

Writing Centers

Writing centers grew substantially in the 1960s and 1970s during the open admissions movement when universities were experiencing a major shift in student enrollment and demographics. Moreover, there were national conversations about literacy and higher education that led to structures like writing centers which were designed to support student writers and to be a resource for teachers. Writing centers are a space (e.g., lab, clinic) where students can receive writing instruction beyond first-year writing classes and English departments; they are sites that provide a wider range of assistance and offer individualized feedback on writing. Writing centers take different forms, but for the most part, they offer one-on-one writing consultations or tutoring for students (e.g., face-to-face, asynchronous). Some writing centers are tied to a single space on campus, whereas some writing centers offer multiple locations. Writing centers are usually staffed by undergraduate and/or graduate students. Some are staffed by English majors and are closely connected with English departments, whereas others are more interdisciplinary. Whatever the case may be, writing center directors usually offer training and development workshops for staff. Directors offer strategies that might help tutors navigate sessions, and they provide additional resources from writing studies scholarship to help professionalize tutors.

Writing centers are sites for conversations on writing. They are collaborative spaces intended to meet students in their writing process (e.g., brainstorming, drafting, revising). Writing centers are truly student-centered. Tutors can help students build confidence in their writing and offer encouragement throughout their writing process; conversations are often guided by a particular writing assignment or draft a student is working on. This dialogic

relationship between tutor and student is unlike any other writing instruction on campus because it is focused on feedback. Grades are never assigned. Students' papers are never marked with a score or with percentages. Therefore, writing centers are unique spaces that offer strategies for writing and revision and are ideal for building knowledge about what writing is and can do. They provide a low-stakes environment that can shift students' attitudes about writing.

Additionally, they are great sites for negotiation. Tutors and students can develop a plan and attempt to prioritize what is most important given where the student is in the writing process. Sometimes this means addressing larger revisions, such as developing a new idea that takes the piece in a different direction. Other times, it means reconsidering the structure or organization of the writing. Sometimes it might be revising the thesis or rewriting the conclusion. Negotiation is key. Tutors have to listen and set aside their own assumptions and biases in order to really promote student agency. As Nancy M. Grimm (2009) reminds us, "Effective tutors learn to shift perspective, to question their assumptions, to seek alternative viewpoints. These competencies are essential for ethical work, and they are practiced daily in a writing center" (p. 21). Some writing center scholars have advocated for incorporating mindfulness and meditation practices and centering embodiment in writing centers (Godbee et al., 2015; Johnson, 2018; Mack & Hupp, 2017). One of the main goals in each session is for tutors to foster writing engagement and to encourage students to dive deeper into the writing process after their thirty minute or hour-long consultation. Writing centers materialize writing as a social activity.

Writing centers also face adversity. For example, some writing centers face institutional marginalization. That is, writing centers often have to position themselves as theoretically rich sites for research and practice. They aren't subordinate to other departments and programs. This narrative is even more difficult to overcome when writing centers don't have their own space, or when centers are fully dependent on English departments, or when centers don't have a sufficient budget to build something sustainable. Likewise, most writing centers have to challenge assumptions about what it is they actually do. They aren't places to go to "fix error" in writing. Given those misconceptions, writing centers have to bring

awareness to their mission. And hopefully, that mission includes actively resisting colonial assumptions (Bawarshi & Pelkowski, 1999) and racist views on language (Young, 2010).

INTERVIEWS

In this chapter, I talk with Harry Denny, Frankie Condon, Karen Keaton Jackson, Neal Lerner, and Rebecca Nowacek about writing center theory and practice. They reflect on their experiences in writing centers and share strategies for writing center practice, such as building centers focused on social justice and helping professionally develop tutors to navigate conversations about writing with students. Denny addresses identity politics in one-on-one consultations and talks about important characteristics of a writing center tutor: “What makes really good qualities of tutors is, to me, always empathy.” Condon talks about writing centers as sites for antiracism, and she describes what it means to co-labor with others to advance social justice aims. Jackson reflects on the role of writing centers at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), and she addresses the absence of HBCU perspectives in writing center scholarship. Lerner talks about constraints and challenges to writing center work and describes how he mentors peer tutors. And Nowacek concludes by sharing how writing centers are a “great site for research.”

