacy; and whose voice gets ignored, written-over, or erased from an academic notion of literacy. Moreover, writing centers are uniquely situated sites within universities, sites that open new research opportunities. Writing center practitioners share uncommon relationships with students. Their interactions are often one-on-one and conversational, existing outside of the usual teacher-student relationships in which teachers wield the power of evaluations and grades. Because writing centers can pose less risk to students, they are valuable arenas for testing composition theory.

Two notions have dominated recent composition theory: collaboration and qualitative methodologies. Writing center work is inherently collaborative. In tutoring sessions, students and tutors engage in give-and-take discus-
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sions of writing that are, at their best, what Nancy Grimm characterizes as sites of knowledge-making. Additionally, Grimm argues that participation in this meaning-making event allows writing center staff to become ethnographic fieldworkers.

Problems arise, however, when writing center researchers use their ethnographies to speak not only about, but also for, student tutors and writers. Writing from the vantage of privileged faculty, writing center administrators may inadvertently misrepresent students or misinterpret the factors that influence and affect student writing. Overwhelmingly, in a drive to publish or perish, academicians write over, erase, or omit student voices. In the rare instances where student voices do emerge—in excerpts from student papers or transcripts from conversations—they act largely as foils for academicians to display their expertise at theorizing students. As Ellen Cushman notes in her critique of the ivory tower of academe, “when we fail to consider the perspectives of people outside the academy, we overlook valuable contributions to our theory building” (23). When writing center researchers fail to make student tutors and writers an integral part of their theory building, they lose valuable sources for critically evaluating their work.

This collection of chapters seeks to build on the inherent collaborativeness of writing centers, capturing the voices of the student writers and tutors who are at the core of writing center work. Carol Haviland’s vision of chapters written by teams that represent writing center collaborations—faculty/staff members, student tutors, and student writers—is the model we focused on as we sought participants willing to engage in collaborative research and writing in and about their centers. We recognized that we were dissatisfied with the ways in which tutors and students traditionally have been incorporated into the research. For example, the texts we had been using to introduce prospective tutors to writing center issues were at odds with themselves in an important way. That is, although the models to which all texts pointed were those of collaboration between teachers, tutors, and students, the texts themselves were written by teachers only. Tutors and students appeared in the texts but only as they were reported on, as secondary informants or objects of study, and not as co-constructors of knowledge. Thus, although the texts celebrated the coming together of differently situated voices, they limited some of those voices by speaking for them rather than by inviting them to speak for themselves.

None of the four of us could have imagined the pitfalls and surprises of this endeavor. Indeed, we admit that we need all of the elasticity the term “method” offers when we describe our production processes. Carol Haviland and Thia Wolf began by inviting their colleagues—writing center faculty—to gather writing groups to propose chapters on topics that they saw as central to writing centers. They asked only that each chapter be written by at least three authors—a faculty member and/or writing center director, a writing tutor, and a student user of a writing center—and that each writer-group keep a journal of its collaborative writing venture. In keeping with this format, Carol and Thia also asked a graduate student tutor and a student user of their campus
writing centers to join the editing team. What they found, however, was that although the chapter authors were reporting that arranging collaboration across these roles was difficult, the editors found it impossible. Most of the chapters were written over a one or two-year period, but editing the manuscript took several years of concerted effort. Graduate student editors could make arrangements to work on the project, but it did not carry sufficient reward to keep an undergraduate student editor involved. Thus, we had an editorial team of four who, after over more than two years of writing, revising, and editing, were confronted by a complete manuscript; we read, we questioned, we surmised, we struggled, and we asked, “What is this book about?”

The obvious answer—writing centers and collaboration—could not explain the eclectic manuscript, for each writer-group observed the nonnegotiables in what we have concluded is predictable writing center fashion: each adhered to the intent, but all interpreted or renegotiated within their own contexts. Although all of the chapters were written collaboratively, some make their collaboration explicit, typographically displaying the change in authors, whereas others construct more unified authors/narrators. Others, such as chapter nine, problematize the notion of collaboration. All, however, engage writing center faculty members and administrators, tutors, and student writers actively in considering both the theories and the practices that shape writing center cultures. Some authors explore the practical, day-to-day workings of their writing centers, whereas others highlight unique experiences, sea changes, or particularly interesting student-tutor interactions. In turn, we engaged authors in revision in the same ways tutors engage students in writing conferences, chiefly asking about focus and eliciting details to move writer-based discovery to reader-based chapters and to integrate theory in ways that might be useful to writing center staff. We did not, however, work to eliminate conflict either within or between chapters. The essays challenge overarching notions of collaboration and writing center theory. They show how writing center work and writing collaboratively is messy, chaotic work. But in this chaos is a place—a place defined by institutions and participants, a place where students meet with writing experts—a contact zone.

