

Writing-Center Faculty in Academia: Another Look at Our Institutional Status

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For nearly fifteen years, those of us who work in writing centers have bemoaned the limited perception within our home institutions of the varied and complex nature of writing-center work. Our conversations at conferences are peppered with stories of the professors—even those trained in composition—who continue to send their students to us to clean up subject-verb agreement or sentence fragments, and the pages of our journals testify to the continuing need to describe (i.e., justify) to our colleagues what we do in our writing centers. Probably the most visible and public complaint came from Stephen North, whose frustration erupted in *College English* in 1984:

[T]he members of my profession, my colleagues, people I might see at MLA or CCCC or read in the pages of *College English*, do not understand what I do. They do not understand what does happen, what can happen, in a writing center. (433)

North was neither the first nor the last to note this ignorance. In 1983, Malcolm Hayward reported that members of his department consistently undervalued the capacity of his writing center to teach much more than grammar and punctuation. In 1985, Patricia Murray and Linda Bannister reported that their survey revealed a common faculty perception of a writing-center job as a “cush-y” substitute for office hours. Elray Pedersen argued in 1986 that “Writing Labs Are More than Remediation.” In 1988, Diana George described to English Department chairs the work centers accomplish and the opportunities they offer for research and teacher training.

One of the most troubling descriptions of our colleagues' narrow vision occurs in Gary Olson's and Evelyn Ashton-Jones' 1988 article in *WPA: Writing Program Administration*. They point out the perception among freshman English directors that writing-center directors are “a kind of wife,” among whose important attributes are the need to be “nice,” “supportive but not critical,” “friendly, cooperative, and have lots of personal-

ity," and who should "provide chocolate chip cookies to writing center clients"(23). From these descriptions, Olson and Ashton-Jones note that

She is not encouraged to 'work' as the real members of the academic community do, and when she is allowed to, she is certainly not compensated fully for her labor, since her labor is not truly valued by the community. In short, her place is in the home. (23)

Not much has changed since this chilling recognition. In September 1989 and in Spring, 1990, Rick Leahy countered commonly held "myths" faculty hold about writing centers and—again—described the work writing centers can and do accomplish. As recently as June 1990, Marian Arkin noted the continuing low status of writing-center faculty, despite some notable improvements in conditions for writing centers in the last seventeen years.

Despite this grim picture, writing-center faculty have developed a variety of responses to counter this persistent, narrow understanding of our work. Keeping statistics emerges as the standard response (Chapman; Jonz and Harris; Neuleib, "Evaluating a Writing Lab," and "Evaluating Writing Centers"), while sending memos and writing newsletters to faculty and administration describing writing-center services, projects, and success stories are also frequent strategies; classroom visits to describe and to demonstrate tutoring (North, Chase) along with open houses to bring faculty to the center (Smoot) are other common responses; additional services, such as hotlines, libraries, workshops, mini-classes, and test administration and evaluation have also been used to demonstrate to our colleagues that writing center faculty do work (Chase, North).

Despite all these efforts, however, the misconceptions continue, and many of us who work in writing centers must continue to explain our presence on our campuses. Are these misconceptions due merely to the inertia of old attitudes? Here again, writing-center faculty offer a variety of reasons for the persistent invisibility of our work: the operation of writing centers within a non-traditional, collaborative theory of learning (Bruffee, Ede); the historically low status of tutors as employees of the rich (Jolly); the origins of the modern writing center in response to the literacy crisis (North, "Idea"; Hairston); the use of students to staff the centers (Bruffee); the historical attachment of writing centers to developmental programs (Leahy, "What"); narrow conceptions about writing (Chase,

Pedersen); a prevailing view—even among many writing-center faculty—that individual tutoring is a supplement (i.e., "frill") to the 'real' instruction in classrooms (Simpson, "Reader").

All these explanations are valid. However, they ignore another equally important explanation: the possibility that we ourselves may contribute to the invisibility of so much of our work. For we, too, suffer from a narrowness of vision, not about what we do, but about how we describe to our colleagues and administrators what we do. All of these responses are *administrative* answers to a problem assumed to be essentially administrative. In other words, these responses may actually undercut our attempts to achieve a broader recognition in our institutions.¹ Fortunately, Michel Foucault's insight into the relationship between discourse, power, and knowledge offers a useful perspective from which to view how one of these responses, statistics reporting, can prevent writing centers from gaining recognition. His description of the interplay among discourse, knowledge, and power can provide writing-center faculty with a theoretical framework to discover and investigate how most of our work in writing centers all too often remains invisible to our colleagues and, particularly, to department chairs and to higher-ranking university administrators.