Shane to Harry Denny: Your book, *Facing the Center: Toward an Identity Politics of One-to-One Mentoring*, takes up issues of power, agency, and language. Can you talk about identity politics in the writing center, and how social and cultural factors impact interactions between tutors and students? [Episode 51: 01:02–05:46]

So what got me thinking about that idea way back when was the whole notion that a lot of our literature talks about writers, particularly in writing center scholarship at the time, as though writers occupy this uniform, unified, cogent identity. Those of us who have taken any post-modern, post-critical, feminist, critical race, you name it kind of theory, immediately think about identity positions as always complicated and fluid. When a writer comes to the writing lab, they're not just coming with that signifier,

they're coming with all sorts of identities and baggage and concerns, but it's not just the writer that we interact with at the table, we also have tutors or writing consultants or writing fellows who don't suspend who they are when they come to a session.

So over the years where that's become really tangible is when writers come in or tutors encounter issues and topics that can be really controversial. Whether it's a student writing about affirmative action and depending on what their position is being counter or pro and being in conflict with whoever they're working with, or someone writing about reproductive issues and having conflict there. Every once in a while, I haven't had it so much in Purdue, but at previous institutions, writing consultants really being frustrated that students aren't working hard enough, and sort of suspending an awareness of their own privilege when it comes to the ability to focus on education.

At many of our institutions, we have lots of first-gen students for whom college is one of many things occupying their time . . . we have lots of students here at Purdue that work, maybe two, three, four jobs, between 30 and 50 hours a week to pay for school. So that impacts people's connections to how you learn and how you experience teaching and how you do teaching. I also think about sexual minorities. We are in an environment where it's more or less okay to say offensive things or be the object of offensive things. Tutors and students alike are constantly struggling with that. I think a lot of times the impulse is to create bubbles of same mindsets rather than figure out how do we have dialogue about rhetorical situations, about genres, about expectations, and all those sorts of things.

So when someone meets another writer at a table, if only we could suspend the world—it would be a wonderful place, but the writing lab or writing center or writing studio, anywhere in the country, whether urban, rural, North, South is going to have everything that's percolating in that

very space. We can't suspend and make the writing center a vacuum. So real life issues are going on. I think of my former tutor, who's now on her way to Oklahoma, who talks about tutoring while Black. That when she enters a session, her race isn't suspended, it's obviously always legible. Versus someone like me who may or may not pass as gay or straight. I can invoke that; I can play with that in sessions. But how our identities are legible and read or not legible and not read impacts interaction in so many ways.

I wish we could suspend all of society and all culture when we're talking about writers, but you and I know enough about comp theory to also be aware that you can never do that. Why would we want to pretend as if society and culture and politics and economics stop at the door? Writing centers, just like regular classrooms, are spaces where all it has to be hashed out and thought about. It becomes really, really interesting and really powerful and magical and tragic, you name it. It's a great environment.

Shane to Harry Denny: So let's take everything you just said—complex identities surrounding cultural and social systems, politics, and the exchanges between tutors and students in the writing center—and let me ask this question: What are some of the most important qualities and characteristics of a writing center tutor? [Episode 51: 05:47–10:26]

I have a whole laundry list. I think at the top of my list is the whole notion of empathy that you need as a tutor, or a client needs. I think both sides of the equation are critical here. But thinking about what makes really good qualities of tutors is, to me, always empathy. That's an X factor that's hard to cultivate in a tutor training class or a tutor education class, how do you have empathy? How do you have some baseline regard in valuing of the human with whom you're working?

I'd add another quality as being open, being inquisitive, ask open-ended questions, and understand that you aren't the

smartest person at the table all the time. We have enough people in our world and in our politics who think that they're the smartest people in the room.

I cultivate among my crew to ask questions and not necessarily baiting or rhetorical or leading questions, but, "Huh, tell me more." When I work with faculty across campus, I'm amazed at how many people I win over just because, "Hey, tell me more. I don't know anything about this." I think that's a good quality that really helps us be open. Don't always morph into, "Let me crack open your head and pour in what you need to know," but how do we have a really good critical dialogue? Another thing I always tell tutors that I think is really critical is having a mindset of always being willing to *learn with* rather than *learn from*. Embedded in that, to me, is this whole notion of valuing mutuality: "I respect you and I want to learn with you. I am not top-down, but we are horizontal with one another," if that makes any sense.

. . . they can teach me about their field. They can teach me about how their field thinks and how they do inquiry. Yeah, there might be things that I can teach them about writing, but it's not one way, it's not linear, but it's dialogic. Then, I would add to that is the willingness to be improvisational. I'm always trying to teach my folks, don't turn every session into a robot, like I've figured it out, here's the recipe, here's the template. How do you morph from session to session? How do you read the person that you're with and think about what their needs are?