In a watershed essay, Mary Louise Pratt defines her notion of the contact zone: it is a place where cultures “meet, clash and grapple.” Pratt’s contact zone is a borderland, the area where a dominant culture and an indigenous culture overlap. Pratt advises us to look carefully at the way the indigenous culture speaks back to the dominant culture, the way the indigenous people appropriate notions from the dominant culture and meld them with their own to create new ways of pushing against the dominant culture. Writing centers often are conceptualized as bridges into universities, places where students can go to practice the literacy of the dominant culture, zones that buffer students from the harsh realities of the academy. The following chapters, however, complicate this notion of a friendly, supportive buffering zone. They show, instead, contact zones full of tension—tension between the goals of universities and their writing centers; tension between what writing centers
say and what they do; tension between the differently situated faculty members, tutors, and students who write in writing centers; and tension between the services writing centers offer and the technologies that affect postmodern notions of writing.

The book, thus, resists seamless interpretation in favor of rich, sometimes contradictory, detail. In choosing this course, we recognize that we may frustrate readers looking for stable, coherent answers to specific writing center questions. Indeed, we received precisely that response from a sophomore English major who had just finished his first quarter of tutoring writing and agreed to read an early draft of the manuscript. He commented, "Well, I like your book because it is well written and because it asks good questions, but I don't like that you refuse to answer those questions. Anyone can pose questions—especially English teachers—but we also need answers so we can decide what to do." He is right; we do not give answers. Instead, we hope that these multivoiced and sometimes conflicting chapters will act as heuristics that encourage active investigations and dialogues about particular writing centers. However, we do open some paths to situated answers, which we believe is consistent with writing center theory. Just as in our practice we help writers with invention and revision by asking questions and exploring contexts and possibilities, here we work to theorize our observations, hoping that we can help readers construct their own answers as well as generate discussion from which we can continue to learn.

We collaborate, perhaps unwittingly, when we create metaphors to describe our world, our work, each other. We become more reflexive—more active, more self-conscious—when we make this collaboration explicit and when we reveal the contradictions that are a part of living in the contact zone. These contradictions led one group of authors to describe writing centers as both purgatory for bad writers and the most human place in the university. Every time students enter writing centers, they engage us in collaboration. The ways we define ourselves and the ways we relate to those students construct the collaborations that ensue. Our collaborations create cultures. And thus, as reflexive practitioners, we must ask whom these cultures represent, privilege, and empower. The cultures exist within defined and university-sanctified spaces. To whom do writing centers belong? How are they designed to show this ownership or encourage joint ownership? When are they the hinterlands, separated from the meaningful and meaning-making activities of their sponsors, and when are they the contact zones between cultures?

The notions of space and culture Pratt raises seem so rich and integral to writing centers that the chapters gathered here have been arranged to highlight ideas of space and culture. In the first four chapters, the authors explore ways the spaces in which we make contact affect the work we do. These explorations include discussions both of the actual physical spaces and of the metaphorical spaces—or places—writing centers hold within institutions.

Chapters one and two explore place—writing centers' locations, arrangements, aesthetics, and relationships to their institutions—arguing that these
places are integral parts of writing centers' identities and functions. In chapter one, the authors explore how their move from a marginalized space to a more mainstream and institutionally constructed space affected the tutors and writers. Chapter two explores a high school community, arguing—perhaps implicitly—that writing centers can provide structures that foster collaborative models. Moreover, this chapter illustrates the ways that writing center administrators and tutors can encourage equal collaborations with students and faculty members.

Chapters three and four also discuss physical places and writing center constructions; however, as they explore the roles of assessment and technology, they also open several issues involved in constructing new programs and new spaces, encouraging us to think about the ways that writing centers might be conceptualized in the future as we struggle with incorporating technology and university-wide assessment. Chapter three, a case study of one writing center's move to house assessment, examines the physical and pedagogical changes such a move imposes. It notes the importance of carefully examining the role of assessment and its effects on writing center practice before coupling with such a program. Chapter four, a study of the creation of an online writing center (OWL), raises theoretical and practical questions about integrating technology and writing conferences. By carefully critiquing their experiences, the authors show how models of collaboration affect program designs.

