

1

THE WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER AS HISTORY

Tracing the Growth of a Scholarly Community

MICHAEL A. PEMBERTON

In her May 2001 review of five recently published writing center books for *College English*, Jeanette Harris begins by noting how remarkable it is to see so many such texts published in a single year. “For a long time,” she says, “the writing center community considered it a good year if more than two books focusing on writing centers made their way into print. . . . In fact, for a while it looked as if the term *writing center scholarship* might be an oxymoron” (662). Harris’s observation, just pointed enough to make many writing center professionals wince, is not so much a lament over the dearth of reputable scholarship as a tacit recognition of the relatively short history writing center studies have as a specialized area of inquiry. For the first few decades of the community’s existence as a community, most writing center directors were more interested in surviving annual funding uncertainties than conducting directed research or pursuing publication, and there was often very little institutional support for writing center research even if a director were so inclined. Writing center work was generally looked upon as a service function, geared toward remediation, and not worthy of much regard academically or institutionally.

There was not much support to be found in a network of colleagues with similar interests, either, largely because such a network did not yet exist. Though a great many colleges, universities, and high schools contained writing centers or learning centers—some of them with histories that extended back to the 1930s or earlier—contact among these centers was very limited. As late as the mid-1970s, there were no formal writing center organizations, no publications with writing centers as their

focus, and relatively few opportunities for tutors and directors to gather together and discuss issues of mutual concern.

By the late 1970s, however, the number of people interested in writing center work had reached a critical mass. At a pivotal panel presentation at the 1977 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) in St. Louis, Muriel Harris, Mary Croft, Janice Neuleib, and Joyce Steward met to present papers and lead a discussion on writing lab theory and administration.

[T]heir audience was so large that many had to listen from the hallway. . . . [P]articipants recognized that their vigorous exchange of ideas could help them in the development of their own writing lab programs and that they needed a means of continuing their useful exchange. The enthusiasm of their discoveries ran the Writing Lab session head-on into the next presentation. Harris remembers that as participants for the next presentation tried to push their way into the room, she suggested that a newsletter would be the best way to continue their collaboration. She also realized that they needed each other's addresses and passed around a sheet of paper [to collect them]. (Ballard and Anderson 1989, 7)

Even with a critical mass, a group has no power, no clout without an organ to communicate its platform and mission. Harris' innate sense of the need for such an instrument led to the creation of *The Writing Lab Newsletter (WLN)*, a manifesto through which writing center personnel could find a voice. Robert Connors once described the newsletter as a *kaffeklatsch* for its informal, welcoming nature; underlying that coziness was a political action instrument that led to the increased professionalism of the writing center community.

LAUNCHING A MOVEMENT

Muriel Harris—beginning assistant professor at Purdue University, faculty wife, Renaissance scholar, director of a brand-new “experimental” writing lab (all markers of a fairly powerless position)—voluntarily produced the first issue of *The Writing Lab Newsletter* and distributed it to the 49 people on the original mailing list in April 1977. No one at the time, least of all Harris, could have predicted what the eventual results of that initial effort would be—that the *WLN* would continue regular publication for over 25 years, eventually attract more than 1000 subscribers, become the principal means of communication among writing center tutors and directors, help to found a growing writing center com-

munity, and usher in an new era of writing center professionalism, scholarship, research, and theory.

With the prophetic words “WE ARE LAUNCHED!”, volume 1.1 of the *WLN* proclaimed that a new specialization within the growing rhetoric/composition community had been established, and over the course of the next quarter century, the *WLN* has given voice to its members’ concerns, interests, ideas, and fears, chronicling the growth of the developing writing center field on a monthly basis. The *Newsletter* and the community have evolved together, interdependently, and the changes that have taken place in one have quite often been reflected by or been a reflection of changes that have taken place in the other. For this reason, then, the *WLN*—perhaps more than any other resource—provides a unique window into the evolutionary process that has made the writing center community what it is today.

ETHOS AND THE PHATIC SHIFT

When Robert Connors wrote a review called “Journals in Composition Studies” for *College English* in 1984, *The Writing Lab Newsletter* was singled out for special attention, partly because it represented the recent emergence of a new constituency within composition studies—writing center specialists—and partly because of the unique ethos it embodied:

As Lisa Ede has pointed out to me, most of the content of newsletters is phatic communication, a sort of “Hey, I’m out here too and we’re all facing the same kinds of problems” halloo from some colleague previously unknown. *The Writing Lab Newsletter* illustrates this, remaining today what it has been since its inception—a classic and admirably useful newsletter without pretense to scholarly importance. . . . *WLN* acts like a bulletin-board for writing lab administrators, keeping them in touch, announcing who’s had a baby or lost a relative, offering help at home and handy-dandy tips. Though *WLN* remains a very specialized publication, useful only to writing lab administrators and tutors, it serves its special purpose well. It is, in addition, the most personalized and informal of all the journals covered here, strongly imbued with the character of its editor, Muriel Harris. It is the only writing journal that makes its readers feel like friends. (359)

Some aspects of this description, notably the “bulletin-board” function and friendly ethos, are as true of the *WLN* today as they were in 1984. But the nature of the bulletin board and its ethos have changed somewhat over time, due largely to the changing face of the profession

and the subtle evolution of the *WLN* itself. The *Newsletter's* communicative stance slowly became less personal and more professional, shifting away from birth announcements and brief requests for help, and moving toward calls for proposals, conference announcements, and job advertisements. All these forms of communication work to build and maintain community within a field, but they make different assumptions about the nature of the community and the best mechanisms for maintaining cohesion.