I often joke, one session I'm the goofy gay uncle, the next session I'm very serious, the next session I'm reserved. I'm always trying to riff off of who I'm working with. I think that's another really good quality. Then, the last thing that I think is a really good quality and it's another X factor is approach teaching and learning moments with good cheer. If you approach teaching and learning like, "Aargh, I'd rather be off doing something else, but, oh, I've got to

do this.” That sets a vibe. Who wants to work with Debbie Downer or the Womp-Womp queen? I want to work with someone who’s fun.

I have all these tutors who, I don’t know how they keep the energy throughout their shifts, but they go from student to student, faculty to faculty, excited and energized . . . it’s refreshing and it’s encouraging particularly at big institutions for clients to meet someone who actually cares about them.

Shane to Harry Denny: How do you foster community in the writing center? What are some practical strategies? [Episode 51: 21:20–27:05]

I’ve done this at every institution at which I’ve worked. I start off with asking the staff, “What does community mean to us? What metaphor is going to govern how we understand who we are and what we’re about?” I’m often very worried about a writing center becoming a clubhouse of exclusion, of elitism, of whatever. I always want us to be really thoughtful and mindful about what community means, who is included, who is excluded, who do we see in our staff? You know enough about me to know that I care deeply about, who’s in, who’s out, and how do we get there? But I also think that when we build community, we’re actually in effect building communities.

At a very STEM school like Purdue, how do we make sure that our writing center has tutors from those fields? How do we make sure we have engineering students in the writing lab? How do we make sure that we have scientists and all the very interesting aeronautics and nuclear engineering, you name it, that happens at Purdue? But also commingle them with the interesting creative arts that’s happening at a place like Purdue. How do we have theater students? How do we have English creative writing people from across the liberal arts?

As I talk to you about that, obviously, there is a bias towards the academic. What other communities might we build

with? That's when we have to do really proactive outreach to other communities on campus. I think my staff does a really good job of reaching out to the LGBTQ Center and thinking about how might we be accomplices? But also how might we have representation among our staff of people from that community? All the while recognizing that there are people already on staff that are part of that community.

But similarly, any cultural center on campus, how do we build bridges to them? How do we make the writing lab or the writing center a space that's inclusive? I think about how do we imagine both the mainstream student, but also the marginalized student, the at-risk student and the not at-risk student? I think all those are really critical elements. I think that we also have to think about how do we create community in a way that's reciprocal? That we're not just poaching, but that we are fostering across communities, if that makes any sense. I think it also means showing up. Community means if you have tutors that are doing a reading or doing a performance or presenting research, that we support them, that we get out there and we make them feel valued. Community means not just doing our own thing, but community means being there for one another. I think that's really critical. I jotted down community means having fun with each other. It means eating with each other, it means doing things together.

. . . I suspect you know that in your heart, too, that if you want a community, it has to be material, it has to be tangible to people. You have to create a space where people want to be. You don't want a space where people are just punching the time clock. That they are invested in the space, that they get to put their imprint on that.

Shane to Frankie Condon: How did you get interested in social justice and antiracist practices, and how can writing centers construct a space committed to that kind of work? Perhaps some are asking, "Where do we start and how do we develop centers and programs in the most sustainable way?" [Episode 28: 03:10–10:31]

There's a personal aspect to that part of the story that I've written about in some depth in *I Hope I Join the Band*, so I'm not going to retell that part. So what I'll say about that is that when I was in graduate school, I already had this commitment to antiracist activism that was driven by my own family story, my personal history and my relationships. I was going to the University at Albany. I was working with a group called the Dismantling Racism Project, and really what we were doing is antiracism training predominantly in the medical and social services community in Albany, New York, particularly with those agencies and groups that were working with queer people of color who had HIV/AIDS, and making sure that they were culturally competent, culturally aware, and coming to that work from an antiracist perspective.

I was moving out of graduate school. I got a job directing the writing center at Siena College. I was writing my dissertation and it became increasingly clear to me that I could not proceed as an academic treating that activism work as if it was somehow unrelated to the work I was doing in the academy . . . so I just made a commitment to myself that I was never going to behave as if my work as a writer, as a researcher, as a teacher or as a writing center director and scholar was separate from my work as an antiracist activist.