The second section explores the ways that collaborations and interactions with students create cultures within writing centers. Chapters five and six examine the ways that we define who we are and the roles we play within writing centers and institutions. As the authors of chapter five theorize their own experiences, exploring multiple definitions of writing centers, they examine the differing impulses that bring faculty members, students, and tutors to writing centers and their own divergent beliefs about text ownership and the complications of self-definitions that compete with institutional definitions. Chapter six explores and compares the possibilities and realities of graduate student tutors from two disciplinary perspectives. The authors highlight the tensions between the roles of tutor and teacher, focusing on the role of expert knowledge both in the field of composition and in the university. Each author offers an examination of these multiple roles, which one describes as a "demanding, mentally (and sometimes emotionally) draining form of work, one built on various role conflicts and organized in the face of logistical hassles, space constraints, paperwork pressures, and treadmill-like back-to-back sessions."

Chapters seven, eight, and nine continue to examine these roles, problematizing writing center work by placing it within larger cultural frameworks. Chapter seven studies a writing-across-the-curriculum program, exploring the tensions between disciplines and highlighting the perspectives of the different actors involved in cross-disciplinary collaborations. It illustrates how reflexivity can turn disappointing interactions into productive collabora-
tions that improve cross-curricular relationships. The authors of chapter eight use Henry Giroux’s work to frame their exploration of race, culture, and language within their writing center as they moved from a banking model of tutoring to a problem-posing Freirean model. They argue that writing center practice based on understanding students and institutional contexts, listening carefully, and speaking thoughtfully is essential not only for ESL students but also for native speakers. Chapter nine also explores notions of culture and otherness, situating its study of agency in a composition course. The authors engage their students in a collaborative model that amplifies the problematics of agency, writing, and education as it questions the ways we position students in conflict with their historicized positions.

Finally, we use the concluding chapter to examine what we, along with the contributors, have learned about using writing center pedagogy to iterate its practices—about working with large numbers of authors; about the conflicts involved in pulling student, tutor, and faculty writers together; about the different stakes these differently situated writers have in their writing; about foregrounding issues of power that will not disappear; about representing multiple authors in single texts; about ethnographic questions of how to cast nets widely across arenas and collaborators and yet construct the coherence readers need; and about how to negotiate thinly defined and uncertain research projects with contributors, publishers, and ourselves—about what collaboration does and does not mean in writing centers.

As you read through this book, you will find that collaboration has many different voices. We invite you to bring your own contexts, experiences, and theories to your readings of this work as you listen to the voices here, reflect on the voices not heard, and add your voices to Joan Mullin’s Epilogue as we probe the questions we raise together.

WORKS CITED

Who We Were and How We Wrote

Colleen Connolly, Writing Center Graduate Project Assistant and Masters Student in Rhetoric and Composition
Amy DeJarlais, Senior Writing Center Tutor and Undergraduate English Major
Alice Gillam, Associate Professor of English and Coordinator of Composition
Laura Micciche, Graduate Teaching Assistant and Doctoral Student in Rhetoric and Composition

We began with some chunks of writing that Alice had done previously for talks, such as the brief history of Curtin Hall and the “key word” material on borderlands. And she took the lead at some other points; after a joint composing session, for example, she often did some editing, adding, and deleting that we all critiqued at the next session. But we composed much of the text with all of us crowded around Alice’s desktop computer in her home office, taking turns at the keyboard. Often, it was exceedingly hot (no air conditioning in that small upstairs office), so we worked with the fan on high, papers flying around, and constant diet soda refills—and it was fun. Alice had tried joint composing before but with little success; however, this work was collegial and productive, we think because no one felt defensive when someone rejected a concept, organization, word, or phrase. In fact, more often it was almost game-like: “What word do we want here? What about X? What we want to do is get from this idea to this—but how?” Often, we felt real synergy, ending up exhilarated and almost giddy even after an exhausting two-or three-hour session. Our collaboration not only produced a book chapter, but it also was a healing experience for us. We had experienced a bruising time in our writing center, and writing about it together helped us salve some of those wounds.
Erika and the Fish Lamps: Writing and Reading the Local Scene

Colleen Connolly, Amy DeJarlais, Alice Gillam, and Laura Micciche
University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee

At the front desk, wearing his blaze-orange North Woods hunting vest, sits Eric, his long legs jutting out the opposite end of the desk. He is both balding and long-haired, diligent to a fault. Eric still believes in the possibility of Truth and Beauty and, on occasion, tries to impress these transcendental values on unsuspecting students. In the background, jazz plays softly beneath the din of phones and voices, while aqua fish lamps provide “mole-mood” lighting on this gray Milwaukee day, the likes of which begin in October and last until May. Behind Eric, clamped to one of the computer tables, sits Erika, the punk beauty mannequin head, who is the writing center’s icon, its mascot. In black lipstick, purple eyeshadow, and a green hard hat, Erika seems a most unlikely muse. Together, this oddly twinned pair are fitting tropes for the ethos that has developed at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee’s writing center by accident and design.

Nearly three years ago, we began this chapter by composing the above scenario. We were aware even then that this depiction told as much about us as it did about our center as a physical space. Yet, in a way, that was the point. We wanted to know what a reading of our physical place might tell us about who we were or who we thought we were. Writing and reading the writing center’s “local scene,” however, takes a new spin now that its administration and environment have undergone substantial changes. After 8 1/2 years of a relatively consistent philosophy and ethos, the center changed faculty coordinators, and with the new coordinator came changes in the center’s face and function in the university. Inevitably, the old and the new scenes now oscillate in our text, each informing our representation of the other, and both shaping our understandings of what local scenes mean.

While our interest in describing and interpreting the local scene remains, the perspectives from which we do so (and even the makeup of our team) are now complicated by the changes that have occurred in the past several years. As we return to our original text to revise and write anew, we are keenly aware that we represent different generations of experience with the center. Not surprisingly, our differing histories, investments, and relationships to the center yield sometimes complementary, sometimes contradictory representations and interpretations.

Alice and Amy were with the writing center since its inception in spring
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1987, Alice as faculty coordinator and Amy as a member of the first peer tutoring class. Committed to peer-centered, collaborative writing assistance, Alice founded the center to serve all levels of student writers, working on tasks from across the disciplines. For Alice, conversation about writing was at the heart of the tutorial encounter, not instruction in the conventional sense, and the writer’s authority over the text was paramount. Although her level of involvement in the center fluctuated depending on other professional demands, she remained the writing center’s titular head until 1993 when she left to direct the composition program. Over the years, Amy’s role in the writing center evolved from that of novice peer tutor to senior tutor to assistant coordinator to de facto coordinator. Her leadership, which continued until the fall of 1995, was largely responsible for the offbeat ethos and the strong sense of tutor culture described in the opening scene.

Laura and Colleen, who represent a newer generation of writing center locals, took the peer tutoring class together in the fall of 1994, albeit for different reasons. Laura, who had been a teaching assistant while earning her master’s degree at another university, took the peer tutoring class in order to continue working with students as she began her doctoral course work. What she found in the writing center was not only this opportunity but also a community of fellow writers and friends. For Laura, the center represented an alternative space within the university in which tutors and student writers could emphasize their uniqueness while working toward a distinctly institutional goal: the improvement of writing. Laura still drops by to socialize with other tutors, but she no longer tutors there. Colleen took the peer tutoring class as someone already familiar with the writing center. Initially, she came to the center as an undergraduate writer seeking tutorial assistance. The center’s nonthreatening environment enabled her to develop confidence and a sense of investment in her writing. As a member of the peer tutoring staff, she encourages students to explore the relationship between critical writing and thinking. Recently, Colleen has taken on a more central role in the writing center. As the graduate project assistant, she functions as both tutor and administrator.

Despite the changes in cast and setting, the questions that guide our description of the local scene remain: what does the history of our place tell us about our status and role within the university? How do the concrete, physical aspects of our writing center relate to abstract concepts of identity, mission, and purpose? How does place shape, reveal, and define the local culture?

Similarly, the questions that guide our interpretation of the local scene remain indebted to the discussions of place that have long played a prominent part in writing center discourse. Descriptions of physical space—poorly funded centers housed in basements and broom closets and well-funded centers housed in clean, well-lit places—are frequently invoked as ways of articulating writing center identity, history, and politics. Under-funded, marginal centers housed in broom closets, for example, are sometimes the starting point for narratives
of progress, representing what Trimmer calls the "bad old days" before writing centers gained recognition and adequate funding. Alternatively, "broom closet" centers are sometimes celebrated as sites for subversive writing pedagogies, where institutional neglect allows writing center activities to occur outside institutional surveillance and regulation (Summerfield). Well-funded, high-tech centers may be celebrated as sites for cutting-edge, on-line pedagogies, as Crump claims, or critiqued as sites that radically alter the interpersonal dynamics that are at the heart of writing center practice, as Gillam argues.