Tracking the points where the first type of phatic communication (personal/direct address) began to fade away in favor of the second (professional/indirect address) is difficult, given that the personal has never disappeared completely from the *WLN*. Many current articles use personal address or take the form of personal anecdotes. Harris's introductory editor's column in each issue, for instance, is always very personal, addressing readers directly and making friendly appeals from time to time. Still, it is possible to identify two of the regular features in the *Newsletter's* earliest issues—features with purely personal phatic functions—that have either completely vanished or that no longer appear with any regularity. These are (1) lists of new subscribers' mailing addresses and (2) "letters to the editor" that make suggestions or requests.

Sharing names and addresses was, perhaps, the *WLN's* most important function in its early years. Growing directly out of the CCCC session that gave the newsletter its start, the publication of address lists reflected how critical it was for members of the nascent community to know who they were, individually, and where they were all located. As Harris proclaimed at the start of volume 1, issue 1:

Here is the first issue of THE WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER proposed at the CCCC's, and our first order of business is to have each other's names. Enclosed is an initial list, but as you spread the word and encourage other lab people to join us, supplementary lists will be included in future newsletters. (1)¹

These supplemental lists appeared in every issue for the next three years, but before long they became an impractical burden on the *Newsletter's* very limited printing space. In September 1981, because of the "stack of manuscripts waiting to appear" and because during the previous summer over 50 people had joined the newsletter group, Harris announced it would no longer be possible to continue listing the names and addresses of all the new members in the Newsletter (6.1, 1).²

The mailing list at that point exceeded 1000 subscribers, and the one-time “small community” of writing center specialists was no longer quite so small anymore. The *Newsletter* was clearly achieving its intended goals: to create and build community and to provide a place for scholarly output.

In a similar fashion, one of the *Newsletter*'s earliest staple features—short letters and announcements from members of the newsletter group—was gradually crowded out by longer, more substantive articles and extended reports on professional meetings. In volume 2.5 (January 1978), for example, short pieces of correspondence almost completely fill the issue. Paul Bator (Wayne State) asks to hear from people with experience in basic writing and/or proficiency testing, Ken Bruffee (Brooklyn College) provides a short bibliography on training peer tutors, and a new “Editor’s Mailbag” prints four short letters announcing, among other things, new writing labs at Brigham Young University and Southern Methodist University; another of the letters asks whether the *Newsletter* might consider publishing job announcements for qualified “lab people” (3). A mere two years later, lengthy program descriptions and professional announcements take up a majority of the publication’s available space. Short letters from readers linger for a long time; at least one is printed in every issue through November 1986 (11.3). After that date, they appear only sporadically, the next one not showing up until June 1987 (11.10).

Still, despite its increasingly professional tone, Harris believes that the core ethos of the *Newsletter* has remained essentially unchanged. It continues to be personal, practical, and accessible, providing an important mechanism for new tutors and directors to enter the writing center community and immediately feel a part of it. “The *Newsletter* is still a way for people to keep in touch, new people in particular,” she says. “A lot of people express gratitude for the *Newsletter*'s role in doing this—they don’t read listservs or go to conferences. I still try to keep it open to people at all levels of expertise. . . . I think of it as a conversation rather than a publication with a head editor. The *Newsletter* is a community for keeping people in by mentoring them” (Harris 2001).

BUILDING A COMMUNITY OF PROFESSIONALS

Besides publishing information about its subscribers and generating a sense of community through the concrete act of identifying them by name, the *Newsletter* also functioned, then as today, as a news service,

publicizing conferences and professional meetings that would allow the community to gather face to face. Unsurprisingly, the first conferences announced in the *WLN* were not focused on writing centers *per se*. Volume 1.1 included an announcement for “SET IT WRITE—A Conference on the Teaching of Writing” at Illinois State, and volume 1.2 publicized the sixth annual Wyoming Conference on Freshman and Sophomore English. The March 1978 (2.7) issue did forecast an upcoming “Special Interest Session on Writing Labs at the CCCC’s” (1), but the first actual writing center conference announced in the *WLN* was the Ohio Writing Labs Conference, hosted by the English department at Youngstown State University, Nancy McCracken coordinating (January 1979, 3.5). In later issues, conference announcements and calls for manuscripts appeared frequently, eventually being given their own section in March 1981 (5.7).