That was 25 years ago or so, and I've just tried to live that way to the best of my ability . . . now with regard to the how do we start and how do we sustain, some of the things I think about, or maybe my first gut response is I really love the work that Myles Horton does. And Myles Horton has a phrase that I love and admire, which is he says, "We make the road by walking." So one response is well, how do you start? Well, you just do. You just start, right? But maybe that's too fast and maybe that's too simple. So maybe you start walking in order to make the road and maybe then you ask, "Who are my people," or, "Who are our people," right? Because I think one should never do this work *for* others. One should always do it *with* others.

So who are the people with whom I can conjoin the work that I'm doing in my writing center, or that we in our writing center can conjoin with? I look across an institution and I think, well the Multicultural Student Services Office is doing antiracism training. Perhaps I can work with them. So I go visiting people. The Faculty Development Center has somebody who's doing something. I go visiting people. Oh, I know this group of faculty are meeting and talking. I go visiting people, right? The job in some way is to start making connections with people, aligning with people and acting in solidarity with folks, building relationships with them.

I'd say another way to begin and to make the work sustainable in a writing center is to put it at the center. It can never be peripheral and be sustainable, right? It's not I'll add a unit to my tutor-training course, or I'll slap a reading in there. It really has to be at the center of the conversation and infused into all of the work that I'm doing and tutors are doing.

Then the last thing I'd say about sustainability . . . is you get tired, right? One of the biggest challenges to sustainability I think is the wear and tear of emotional labor and intellectual labor in doing the work. This is part of why I say you must always do it with people. First of all, doing it for people is that weird benevolence that actually does more harm than good, right? And that often has the effect of making people, White people in particular, feel better about themselves, feel like they're a better White person without actually having any effect on systemic racism or institutional racism.

But you get tired no matter what. So back in the day when Michele Eodice, and Meg Carroll, and Beth Boquet and Anne Ellen Geller and I were working on our book together, we talked a lot about the peloton, which if you are familiar with bike racing, you might know about the peloton, right? So there's a racing team and one person takes the front and they take the wind so that the people coming behind can ride with less wind resistance, and then

when they get tired, somebody moves up to the front and takes the wind for the rest of the people. Canadian geese do this too, right? When you see geese flying in a V formation, there's one goose taking the lead and they're taking the wind and they take the wind for the other geese until they get tired, and then they fall back and another goose takes the lead. I think we need this in activist work and in particular, in antiracism work, right?

No one person is at the front of the peloton for too long. When people get tired, there's somebody who can move up to the front and take the wind. And of course, we need to be thinking about the degree to which so often people of color are put in the position of taking all the wind all the time. There are some White people doing antiracism work who need to be sensitive to when it's time to step up and take the wind without engaging in that illiberal benevolence, being with, not for.

Shane to Frankie Condon: I like how you talk about this as a communal effort. Knowing when to step up and take the wind and knowing when to come alongside and support. You mentioned walking the road with others. I'm interested in how you do this work with peer tutors at the writing center. [Episode 28: 10:45–14:23]

Engagement from the center with the center and also simultaneously looking outward. I think I was just talking with students this morning about this, right? There's that turn of phrase that people will say, "Change starts by being the change you want to be in the world." It starts with the individual, and I tend to think that that inward turn is always necessary and always insufficient. You never get to a point individually in your work on yourself where you could be like, "Dude, I'm done. I have the stamp of approval and I no longer need to work on this anymore. So now I'm ready to work on systems and institutions." That work is always mutually contingent and interdependent. Yeah? So we want, as individuals inside the writing center,

to be thinking about who we are and what we're doing and the ways in which we are invested in racialized and racist ideologies with regard to language and teaching, and higher education or high school education, if those are the right centers that we're in. We want to be thinking about what our particular institutional site is and what its complicity is, or culpability is in broader institutional systems of racism, or marginalization and exclusion.

And then we want to be looking outward too with the institution as a whole. One of the things concretely that we could talk about is I want tutors to think carefully and critically about the languages for which they advocate as they're working with writers in a writing center. So when we say to a student writer, for example, "You really have to write things in this way because I'm not a racist and I like your home language and I think it's fabulous, but the teacher down the hall is a racist," then effectively we're acting as functionaries for the racist down the hall. I'm not sure how that makes us not complicit.