Similarly, North, Carino, Lunsford, Healy, and Pemberton have interrogated literal and figurative place names—center, lab, clinic, storehouse, garret, Burkean parlor, church—for what they reveal about writing center philosophy and practice. Recently, writing center scholars such as Cooper and Haynes-Burton have begun to use the term culture as an all-encompassing trope for writing center space, practices, and inhabitants.

Drawing on this broader conversation about place, we ask the following questions in our reading of the local scene: what metanarratives are implicit in our representations of place? What trope or tropes offer lenses for interpretation? What does it mean to define and interpret the writing center community as a culture?

WRITING THE LOCAL SCENE

Built in the 1970s along the eastern border of campus, Jeremiah Curtin Hall is a nine-story, T-shaped modernist building that resembles a grain silo or, some say, a film projector. Home to the departments of English, linguistics, classics, philosophy, and modern foreign languages, as well as to the writing center, Curtin Hall was named for Jeremiah Curtin, a nineteenth-century linguist who is said to have been "devoted to linguistic investigations and always ready to sit down anywhere and listen to ancient stories and folk tales" (qtd. in DeJarlais 3). Urban legend has it that, reflective of the times, Curtin Hall was constructed to withstand student riots and is capable of being totally secured within three minutes. (We understand that many campuses have a building about which this same story is told.)

Its exterior of corrugated gray concrete was originally meant to be covered by a facade of green marble, but when the original contractor died, or some say committed suicide, the new contractor refused to do anything beyond the minimum work necessary to finish the job. Not unlike many modernist projects, many of Curtin Hall's intentionally progressive features have gone awry. Inexplicably, the building faces the wrong direction; thus, its first-floor skylights fail to catch the sun during the heat of the day. Additionally, the energy-saving electrical system, which is steam generated, causes the clocks to be chronically off, sometimes by many hours. More successful has been its cooling system that conserves energy by "lapping" the building's air and water through channels under nearby Lake Michigan.

In the introduction to Fragments of Rationality, Lester Faigley tells us
that modernist architects, like Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier, believed that the “architect as urban planner” was “capable of solving the many problems cities presented—slums, congestion, sprawl, the waste of land and resources, and general ugliness” (4). Thus, modernist buildings soared above the congestion of city sidewalks, countering the horizontal sprawl with their vertical movement and replacing ramshackle slum housing with uniform blocks of public housing.

In much the same modernist spirit, our writing center originated in 1987 as an antidote to some of the problems presented by our urban commuter campus: the slum-like environment of the remedial learning lab located in the basement of the oldest building on campus, the congested schedules of composition teachers with little time for one-to-one conferences, the waste of human resources when discouraged students from first-generation college families or inner-city high schools dropped out of the university. We began an entirely new English department-sponsored writing center with the optimistic belief that liberatory writing center pedagogies could ameliorate if not solve the problems of student writers in ways not possible through traditional classroom instruction.

Inside Curtin Hall, the writing center is located on the third floor, one floor below the English department, down a narrow corridor, and, fortuitously, next to the vending machines. We were given Room 382 in the winter of 1988, after two semesters of camping out in the computer lab trying to drum up tutorial business. About 400 square feet in size, the room is L-shaped with an institutional black linoleum floor and acoustic ceiling tiles. When we first arrived, the room was painted a drab green. Formerly a foreign-language lab, its most attractive feature is a large square window that faces north and offers a spacious view of the old, red-brick Downer College buildings and beyond them Downer Woods, which is a haven for deer and is protected in perpetuity from university encroachment.

To make the space more inviting and less institutional, one Saturday, Lisa, an assistant coordinator; Kelly, a peer tutor; and Alice, the original coordinator, snuck in to paint the walls a pale rose, an illegal not to mention politically incorrect act because it violated the university’s agreement with the unionized maintenance staff. Later, several of us scavenged the cavernous campus warehouse and rummage sales to produce round wooden tables with unmatching chairs and two battered easy chairs, one with a daisy-patterned slipcover, the other upholstered in dull mauve chenille with a matching ottoman. Consciously or unconsciously, we were marking the standard institutional space we were issued as different from other institutional spaces, as nongeneric, unconventional, eclectic, in, but not altogether of, the larger academy.