In keeping with the philosophy that “if it’s not written, it didn’t happen,” early issues of the *Newsletter* documented “conference reports” from CCCC and other meetings, and these reports are striking, not only for what has changed but for what has remained the same. Consider the following list of “the most important areas discussed” in a special CCCC session on “The Writing Lab as Supplement to Freshman English” by James S. Hill:

1. continuity of instruction in the classroom and lab, 2. the use of grammatical exercises in the lab as opposed to composition, 3. general expense of operating a lab, 4. accountability to the English Department, 5. the importance of effective communication between the lab and classroom, 6. the psychological implications of the lab as a place of learning rather than for “bad” students, 7. referral procedures—drop in or appointment, 8. the lab as one hour credit in addition to the classroom, 9. the importance of having a rhetorician in the English Department who can oversee and organize the format of the lab, and 10. the use of teaching assistants in the lab. (May 1978, 2.9:1)

These early conference reports also display a fair amount of drum-beating and revivalist enthusiasm, promoting both the strength of the community and the growth of the profession. Harris was particularly adept at displaying this sense of excitement. In her report on the 1979 CCCC, she begins by saying:

Writing labs are thriving and, while still in a state of growth, have already become one of the major areas of concentration in the field of composition. In the 1979 CCCC's program, writing labs were listed as one of the seven major topics dealt with in multiple conferences sessions. In addition to the five sessions on writing labs so adeptly coordinated by Janice Neuleib (Illinois State University), there was also the Special Interest Session on Writing Labs which attracted over 150 people! From all this, I have a strong sense not only of the continued growth of labs but also of the establishment of labs as integral parts of composition programs. (May 1979, 3.9:1)

For writing center specialists, many of whom were "at the periphery of the academic structure" with "less pay, less job security, and no access to tenure" (Harris, 3.9:1), the existence of a vital, thriving organization that shared professional interests while working to address these inequalities was an exciting prospect indeed.

Job announcements gave concrete evidence to the growing sense of professionalism. The first such advertisement to appear in the *WLN* was for a full-time, tenure track, assistant professor position directing the writing lab (half time) at Central Connecticut College. The February 1980 (4.6) issue published four such job announcements—though not all were specifically for writing lab specialists—and subsequent issues regularly included job ads, gradually focusing more and more on writing center director and tutorial positions.

ORGANIZING THE COMMUNITY FOR ACTION

As the newsletter group grew, so did the impetus to establish more formal, independent, professional organizations, and the *WLN* was an important mechanism for publicizing these groups as they coalesced, established charters, and held conferences. The early 1980s were especially active in this regard. The April 1981 (5.8) issue announced the upcoming third annual conference of the Writing Centers Association (later to become the East Central WCA) as well as the formation of the Southeastern WCA with Gary Olson as president.³ In September 1982 (7.7), the Rocky Mountain WCA announced its first conference, and in November 1982 the National Writing Centers Association (NWCA) was recognized by NCTE and awarded assembly status (first announced in a short note in issue 7.4, December 1982). January 1983 (7.5) saw notices for the first Midwest WCA conference; the initial meeting of the Texas Association of Writing Center Directors, organized by Jeanette Harris; and a "Calendar of Writing Lab Conferences" that listed six regional

events scheduled between February and May. In the September 1983 (8.1) issue, NWCA's first president, Nancy McCracken, explained how the national organization had grown out of the WCA: East Central, an article that was followed on the next page by a "News from the Regions" column, listing contact information for the five existing regionals (WCA: East Central, Southeast WCA, Rocky Mountain WCA, Midwest WCA, and Texas WCA) and two regionals that were "in progress" (Mid-Atlantic WCA and New England WCA). A call for the first meeting of the newly-formed Pacific Coast WCA appeared less than a year later (June 1984, 8.10).

The dramatic growth of writing center professional organizations, in some ways, begged important questions that had to be addressed before the organizations could claim to represent a "community" or achieve some sort of epistemological coherence: Just what, exactly, did it mean to work in a writing center or to be a "writing center professional"? What was the profession's theoretical grounding? What were the principles of its pedagogy? What should the goals of the discipline be, professionally and academically, and what were the best methods for working to achieve them? These questions entailed not only matters of self-definition and practice but also status and respect. The only way to elevate the status of writing center professionals in an academic community was (and is) to imbue it with its own epistemological principles, theoretical foundations, and research agendas.

The newsletter provided space for important discussions in and about the profession in contrast to *CCC* and *College English*, which shut out such explorations. In the early 1980s, the *WLN* published a number of minor "manifestos," statements of principle or critiques of the field that were intended largely to serve as a "wake up call" to those who might otherwise have been content to see a professional literature filled with little more than Connors's "handy dandy tips" for tutoring. Beginning with Judith Fishman's "The Writing Center—What Is Its Center?" in September 1980 (5.1), a number of writers—Stephen North, Angela Scanzello, William Stull, Maureen Ryan, Patricia Murray, and Linda Bannister among them—reflected on the need for writing center people to do more than just organize; they had to earn credibility and be willing to flex their professional credentials in order to gain the respect they deserved.