We have traditionally recognized the connection between discourse and knowledge. Foucault, however, has added the element of power to this relationship. His explanation of power demonstrates how it is that we have traditionally not recognized power's presence or workings in our interchanges with our colleagues. According to Foucault, power is not a static imposition of force on an individual; it is at once positive and negative, enabling and constraining. In "Truth and Power," he points out that

What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it . . . produces things, induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse (emphasis mine). (119)

In addition to this dual conception of power, Foucault describes the development in the 17th and 18th centuries of "a new 'economy' of power," whose effectiveness lay not in overt domination but in its development of "new technologies of power" whose "concrete and precise character" enabled them "to gain access to the bodies of individuals, to their acts, attitudes, and modes of everyday behaviour" ("Truth and Power" 119, 125). In short, power is most effective when it operates through routine

practices. And it is at its most routine in our everyday language practices. So, what we say, how we represent ourselves in a given report, memo, or orientation is not only a rhetorical choice and therefore an exercise of power, but, and perhaps more importantly, an effect of power as well.

What effect does routinely using discourse and knowledge have on power? We are accustomed to thinking of discourse as a system of communication, of the free exchange of ideas among speakers and writers—situated now, of course, within discourse communities. However, Foucault asserts in "The Discourse on Language" that discourse is actually unobtrusive; communication occurs, but much more remains unsaid: "Exchange and communication are positive forces at play within complex but restrictive systems; it is probable that they cannot operate independently of these" (225). Every statement,² therefore, is simultaneously expression and silence.

Essentially then, through familiar conventions, such as those which encourage us to describe our work with tutors as "training" rather than "teaching," discourse shapes and channels uses of power while power enables and constrains discourse. We can productively apply this understanding to the narrow view of our work on campus. As Foucault puts it:

Let us ask . . . how things work . . . at the level of those continuous and uninterrupted processes which subject our bodies, govern our postures, dictate our behaviors, etc. ("Two Lectures" 97)

From this perspective, we can scrutinize the use we make of statistics reporting to see how it both advances and undermines our attempts to gain visibility for our work in writing centers. This is not to say that we can all dispense with keeping and reporting statistics, of course; the point is that we need to determine what our use of statistics allows us to express and exclude alike. The silences this determination can reveal may be very important indeed.

Statistics have long been regarded as highly convincing evidence for claims to truth, especially among administrators. As such, writing-center directors have adopted it in order to support our requests to department chairs and deans for institutional recognition. This use exemplifies statistics as an important avenue of power in both its productive and prohibitive aspects. A look at the literature reveals that the advice to gather statistics originated in a need for raw headcounts to justify the writing center's

existence on campus. Writing-center directors were advised to "Keep track of everything!" (Neuleib, "Evaluating a Writing Lab" 232). As writing centers matured, Jon Jonz and Jeanette Harris described other uses statistics can serve, for example, as bases for internal program assessment, for planning, and for research (226). As a result of such encouragement, writing-center directors have begun to learn more sophisticated and streamlined methods of gathering, interpreting, and using data.

The use of numerical data for survival has remained a key function, despite Jonz and Harris's warning to writing center directors not to engage in "defensive recordkeeping" (217). When writing-center directors want recognition from administrators, we rely on statistics. In advising those who would start writing centers in two-year colleges, Gary Olson describes "Data collection" as "the principal means of justifying a center's existence to administrators," explaining that it "provides the concrete information administrators need to judge the center's success" ("Establishing and Maintaining a Writing Center" 94). As recently as 1990, Rick Leahy matter-of-factly notes that "Most writing center directors compile mountains of statistics every semester on how many students have been served, in order to justify the center's existence" ("What" 43).

Informing this particular use of statistics is an assumption that numbers are the only data that administrators respond to because numbers offer objective, unbiased evidence upon which to base decisions. Foucault notes in "Discourse" that this assumption disguises a historical stance toward discourse and knowledge which developed in the 16th and 17th centuries to prescribe an absolute separation between observers and observed, or "subjective" knowers and the "objective" known; this separation, of course, disguises and denies the operation of power, of anything subjective, in "true" discourse and knowledge (218-220). Operating under this separation, what writing-center director would deny that our annual reports use these numerical measures as a "neutral" way to demonstrate the effectiveness of our work? We use numbers precisely because their assumed neutrality helps us make a case for our centers.

Unfortunately, this reliance on statistics to communicate with our chairs and deans lets us forget that those numbers describe only a small part of our work. We forget that the numbers we report, and the ways we report them, measure services unknown to our administrative audience. They know that so many students from x, y, and z departments have passed through our writing centers, but they have only a vague idea at best of just

what we do or why we think it is important. They rarely hear from our teacherly or our scholarly side; neither do we invoke their teacherly or scholarly side.