Or we say, "Well your employers will require it. That you do this, that or the other thing, because they're racist, not me." We're being functionaries for racism in the business world or the professional world or whatever. What people like Vershawn Young, and Asao Inoue, and Aja Martinez, and Elaine Richardson, Geneva Smitherman to name just a few, Victor Villanueva, are saying about the home discourses of peoples of color is those discourses are always being appropriated by predominantly White communities rhetors. But somehow, White folks get a pass on appropriating those discourses and all you have to do is have a Black sounding name or a Chicano sounding name and you don't get the pass. We need to think in more complex and critical ways about the languages for which we're advocating.

Shane to Karen Keaton Jackson: You directed the writing studio at North Carolina Central University. What role do you see writing centers playing in the context of HBCUs and what sort of

differences are there compared to writing centers at PWIs? [Episode 34: 19:40–23:32]

As I think about that, right as I was transitioning out into my current role, I really started to think about how I could articulate some of those differences with HBCU writing centers . . . I've talked about that at conferences and things. That affective component. I think that's always my bottom line, for me, that affective component. No matter where you set me, I'm always going to talk about the affective component of learning. Just one very basic level in our writing center at North Carolina Central University, we have an administrative assistant who makes all of our appointments so students can call or they can come in person.

I know probably almost everyone else under the sun uses WC Online or something similar, and students can go in and make the appointments themselves. I think we tried that for all of two days. Part of it is probably my anal kind of temperament . . . I think our students turned our schedule upside down so much within two days, we were like, "Oh, we can't give them this much access to our schedule because we can't keep up with it." But again, thinking about our student population, a lot of our students really didn't know quite what they needed. Like they knew they needed help, but, you know, they thought they only needed fifteen minutes while they really needed an hour.

Our administrative assistant, that's my frontline person. I was very intentional with who I hired for that position. Like to me, it's not just somebody answering phones. It's somebody who's calming a student who walks in and feels like, "Oh my gosh, I'm a horrible writer," or "My professor just tore up my paper," or "I hate my professor," or . . . I mean, there's a lot of emotion that comes when students walk in through the door. There's a lot of stigma attached with getting help. And that's not just in the Black community. I think that's across the board, but certainly for some

of our students, I think they felt some kind of way, you know, coming in for help. So for them to come through the door was like a big win already. I want to have someone there who was encouraging, again, that kind of other mothering mentor, right?

Like, “You can do this, we got you, I got just the right consultant for you.” You know? So our administrative assistant is very intentional with who she would partner them with based on the different consultant strengths and weaknesses, and based on what they need that I don’t think a computer system can do. We want us to keep our students coming back. We want to keep our enrollment up, our retention numbers, all of that is a big part of it. If you have a large number of your student population that’s just totally unfamiliar with navigating this college thing, I’m a firm believer that that hands on piece makes a big difference in why we have so many repeat clients, why our numbers grew by leaps and bounds during the time I was director. And clearly it wasn’t just me.

It was really the consultants and the frontline person. I was just kind of in the back. But they did an awesome job in being ambassadors for the writing studio. I don’t think without that personal touch, that we would have drawn in as many students in that kind of way. So that’s just kind of one thing that we do that I think is very different when I would talk to other writing center directors. That’s something that I wouldn’t bend on.

I mean, there was a time where they were trying to decrease our number of administrative assistants and that kind of thing. I was really advocating like, “No, I don’t want a work-study student here just randomly scheduling students. Like I need a key person here.”

Shane to Karen Keaton Jackson: Do you feel like there’s an absence of HBCU writing center voices and experiences in writing center scholarship? How can that be addressed? [Episode 34: 23:33–26:34]

Yeah, so absolutely. I believe there's a gap for sure. I think a lot of similar approaches can be taken in terms of the collaborative pieces. I was a member of the SWCA board, the Southeastern Writing Center Association board. One thing I was really excited to do just before I transitioned off of that a few years ago was to help them establish a position for an HBCU representative. I'd been kind of talking about it for a couple of years . . . it wasn't really taken seriously for a while. Then, we had a really great SWCA conference at East Carolina University. You know I have to give a shout out, it was Will Banks and Nikki Caswell headed it up.

And it was dealing with issues of diversity and difference. It set the perfect tone of really digging into these honest conversations about diversity. Then, when we had our follow-up board meeting, it was almost like, how can we not say it now and do it now because the conference just set up the theme just so brilliantly. I think Vershawn Young was the keynote speaker that year. Again, I wasn't obviously the only person to do it, but, you know, that was kind of one of the things I was able to help usher in that position for the HBCU representative, having those intentional positions on the boards. And particularly, because of our region, most HBCUs are in the Southeast. So kind of like, how can we be so absent here, like regionally, and there are so many of us here.