Fishman's article confronted some of the harsh realities of writing center work. Too often, she said, center folk felt they could not afford

the luxury of defining who they were and what they did because working in a writing center meant a constant struggle for survival. “Many of us are uncentered, unstable, and vulnerable in our own institutions. . . . We live on the periphery, many without faculty status, without a tenure track position” (2). Given these pressures and the constant demands to demonstrate successful results for student learning, claimed Fishman, too many center directors lapsed into the easy out of grammar exercises, programmed instruction, and similar activities that allowed for easily-quantifiable outcomes testing. She challenged her audience to think differently: “We are a part of a larger whole and a larger effort,” she states, “to effect change in the way in which our students are educated” (4). Her argument was, in effect, a declaration of independence and a rallying cry for defensible borders. Not only must writing center professionals make efforts to protect themselves institutionally, but they also must promote a student-centered, collaborative, process-oriented environment in the center itself, driving their own pedagogies rather than being driven by those which might be more administratively convenient.

One year later, Steve North made similar points in “Us ’n’ Howie: The Shape of Our Ignorance,” but he was far less diplomatic than Fishman. In a strikingly acerbic style, North said:

I’m here to tell you that the PROBLEM, in capital letters, is that we don’t know the fundamentals. That when it comes to teaching writing in individualized ways, one to one, *we don’t know what we are doing*. . . . Teaching writing in writing centers is expensive, hard work. If we are to survive, we must do it very, very well—better than anyone else. For that to happen, we must know everything we can about what we do and how we do it; we have to be able to measure our success, and on our terms. (September 1981, 6.1:5–6)

Other writers took up these calls with equal fervor in later issues of the *WLN*, though their tone was somewhat less strident. Angela Scanzello, in “The Writing Center in an Identity Crisis” (December 1981, 6.4), admitted the difficulty of defining just what a writing center is, but argued that it “can no longer be limited to a ‘place’ where under-achievers may be taught to write better by using programmed materials with the help of tutors” (8). William Stull, writing about “The Writing Lab’s Three Constituencies” in the January 1982 (6.5) issue, extolled the progress writing centers had made since the 1970s, but charged his audience to think of themselves as professionals with professional status. “[W]e need to cultivate our hard-won self-respect. . . . We must, if we are

to earn lasting respect from our students and colleagues—and from ourselves” (3).

The central message conveyed in these early manifestos was this: respect for writing centers and the people who work in them will only come if they are well-read, well-trained, and willing to wage war on the battleground of theory for the pedagogies they believe are the most effective. The readers of the *Newsletter* heard these cries and responded to them, some by pursuing advanced degrees, others by marshalling the results of current research in defense of their pedagogies, still others by sharing their experiences at conferences and in print.

In both direct and indirect ways, then, through address lists, job advertisements, calls for proposals, conference announcements, event calendars, conference reports, minutes from the meetings of regional and national organizations, and published manifestos, *The Writing Lab Newsletter* was instrumental in the continuing growth and development of the writing center profession. It facilitated communication and organization among its members, built a network of academics and professionals with similar interests, and provided a forum for discussions that helped to build both a professional identity for writing center specialists and agendas for future action.

BUILDING A COMMUNITY OF SCHOLARS

Yet the existence of a professional community in and of itself is no guarantee of increased respect or enhanced status in an academic institution. The only way for writing centers to escape the stigma of their second-class “service function” in educational institutions is to enhance their intellectual credentials, to conduct research and apply theory in ways that other academics will recognize and value. Unfortunately, *The Writing Lab Newsletter*, particularly in its earliest incarnation, was suitable only for the promotion of a growing research agenda, not its publication or dissemination. Its five- to ten-page format was not long enough to publish traditional academic articles with detailed research findings or extended theoretical arguments. The low print quality and lack of a peer review process also dissuaded many academics from seeing it as an outlet for serious research; few promotion and tenure committees were likely to regard it very highly.

Working in its favor, however, was the fact that early on there were almost no alternative outlets for writing center scholarship. The *Writing Center Journal (WCJ)* did not publish its first issue until 1980, and neither

College English nor *College Composition and Communication* saw writing center research as an area of much interest to its readership. Writing center scholars could very well feel marginalized and shut out by the major composition journals, and when *WCJ* did appear, it may well have given other editors the opportunity to shunt writing center essays to a less central journal. In point of fact, very few people at that time had any clear sense of what writing center scholarship was or what writing center theory might be. The *WLN*, then, provided an essential role as a forum for discussing these issues, once again grappling with matters of definition and attempting to reconcile sometimes conflicting perspectives about where the field was going and what it should be trying to accomplish. Later, as the profile and ethos of the *Newsletter* became more professional and conformed more closely to the traditional norms of academic publishing, academics were more likely to see it as a legitimate (and status-enhancing) venue for publication.