To the original mismatched furniture were added a decidedly funky collection of artwork, signs, and knickknacks: on the wall was a picture of Gorbachev alongside an original painting of a tutoring session donated by an artist boyfriend of a former tutor; above the clock with the perpetually incor-
rect time was a sign reading “Honolulu time.” A palm tree, actually a bamboo pole with large green construction-paper fronds, grew into the ceiling where acoustical tiles had been removed due to a leak. The previously mentioned fish lamps provided mellow indirect lighting, a welcome relief from the harsh fluorescent lights in most classrooms, while the cool jazz soothed the fears of anxious writers and the frayed nerves of commuter students rushing between work and class.

Over the years, individual tutors contributed objects representative of their own personal styles, giving the center an increasingly less institutional more offbeat appearance. Posters of van Gogh, O'Keeffe, and Monet paintings were tacked up. Plastic toys (potential heuristics?) appeared in extra mailbox cubbyholes. Ferns, African violets, and a weeping fig tree thrived or withered, depending on who, if anyone, was paying attention to them. A custodian whose normal turf did not include the third floor frequently happened by whenever the background music shifted to more bluesy numbers—from John Coltrane, Miles Davis, and Billie Holiday to B.B. King, Memphis Minnie McCoy, and T-Bone Walker. The decorations and easygoing atmosphere announced the center’s alternative identity and student-centered approach to writing conferences.

With the addition of an annex several years later, there were two distinct environments in which sessions could be conducted. Room 382, clearly “the center of the Center,” had indirect lighting, background music, offbeat decor, and more noise and activity; the annex, originally designated for overflow sessions, had fluorescent overhead lighting, institutionally nondescript decor, no music, less activity, and more privacy. Generally, student writers and their tutors found one space or the other more suited to their personalities and expectations for the tutoring sessions. Observing the interactions between people and environment helped us make adjustments over the years, as did the feedback we gathered through end-of-the-semester evaluations of our services. For instance, we realized that sessions conducted at the front desk in Room 382 were less productive since these tutorials were frequently interrupted by phone calls and walk-ins. Furthermore, the tutor’s position at the front desk unintentionally conveyed a sense of authority that undermined the collaborative work relationship. The writer often yielded to or encouraged a more directive tutoring approach. To reverse this trend, more sessions were conducted away from the front desk to restore the equilibrium of peer relationships.

From time to time, tutors less comfortable with the center’s informality attempted to create a more ordered and businesslike environment. One graduate project assistant who had been an office manager ordered yellow plastic file holders to fasten on the wall, a coat rack, and a ten-year supply of rubber bands and paper clips. However, the coat rack was never used, the yellow wall pockets mysteriously disappeared, and most of the supplies have been bartered away to the English Department in exchange for extra photocopying privileges.
For 8 1/2 years, the space resisted institutional appropriation in face if not altogether in function. This tutor-owned space was a site for expressing individuality, humor, and creativity through both its decor and pedagogy. Tutors sometimes brought in their own writing to use in the tutorial, took students to the University Art Museum to practice descriptive writing, accompanied them to the library for research assistance, or conducted tutorials in the courtyard.

In addition to encouraging inventive pedagogy, the site also encouraged active resistance of institutional norms. Tutors occasionally fudged time cards and avoided a scheduled work hour by putting a fake tutee name in the time slots, switching appointments, or disappearing for unscheduled cigarette breaks. For tutors, these forms of resistance represented a tacit refusal to work within the larger institution’s parameters. Other acts of resistance occurred during meetings of a Tuesday evening after-hours writing group. This group, of which Amy and Laura were both members, met to workshop poems, stories, even vitae and job letters. At times, Amy and Laura recall, the group abused the center as they shared beers and cigarettes, asserting a kind of self-proclaimed authority and thumbing their noses at institutional rules and sanctions. Just as the center’s physical appearance defied conventional school decor, so too tutor behavior and customs often disregarded institutionally defined roles.