I think having more representation on boards and actively reaching out to HBCUs. You know, we're smaller functions in general. A lot of us are wearing many hats, writing centers included. I think having to intentionally reach out makes a difference . . . being intentional, reaching out, and trying to mentor. Again, I think if people feel that their voices are valued, you know, then you're more apt to want to dig in and give a little bit of extra energy. I think that that part of being intentional is really, really, really key. You know, sharing the wealth a little bit more. I think we need to be everywhere, right? So maybe we can be at all different

places. You just have a lot of different voices coming in at one time, which would be like our utopia.

Shane to Neal Lerner: You've seen writing center studies scholarship grow a lot over the past several decades. I imagine this development of scholarship has been exciting to see. But I also imagine you've seen reoccurring trends and threads in research that writing centers face, maybe at an institutional level, that has caused some sense of frustration? [Episode 35: 07:44–11:16]

My frustration . . . and I'm not the only one to write about it, is that writing centers are in a funny place in terms of a constant need to justify their existence, a kind of perpetual funding and staffing crisis, partially because of their alignment, either with student services or student affairs or academic success centers. So there's this limit for many of them on what they could potentially be and do, that there's ways in which the role of writing center director is hamstrung by institutional realities.

A writing center is a true research site. Or writing centers, themselves, as a kind of disciplinary enterprise, is never quite realized in ways that I wish it could. And that's not any individual's fault necessarily, but it's just a structural thing that just seems to be perpetuated. I mean, if you go back and you read stuff from the late '80s, early '90s, there's lots of same themes. The stuff that . . . even a little bit later, right? The things that Nancy Grimm wrote about in the late '90s and her taking the field to task in lots of ways, for certain kinds of practices and attitudes and beliefs, it's still true.

I mean, Frankie Condon will talk about that too, right? You'll have plenty of people to say the field hasn't moved quite far enough for a whole variety of reasons. It's grown, but at the same time, it maybe hasn't grown as much as I think some of us would like. I've been frustrated in my own institution about grad students who haven't been as interested in studying the writing center as I would have been, right? Or as I was. That's for a whole variety of reasons.

Seeing writing center work as a career isn't as proliferated as I would like. I think I'm a bit frustrated by that.

At the same time, I've had many, many people work with me as grad students or in other roles who've gone on to direct writing centers. So that happens and that's a wonderful thing. But still generally, institutions . . . many have one writing center and then one writing center director and that's kind of the norm. One of the most fun pieces I've ever written was I drew on some studies from the 1930s of accounts of writing center directors in the 1930s. It's so many of the similar themes going on then as now. It seems endemic to institutions of higher education to have these kinds of limits on what the possibilities are.

Shane to Neal Lerner: In "Writing Center Pedagogy," you talk about how writing centers are social spaces and how centers inherently invite conversations on writing as process and are inherently collaborative. What are some of the constraints that affect social interactions in writing centers? [Episode 35: 14:12–16:39]

The thing I often think about is the role of interactants who aren't there, namely the classroom instructor, as well as a whole bunch of other people who aren't there who have an effect on the social scene for student writing. Whether it's their previous teachers, whether it's their perceived audience. How many things that students are writing in academia have actual audiences, right? Not very many. There are these hypothetical audiences. So they're trying to create and make up and imagine these audiences that they might not have a cultural connection to, right? So some of the constraints are cultural, social, ideological, particularly around multilingual writers and the ways in which consultants have to play these multiple roles or have this kind of insider knowledge that they don't often have.

. . . I've spent 25 years thinking about the role of the instructor as a proxy within the session, right? The instructor's the third person making up that triad in a writing session, but the instructor is not there. The instructor might be there

because of his or her comments on a draft or because of the assignment itself, but the person's generally not there. What kind of conversation is that when it's being driven by someone who's not there? I mean, outside of writing centers, we have those kind of conversations sometimes. You're talking to your sibling about something your parents said and trying to figure something out. But it seems so inexact and imprecise and constraining in a way that I think is worth understanding much more thoroughly than we understand it now. For me, the constraint of social actors who aren't present is maybe the most important one.