The development has been a gradual one, though. The first actual “article” in the *WLN* was Lorraine Perkins’s “An Approach to Organization” in the December 1977 (2.4) issue. Though little more than a description of how to discuss the concepts of “topic” and “thesis” in a half-hour “interview,” it was the lengthiest article that had appeared in *WLN* to date. James Hill’s March 1978 (2.7) article, “The Writing Lab: An Anecdote,” was the first to include a narrative retelling of a tutorial session, and Jane Optiz’s summary of her Writing Workshop’s first semester of operation at Saint John’s University (May 1978, 2.9) was the first published statistical account of student usage patterns for a writing center. A few months later, Tilly Eggers’s article on “Evaluation and Instruction” in the December 1979 (4.4) issue became the first to cite work by well-known rhetoricians and linguists (James Moffett, James Britton, Frank Smith, and Kenneth Goodman), invoking them in support of the tutorial approach used in her writing center at the University of Wyoming. In each of these articles, it is possible to see some initial probings toward research models and methods—pedagogical theory, case study, statistical analysis, application of previous research—but they are clearly just probings at this point, not rigorous work firmly grounded in well-established paradigms of investigation. This lack of rigor was partly due to the fact that “writing center research” had yet to be defined, but it was also due to the *WLN*’s ethos which did not really invite the publication of traditional, serious-minded, rigorous scholar-

ship. Not until Janice Neuleib's "Proving We Did It" appeared in March 1980 (4.7) did any articles even include bibliographic references.

The early 1980s, however, were a transformative period for the *Newsletter* in terms of the kind and quality of scholarship it began to publish. The November 1980 (5.3) issue saw the publication of John Sadlon's comparison group study on "The Effect of a Skills Center Upon the Writing Improvement of Freshmen Composition Students," a relatively short piece that nevertheless followed the conventions of experimental reports: description of purpose, description of methods and procedures, review of previous research, presentation of results, and summative conclusion. The borrowed paradigm brought with it a sense of rigor and legitimacy that many readers found appealing. At the very least, it demonstrated that writing center specialists could conduct and present research using investigative models that had already been sanctioned by the academy.

Without question, writing centers were searching for a theoretical firmament that would, among other things, provide them with a coherent agenda for research. Writers in the *WLN* regularly began to demand that tutors and directors be conversant with current theory, and in their published pieces they sometimes incorporated theories from other disciplines, sometimes drew directly from recent work in composition studies. Thomas Duke's "The Writing Lab as Crisis Center: Suggestions for the Interview" (May 1981, 5.9), for example, considered how crisis intervention theory might impact writing center practice; Steve North's "Us 'n Howie: The Shape of Our Ignorance" (September 1981, 6.1) argued that writing center professionals had to become more conversant with the work of composition theorists such as Janet Emig, Sondra Perl, Nancy Sommers, Richard Beach, Linda Flower and John Hayes, and Mina Shaughnessy; and Mary King in her April 1982 (6.8) "A Writing Lab Profile" stated firmly that

The writing center professional, then, needs training in composition theory and in linguistics; otherwise she/he may bring to student writing an interpretive and prescriptive habit of reading, accompanied by an overemphasis on error. . . . Some knowledge about information processing and reading reinforces the teacher's commitment to reading student papers for ideas, as does learning theory, especially Piaget's theories of cognitive development. Piaget emphasized the importance of social interaction in learning, providing the basis for the teaching style needed in a writing center. (7)

One pivotal article that responded to these calls was Janice Neuleib's December 1984 (9.4) piece on "Research in the Writing Center: What to Do and Where to Go to Become Research Oriented." Beginning with her own frustrations with experimental pre-treatment, post-treatment designs that just didn't seem to work in a writing center environment, Neuleib sought alternative designs and methodologies that would. In the course of this article, she offered readers a number of models that could work well for writing center research—case studies, protocol analyses, surveys, rhetorical studies, computer-assisted instruction, and multivariate statistical analyses—and, citing Harris's work in particular, she concluded that "we are often doing research in composition by what we do daily in writing centers. We just don't remember that it is research" (12).

Over the years, writing center professionals have taken North's, King's, and Neuleib's admonitions to heart, and this is nowhere more evident than in the articles that have appeared in the *Newsletter*. Even a cursory review of some of the articles under "Theories" in *The Writing Lab Newsletter Index* indicates the increasing attention to research and the importance of theory to writing center work. Early articles such as Tilly Eggers's "Evaluation and Instruction" (December 1979, 4.4) and Mary King's "Teaching for Cognitive Growth" (March 1983, 7.7) highlighted the practical contributions of theory to tutoring practice; later articles such as Mick Kennedy's "Expressionism and Social Constructionism in the Writing Center: How Do They Benefit Students?" (November 1997, 22.3) and James Upton's "Brain-Compatible Learning: The Writing Center Connection" (June 1999, 23.10) seem to have a much stronger focus on theory as theory. It is also true that articles which foreground theory have become much more commonplace in recent issues of the *Newsletter*. Of the 132 articles included in the "Theories" section of the *WLN Index*, nearly 50% of them (64) have been published in the last seven years.⁴ Harris herself notes that one of the biggest changes in the content of the *Newsletter* is that "people have gotten more sophisticated and thoughtful. The depth of the articles has increased dramatically, and this is especially evident in those written by tutors. The knowledge base is more complete, and the quality of the writing has greatly increased" (interview, 2001).

CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPACTS

It would be hard to overstate the contribution that *The Writing Lab Newsletter* has made to the field of writing center scholarship, and it's a contribution that continues to this day. Beginning with a small group of people sharing similar interests after a single conference panel twenty-five years ago, the *Newsletter* and its readers have been important, driving forces behind what is now one of rhetoric and composition's most active and vibrant special interest groups. At the CCCC conference in Denver, Colorado (2001), for example, more than thirty panels on writing centers were listed in the conference program—one of the most prominent areas of interest at the entire conference. Most major publishers and many university presses displayed books on writing center research and practice, and the annual WCenter breakfast drew nearly a hundred attendees. The National Writing Centers Association has been renamed the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA), with an executive board that includes representatives from ten regional WCAs, three publications, a listserv, and a website. Annual scholarship awards are given for best article and best book about writing centers, and the IWCA regularly awards grants to writing center professionals and graduate students conducting original research.

Through it all, the *Newsletter* has been there—connecting, promoting, publicizing, supporting, enhancing, stimulating, provoking, and publishing. It has sought to professionalize the field by elevating it to the realm of theory while, at the same time, making sure it never forgets that pedagogy lies at the heart of what it does. It has embraced the field's diversity and given voice to its many concerns, but it has always insisted that there are some principles we can all agree upon: the care we have for our students, the value of collaborative learning, the importance of an ethical pedagogy, the joy of teaching. It has demanded the best work from the most experienced scholars, and it has welcomed the newest discoveries of the least experienced tutors. In fact, the *Newsletter*, through its "Tutors Column" has provided a publication outlet for undergraduate and graduate students, allowing them to become active members of the writing center community. It has not only grown with and recorded the shape of the emerging writing center field over the last 25 years, but it has also been a motivating force, a primary agent of that growth.

Of course, in saying the *Newsletter* has made this contribution, I am also saying that Muriel Harris has done so. As the *Newsletter*'s only editor and one of the most visible and productive scholars in the field of writ-

ing center research, theory, and practice, Muriel Harris has helped determine the shape of writing center studies. Those of us who are fully invested in this discipline and all its possibilities owe her a tremendous debt. Unsurprisingly, Mickey doesn't see it that way. In reflecting on her experience as editor of the *WLN*, Mickey says in typically self-effacing fashion:

It's been a very positive experience. I get to read a lot of incredibly good writing, I stay in contact with people, and I think I've helped some people realize they are authors with interesting things to say. I hope that the *Newsletter* has helped to establish the writing center community—the regionals, the annual breakfast, the *WLN* is a part of that. I feel attached to the community and still want to be a part of it; I want the *Newsletter* to remain that way, too. I'm grateful to be a part of it. (interview, 2001)

It is not unreasonable to say, however, despite Mickey's protestations of modesty, that in a fundamental way, the *Writing Lab Newsletter* created the essential network that would allow a group of diverse scholars with similar interests and institutional positions to become a genuine academic community. This community used the periodical to develop its own sense of self and to set in place agendas for research and political action. It is difficult to imagine how the writing center profession would have evolved were it not for this voice and the leadership of its editor, Muriel Harris.

APPENDIX 1

A Chronology of Format Changes in the Writing Lab Newsletter, 1977-2003

While issues of format may not initially seem of importance, the information that follows about the concrete ways the *WLN* evolved demonstrates in graphic and tangible ways the growth and professionalization of the writing center community at large.