The administrative change in the past year, however, has accomplished what 8 1/2 years of occasional halfhearted efforts could not. The local scene has become decidedly more official in appearance. The palm tree, Erika, the broken clock, and toys have disappeared. The mauve easy chair and other rummaged furniture have been replaced by two additional file cabinets. The fluorescent lights have been turned on, and the jazz has been turned off. Although these changes have created a more professional atmosphere in the center, they have also altered tutors’ relationships to the center, particularly veteran tutors’, and generated controversy over its identity.

As the new administration continues to redesign the space and redefine tutor roles, tutors have responded by maintaining remnants of the “old” culture and shifting the “center of the Center” to the annex. Although the after-hours writing group no longer meets and transgressive behavior rarely occurs, tutors have begun to congregate in the annex during off-hours to talk shop or to simply hang out. Perhaps because it is physically unchanged by the new administration and further away from administrative supervision, the annex has become the hub of tutor activity. Ironically, the annex is no longer a secondary appendage but the primary site of tutor culture.

In contrast to veteran tutors’ discomfort with the changes in the center, student writers appear to be generally unaffected. Ongoing end-of-the-semester evaluations indicate that most students still perceive the center as “comfortable” and “friendly” and the tutorials as “helpful,” suggesting, perhaps, that students have a more task-oriented, pragmatic relationship to the center. Their sessions focus primarily on work, and when their tutorials end, they rarely stick around to socialize. Not surprisingly, their investment in the center differs from that of the tutors, and while they benefit from the sense of
community created among the tutors, their participation in the community is limited. There are, of course, notable exceptions, regulars who come faithfully during their entire academic careers and participate more fully in the writing center community, sometimes attending parties, forming friendships with tutors, and even becoming tutors themselves. At any given time, however, this group is relatively small.

**READING THE LOCAL SCENE**

Plainly, this account of our local scene engages a number of metanarratives—the writing center as emblematic site for the practice of postmodern composition, the writing center as ideal site for the expression of student/tutor culture, the writing center as the natural location for subversive, counterhegemonic literacy work. And while there is something enabling about these metanarratives, they do not tell the whole story and can obscure or elide other stories that might be told from other perspectives. Student/tutor culture, for example, may provide a sense of community for some but exclude others; institutional culture may not be something all student writers want to resist; postmodern decor may be viewed as discomforting and alienating as well as heuristic and provocative. The recent shift from an offbeat identity to a more mainstream one may be read as a narrative of loss or of gain, a fortunate or unfortunate fall, depending on one's perspective.

To focus our reading and link it to discussions of writing center scenes generally, we turn to two tropes that have particularly rich explanatory power: the writing center as a borderland space and the writing center as a subculture. The former has been suggested indirectly in the work of other writing center scholars. Nancy Grimm, for example, describes writing centers as "places where students struggle to connect their public and private lives" (5). Cynthia Haynes-Burton characterizes writing centers as spaces where inhabitants "transgress," "shuttle between," and "straddle" various boundaries between classroom and center, "official" and "unofficial" writing (112-14). And, of course, Haynes-Burton directly introduces the term *subculture* to interrogate writing centers' hybrid identity politics (117-22).

As a spatial or geographical term, the borderland metaphor is a particularly fitting point of departure for reflections on writing center place and identity. According to *Webster's New World Dictionary*, a borderland is alternatively "land constituting a border," "land near a border," or "hinterland" (which the dictionary defines as "back country") or "the land or district behind that bordering on a coast or river, specifically an inland region claimed by the state that owns the coast"). Additionally, the dictionary defines borderland as "a vague or uncertain condition that is not quite one thing or the other." Thus, a borderland is an ambiguously defined geographical space, identified variously as the border itself or as a space that is contiguous to but separate from the border.

Metaphors reflect conceptual systems and thus "structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people"
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(Lakoff and Johnson 3). Metaphors highlight and hide: “In allowing us to focus on one aspect of a concept . . . a metaphorical concept can keep us from focusing on other aspects of the concept that are inconsistent with that metaphor” (10). To call writing centers borderlands is to use what Lakoff and Johnson call an “orientational metaphor,” a metaphor that uses spatial orientation to “organize a whole system of concepts with respect to one another” (14). Such metaphors are, of course, not arbitrary but reflect ideological and cultural values.

Thus, the borderland metaphor aptly reveals writing centers’ contradictory sense of place in relation to the larger institutions in which we reside. In replacing our previous orientational metaphors of center and margin, the borderland metaphor represents the writing center’s paradoxical identity and multiple allegiances. For some students, we constitute a threshold or entry point to the larger academy and, as such, serve as a place where students are ushered or inducted into the academy; simultaneously, we like to think of ourselves as a hinterland, contiguous to, but not of the larger academy, and therefore as a place where students can stand back and observe the academy, contemplating what it has to offer them, what they have to offer it, and what costs it is likely to exact.