Shane to Neal Lerner: Do you mind talking about the ways you develop peer tutors and what it looks like to prepare them to give feedback to student writing? [Episode 35: 16:40–20:46]

Yeah, that's a great question. The kinds of things that we emphasized last year in the training . . . I had an assistant director, a PhD student. We designed the training together and did the training together. What that training consisted of just looks different in so many different places . . . I mean, in some ways there's a basic pedagogical function of it, which is, "How do you give people feedback on their writing to help them improve? What are the best practices around that?" And no surprise, it all has to be very kind of hands on. There's a lot of practice to it. I think the thing that I extend from any of my teaching is the ways in which these kinds of practices need to be out of what people want and where they're coming from and what their attitudes are.

So trying to explore what their experiences have been, what their attitudes are, what their beliefs are, because the way we practice teaching and tutoring is so shaped by beliefs that often we don't even realize, the implicit biases and sometimes simply fears, right?

I'll give you an example of that. One of the things I instituted more than it had been done up to that point was online consultation. And we do it synchronously. When

I started at Northeastern there was email consultation, nobody was ever very happy about it, and it was pretty low volume. There was essentially one person assigned to deal with it, so we eventually got rid of that. And we went to synchronous online using the WC Online platform. There's so many ways in which a lot of consultants really were uneasy with it because it was so different and the norms are so different than face-to-face consulting. Part of the issue around helping them be successful in that endeavor was facing those fears. What were they afraid of? Were their goals for the sessions not quite aligned with what the student's goals were and with what the medium might afford? So we just spent a lot of time talking about those issues and practicing those issues.

Training's always lots of scenarios and reflecting on problem solving in a way with different scenarios. We often have done a lot of that. It often involves reading and response to that reading pretty much every . . . last year we would have monthly staff meetings that were training sessions. We often had guest speakers with expertise. There's no way we can be experts of everything . . . 35% of the students who came in were multilingual writers, so we're always searching for expertise on helping us work most effectively with multilingual writers or with grad students or with disciplinary writers. Bringing in others to help gives us the benefit of their expertise and also pushes the writing center out into the consciousness of these other folks knowing that this is a place on campus that's doing a particular kind of work that's important and valuable. I think in general terms, that kind of covers it. I was lucky to have co-written a textbook with Paula Gillespie on training writing tutors. So I often draw from that, too.

Shane to Rebecca S. Nowacek: What has surprised you the most about being a director of a writing center? [Episode 43: 07:03–11:40]

This is particularly on my mind on the heels of all these exit interviews that I did with graduating seniors. I'm thinking

about how much administrative work matters and constantly I feel like I have to . . . not reinvent my principles, I think my principles are pretty strong and constant, but the practice of it is constantly in progress. I've always believed that it's really important to have collaborative, transparent principles that guide our approach to writing program administration.

I've had such great role models in this. I was a graduate tutor at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, where I got to work with Brad Hughes, who was extraordinary in so many ways, including both how capacious his conversations about writing across campus could be, and also so profoundly humane in the way that he would listen to people and remember things that you said and the names of the people in your family that you care about and your dog. He was such a great model of both the scope of the ambition and how focused you need to be on the people you're working with in order to do that in a sustainable and humane way. Kris Ratcliffe was my senior colleague here at Marquette for many years and I learned so much from her about transparent, inclusive processes and how those are not just in what we say our values are, but how it plays out in committee work. And just seeing it on a daily basis was so powerful and I'm really so fortunate now I have a fantastic co-director in Jenn Fishman, my colleague, and we've moved into co-directing in the last year, year and a half. It has been such an extraordinary pleasure. It has always been the case ever since Jenn came to Marquette. I always say that all my synapses fire when I'm in conversation with Jenn. I think about more ambitious projects and better ways to achieve them.

. . . I've always had great models of how collaborative and transparent the work needs to be and yet I am surprised by all the things that I don't know about how to make that happen . . . the tutors will be fantastic partners if you invite them into the conversations and really mean it. If you just shut up long enough to listen to what they're telling you about, what they need and what writers might need, where

the mismatch between your intention and how things played out was. I learned that through exit interviews . . . we have changed so many things about the way the writing center is organized and runs mentoring and various transitions. We have something called a “leadership team” and the structure of that adjusts depending on what we learned from people.

All of this is a really long-winded way of saying that in some sense I’m not surprised in the big picture, but I’m constantly surprised about how much, all of your little choices, all the administrative details matter for making our ideals of collaborative, transparent decision-making and administrative work. How much it matters for making that the lived experience for everybody who’s in the writing center. Do they feel respected and included in the work?