Because we often do not describe for our chairs and deans our scholarship, our work with tutors, our tutorials, or results gained by the students we serve, we miss an opportunity to demonstrate that our work involves more than recordkeeping. We forget, as Jeanne Simpson reminds us, "to emphasize at every turn that a directorship involves teaching first and administration second or even third" ("A Reader Responds" 6).³ The result? "[F]reshman English directors [and department chairs and deans] are more likely to view the writing center director simply as an administrator, not as a teacher, a scholar, or even a writing specialist" (Olson and Ashton-Jones 20). The invisibility of our other roles is the structured silence which Foucault's comment on the restructuring of power through the rise of empiricism reveals.

So how can we begin to reclaim these other roles, particularly our teaching role? We can use anecdotal evidence, but we all know that anecdotal evidence "proves" nothing; it merely illustrates. Furthermore, deans and chairs still want data, preferably numerical data, no matter how clearly we recognize the limits of this evidence. Like it or not, this elevation of numbers, however political or ideological it may be, is "how things work." Granted then, our use of statistics will very likely continue to be one of the most frequent demonstrations of writing-center productivity. So, we can and should explore other ways to use statistics more effectively with our administrative audience, ways to break out of our narrow, instrumental use of numbers in order to highlight the heretofore invisible aspects of our work. However, numbers are not the only evidence at our disposal. It is equally important that we use other, non-numerical, forms of evidence as well. Rather than exploring alternative methods of using numbers, I want to point to some other familiar data which can allow us to round out the numerical evidence we offer.

Writing-center directors have another kind of powerful evidence at hand, the kind of data we, in fact, have been using for as long as we have used numbers: the progress reports and case histories we and our tutors write. We already use case studies for research and training, and we use the progress reports for informing our colleagues of the work we do with their students. But writing-center literature is silent about their systematic use for describing our teaching to chairs and deans. Perhaps the silence is

due to the commonsense objection that numbers are quickly read compared to a narrative account. However, is that necessarily so? Can we not summarize our work with a given student in a quickly read paragraph in order to *describe* our work as well as *count* it? Might not these descriptions be a way to reveal the pedagogical dimensions of our work in writing centers?

In order to reveal more of my teaching role in the center, I summarized the Spring 1990 progress reports in the files of a graduate student and a freshman, then included them in my annual report along with the statistics. I commented on the initial writing problems which brought each to the writing center, the challenges we helped them overcome, and the new strengths they exhibited in their final visits. What effect this summary had is uncertain, but I know that I have sent a more complete message. This message demonstrates that we teach (in the most collaborative sense of the word), not just "work with" real people; it describes some of the weaknesses and strengths we see in our students' writing and how we help those students improve their writing; it illustrates that we do more than correct grammar and punctuation; it also points out that graduate students and freshmen alike face similar issues in their writing. Most importantly, it includes a portrait of people working together on writing.

Using progress reports and case histories is by no means the only complement to statistics reporting, and, to be fair, the literature does suggest other avenues, such as videotapes and faculty workshops, to describe our work. Both have been successful because they convey what statistics do not: images and experiences of people talking about their writing. But examining our use of statistics is only the beginning. We must also carefully scrutinize the terminology we use in describing our work, perhaps moving away from terms like "training" with its administrative overtones, and examining the consequences of the dichotomy we set up between "teaching" and "tutoring." Work in that direction is already beginning (Hemmeter; James and Perdue).

For too long we have ignored our own rhetorical expertise and have tried to speak one register of an administrative language without checking first to see whether other registers are available to us and what we want to communicate, perhaps because we have not been exactly sure of how we want to be heard. As rhetoricians, though, we know the power of naming. We are identifying more and more clearly for ourselves all the dimensions of our work in writing centers and the resulting positions we can occupy

within our universities. As we explain to our chairs and deans (and our colleagues) what we do, then, let us remember what Foucault's understanding of power relations demonstrates: we must look closely at how we explain our work in order to see both what it allows us to express and what it prevents us from expressing. Clearly, that "how," especially when it seems most familiar, ordinary, regular, is just as important as the "what."

Notes

1. This was the conclusion my colleague Deborah James and I came to after an academic year of fighting budget cuts. In "Writing Centers in Academia: Escaping Our Marginality," a CCCC presentation, we describe that experience and analyze the process by which the strategies we used to stop the budget axe exacerbated the very problem we were trying to avert.
2. The concept of the "statement" is the base of Foucault's archaeological method of inquiry; however, my use of this term is not so specialized.
3. I agree with her intention to make the teaching role of a writing-center administrator visible, but not with her implicit dismissal of our administrative roles. We need to think carefully and critically about them as well.

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