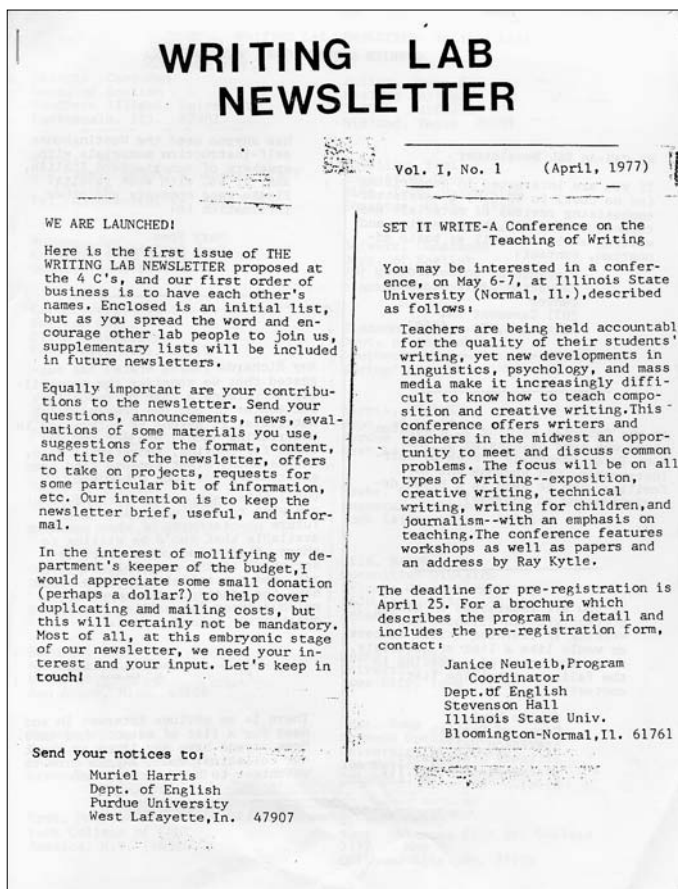


Figure 1. *Writing Lab Newsletter*, Volume 1, Number 1

The first issue of *The Writing Lab Newsletter* was, by nearly all measures, a primitive production. Columns typed on a standard typewriter were cut with scissors and affixed to a sheet of typing paper with Scotch tape.

Ruled lines between the columns were crooked, the lettering in the masthead was crude and off-center, and dark tape shadows appeared throughout. It was amateurish and unimpressive. But it was a beginning.

By issue 1.2 (June 1977), the tape shadows had mostly disappeared, but the format remained otherwise unchanged until issue 2.2 (October 1977), when a small decorative picture of a fruit basket was added to the upper left corner. In issue 2.4 (December 1977), this graphic was replaced by a border of holly along the top edge, and in subsequent issues, pictures of plants decorated the title header in annual cycles through issue 9.10 (June 1985). It was early in this period that “Harris’s daughter, Rebecca, fresh from her journalism classes at Indiana University, initiated the *Newsletter’s* first technical innovations when she showed her mother that rubber cement and border tape produced a more attractive paste-up” (Ballard and Anderson 1989, 7).

The total number of pages fluctuated during the first three years, ranging between five and ten, depending on the number of new submissions and the number of people who joined the newsletter group. In May 1980 (4.9), the length stabilized (more or less) at ten pages until March 1984 (8.7) when it jumped to twelve, and March 1985 when it jumped again to fourteen.

The first issue of the fall 1985 academic year (10.1, September) introduced some significant changes, reflecting what Harris referred to as “an on-going search for a more readable format” (1). A new title header appeared—a hand-drawn pencil enclosing the words “Writing Lab Newsletter,” running headers appeared in the upper corners of each page, and ornate borders between articles disappeared in favor of cleaner, straighter lines. A heavier bond paper also gave the *Newsletter* a more substantial feel and a heftier aesthetic appearance. The use of thicker, more durable paper may have been prompted by the fact—later confirmed by a formal reader survey—that “[a]s many as 20 to 30 readers commonly share[d] a single copy of an issue which [was] passed from lab directors to department chairs to deans” (Ballard and Anderson 1989, 8).

Two and a half years later, thanks to a Macintosh desktop publishing system provided by Purdue’s Dean of Academic Services, the *Newsletter* printed its first entirely computer-formatted issue in January 1988 (12.5). Accompanying this technological shift was the introduction of its first table of contents (“...inside...”), a title for the editor’s monthly introduction to the issue (“...from the editor...”), justified columns, run-

ning page numbers in the bottom corners, a more sophisticated and easily readable serif typeface, and wider margins overall. The hand-drawn pencil in the masthead was updated with a computer-generated version and, overall, the whole publication underwent a major facelift. It was now slick, clean, and professional looking, exchanging its second-hand, hand-crafted apparel for a business suit and spats.

The next major change in format occurred in September 1988 (13.1), shortly after the results of a reader survey were collected and tallied. Harris's "...from the editor..." message in the June 1988 (12.10) issue notes that

I've found from browsing through those surveys that some things about the newsletter format will have to change. For example, despite the small (very small) minority of us who like publications on colored paper (to brighten up our mailboxes, identify current issues more easily, and locate older issues in files), the vast majority of this group does a lot of duplicating of articles from the newsletter, and copying machines are apparently unable to cope with colored paper. And I didn't realize how those staples at the sides of issues were snapping people's fingernails and their patience when prying open pages to read and to copy (sorry). So, no more side staples. (1-2)

The first issue of volume 13 (September 1988) was indeed missing the familiar staple in the corner, a staple that represented, in some ways, the last vestige of its informal, unpretentious, generally humble "newsletter" origins. The *Newsletter* was now a saddle-stitched (two staples on the outside spine) 16-page monthly booklet.⁵ The front page had increased white space for the masthead, three columns instead of two (with the table of contents in a central boxed-and-shaded position), and all the editorial and subscription information contained in a boxed-and-shaded space on page two. In addition, the *Newsletter's* title now appeared opposite the month and year in upper corners of all interior pages, an indication, possibly, of the extent to which articles were regularly being copied for use in presentations and tutor training sessions; essential bibliographic and reference information could now be easily included in all such copies.