For many years, our self-constructed sense of place emphasized the back country or hinterland aspect of our borderland location. That is, we emphasized our separateness from the classroom, the composition program, the university. This enabling fiction, this self-defined “outlaw” status, hid or willfully ignored the ambiguous, borderland nature of our location and our connection to these other institutional domains that provided our clients and our funding. However we might differ in appearance and pedagogical approach, our budgetary rationale and much of our daily work tied us irrevocably to our university’s gateway-oriented composition program. The current center, by contrast, openly acknowledges its relationship to the classroom and program in face and function. If the center’s initial ethos encouraged distance and separation, then the new ethos encourages border crossings to and from the larger academy.

Like the term borderland, the term subculture entails multiple and contradictory meanings, thus making it an apt metaphor for writing center societies and a telling metaphor for interrogating writing centers’ social identities. For one thing, its parent term, culture, is “notoriously ambiguous,” referring scientifically to both a process and a product and humanistically to both “culture as a standard of excellence” and “culture as a ‘whole way of life’” (Hebdige 5-7). For another, its prefix, sub, is ambiguous in identifying its relationship to the dominant culture, suggesting either subordinance or size, a smaller division within a larger unit. Furthermore, the dictionary’s neutral definition of subculture—the “distinct cultural patterns of a group within society whose common identity and interests distinguish it from the larger society” by virtue of age, beliefs, status, or ethnicity (Webster’s 1972)—avoids the question of formation. Is the subculture a group that has been relegated to that status by
the dominant culture, or has the group chosen its alternative status?

To apply the term subculture to writing center societies is to create both a “structured” and “orientational” metaphor according to Lakoff and Johnson’s taxonomy. The term suggests that the groups of people who inhabit writing centers are not just a random assortment of individuals but rather a social unit with shared values, distinctive habits, and identifiable customs. Further, the term, by virtue of its prefix, positions the writing center’s culture as “under”—by size or status—more dominant cultures such as the writing classroom, the writing program, the university, and the profession of composition studies. Whether the social group that makes up a particular writing center sees itself as a smaller part of a coherent whole, a marginal group relegated to inferior status in relation to the dominant culture or an intentionally renegade group that opposes the larger culture, writing center subcultures are inevitably shaped and defined in relation to other, more dominant cultures.

Perhaps the most provocative lens offered by the subculture trope is the contradictory notion of culture as “a standard of excellence” versus culture as a “whole way of life.” Though she does not refer to this implicit ambiguity in the term *culture*, Haynes-Burton associates the writing encouraged in writing center subculture with the latter notion and the writing encouraged in dominant academic cultures with the former. Drawing on the work of cultural theorists, Haynes-Burton defines the writing center as a subculture in order to examine and refigure its relationship to the larger institutional culture. She acknowledges its double or amphibian nature, its negative and positive status, its implication in the dominant culture of “excellent standards,” and its desire to affirm “the whole life ways” of student writers.

Specifically, Haynes-Burton urges writing centers to use their subordinate, subcultural status to create a “distinctive writing center style” that “articulates a refusal of a particular way of managing writing instruction” and “subverts the institutionalization of writing at every opportunity” (115). While quick to point out subcultures’ vulnerability to co-optation and even elimination by the dominant culture, she argues that style can leverage against co-optation and enable writing centers to “maintain an edge with students which we heretofore have lost to the magnetic pull of the dominant discourse of the composition classroom” (116). Rather than engaging in “apologies,” or attempts to legitimize writing center work in the eyes of the dominant institutional culture, she suggests we capitalize on our subordinate status in order to “affirm student identity and tutor identity through engaging in ‘unofficial’ methodologies, ‘unorthodox’ interpersonal dynamics, and ‘imperfect’ discourse” (115). That is, while the classroom inevitably pulls toward the dominant culture’s “standard of excellence” in relation to writing, the writing center can draw on the “whole way of life,” the hybrid nature of discursive practice in its approach to writing assistance.

For Haynes-Burton, this alternative style is signaled not only in pedagogical practice but also in the writing center’s physical environment and tutor culture. She and her tutors at the University of Texas at Arlington have