Shane to Rebecca S. Nowacek: You’ve been a director for nine years. What do you find most fulfilling about your work? [Episode 43: 01:51–06:15]

There are so many things! I love, love, love writing center work. So we could spend all of our time talking about what’s fulfilling in this work, most on my mind right now is the pleasure of working with the students who are our tutors. Some of them take the tutor education class in spring of their junior year so I get to work with them for that semester and two more, but many of them take it . . . their first semester of college. They take the class as a first-year student. I work with them for seven semesters, and it is a privilege. It is a pleasure to watch these students grow and blossom and try things out and fail with some things and knock other things out of the park.

Being a writing tutor isn’t necessarily listed as one of the high impact practices that you know are batted about in university talk, but I stand by it. Being a peer writing tutor as an undergraduate is a profoundly transformative experience. I see it, we do exit interviews and many of our tutors talk about that.

I should say we're mostly an undergraduate-staffed writing center, but we also have a handful of truly fantastic graduate students who do extraordinary work in it. It's a great pleasure to work with and alongside of them and see them really growing as leaders and scholars, so that's one part of it. Another pleasure is I really like the work myself . . . I used to keep at least a shift or two on the schedule myself. As our writing center has grown over the past eight or so years, that's been increasingly difficult to do, but I do still work with writers coming into our writing center. It's a tremendous pleasure to learn about why people want to go to dental school or what they're working on in this capstone in their physician assistant's studies program or whatever. It's intellectually demanding and horizon expanding work just as somebody who gets to talk with writers from all different disciplines.

It's a great site for research. I'm interested in studying and learning more about transfer of learning. It's a brilliant site for research on that subject. So that's another pleasure and there are more . . . there is something deeply gratifying about being able to try to be a nimble program in our university, to try to build different kinds of programs that speak to the needs of our campus or the broader Milwaukee community. To be able to work with our office of admissions, to run workshops for area high school students who are writing college application essays and we hope that maybe they want to come to Marquette, but many of them end up in other places. But being in conversation with these young students on a Saturday morning, they show up at 8:30am or something extraordinary for high school students. And being able to build that with our undergraduate tutors . . .

Sure, there are lots of reports that need to be generated and forms that need to be filled out. I don't mind doing that because the other part of the job is being able to build programming that seems to fill a real need. That's pleasurable in ways that I maybe didn't anticipate.

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The throughline in these conversations, to me, is the joy of collaborating with tutors and building a culture that advocates for student writing. Writing centers are unique spaces that can be a means for shifting attitudes and beliefs about writing across colleges and universities. They are sites for interdisciplinary interactions and research. And really, writing centers are places where student writers and tutors can be encouraged. There seems to be a constant need for centers to increase visibility within institutions and share their mission with administrators, faculty, and students.

Overall, writing centers offer an opportunity to educate a range of stakeholders about writing theory and practice. For example, centers can be a means for amplifying antiracist policies on language and can value cultural and linguistic diversity. They can be active participants of social justice initiatives and can advocate for equity and inclusion across campus. Centers can work collaboratively with other organizations and programs (e.g., office of diversity and inclusion, writing across the curriculum). They can provide workshops and seminars for faculty and students. Further, writing centers can be one of the best sites for researching response, and one-on-one consultations can serve as a great opportunity to observe how conversation helps writers think and engage in the writing process.

For additional resources on writing center theory and practice, I suggest reading *Writing Centers and the New Racism: A Call for Sustainable Dialogue and Change* (Greenfield & Rowan, 2011), *The Everyday Writing Center: A Community of Practice* (Geller et al., 2006), and *Theories and Methods of Writing Center Studies* (Mackiewicz & Babcock, 2019). Moreover, I recommend *The Writing Center Journal* and *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*. I also offer the following questions to help generate more conversations about writing centers:

- How can teachers help support the mission of the writing center in first-year writing class? What can teachers learn from or about the writing center? How can teachers work with centers, and how can they encourage students to see writing centers as a resource for writing instruction?
- As a director, what administrative objectives and goals do you have? What kind of mission or culture do you want to help

cultivate in the writing center? What policies or practices need to adapt to current research and theory? As an administrator, how are you supporting tutors beyond providing resources to help with sessions?

- What kinds of writing center consultations (e.g., face-to-face, asynchronous, synchronous) are most beneficial to provide? What are the advantages and disadvantages?
- What does professional development look like in the writing center? What scholarship is being used (e.g., writing center studies, response, second-language theory)? What scenarios or workshops would be useful given the institution and student population?
- What cross-campus (and local community) collaborations can happen with the writing center?