In September 1993 (18.1), the most recent of the *Newsletter's* physical evolutions took place—not as dramatic, perhaps, as some of the other transformations it had undergone, but striking nonetheless. The trademark pencil in the masthead was gone, replaced by a large, bold, all-cap "THE WRITING LAB" (with a script "W") and a smaller, all-cap,

loosely tracked (i.e., stretched) “N E W S L E T T E R” underneath. Similar font changes took place in the print text, table of contents, and interior titles. The entire publication—interior pages as well as front page—went to a three-column format with a smaller, 9-point font (adjusted to 10-point in November 1994 [19.3]), presumably to allow the inclusion of more material within its 16-page space limitations.

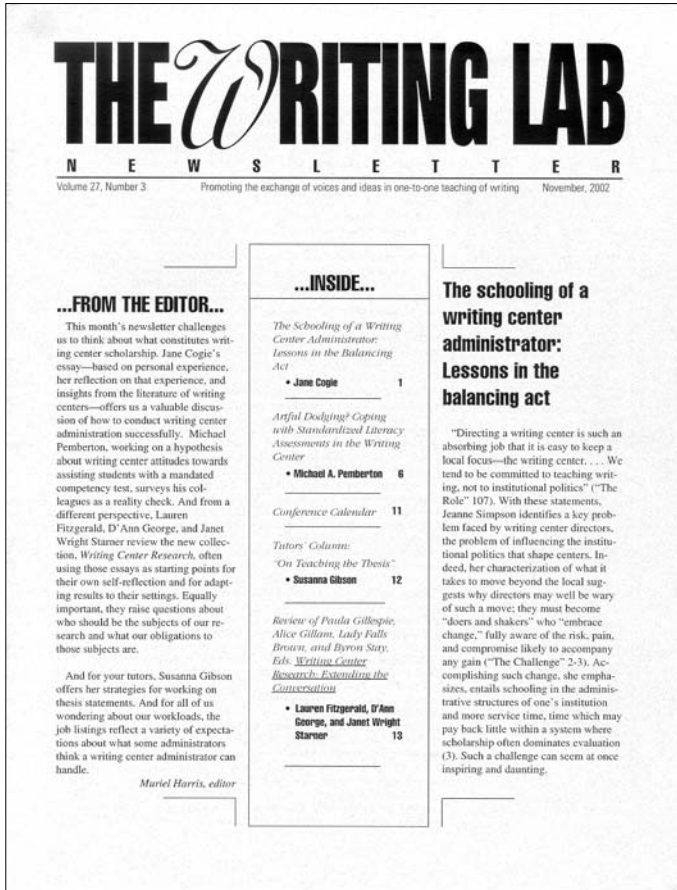


Figure 2. Writing Lab Newsletter, Volume 27, Number 3

APPENDIX 2

Subscription Fees and Subscriber Base of WLN (1977–2001)

- 1.1 (4/77) Donations requested of “(perhaps a dollar?) to help cover duplicating and mailing costs, but this will certainly not be mandatory” (1). Mailing list numbers 49.
- 1.2 (5/77) Donation checks should be made payable to Muriel Harris.
- 1.3 (6/77) Donations of “a dollar or two” requested.
- 2.2 (10/77) Donations of \$2 requested.
- 3.5 (1/79) Mailing list now “over 400.”
- 4.1 (9/79) Donations of \$3 requested.
- 4.6 (2/80) Answers questions about fees: there is “no subscription fee as such, your donation covers as long a time as your conscience permits.” Mailing list is “over 650.”
- 5.1 (6/81) Donations of \$5 requested, now specified as “for next year’s newsletter.” Checks may be made payable to Muriel Harris or the newsletter. Mailing list “grew from about 700 in September to over 950 in June” (1).
- 6.1 (9/81) Mailing list now over 1000. Checks may be made payable to Muriel Harris or Purdue University.
- 6.3 (11/81) Mailing list “almost 1200.” Checks may be made payable to Purdue University or Muriel Harris.
- 6.1 (6/82) Mailing list “over 1100.” Checks should be made payable to Purdue University.
- 9.4 (12/84) Harris issues a warning to those who haven’t donated recently, saying the *Newsletter* will be deleting non-contributors from its rolls.
- 10.10 (6/86) Donations of \$7.50 requested.
- 11.4 (12/86) *Newsletter* now has a “Non-Profit Organization” postage imprint.
- 11.5 (1/87) *Newsletter* first describes itself as “A Publication of the NWCA.”
- 12.2 (10/87) Donations of \$7.50 requested, \$12.50 for Canada.
- 13.3 (11/88) *Newsletter*’s ISSN (1040–3779) appears for the first time.
- 14.10 (6/90) Donations of \$10 requested, \$15 for Canada.
- 16.6 (2/92) Announcement of a price increase for “subscriptions” to \$15 (US), \$20 (Canada), \$40 (overseas). “Donations” is still used in indicia.
- 18.5 (1/94) “Donations” disappears from subscription information; “payments” is now used instead.