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### IN THE SPIRIT OF SERVICE

#### *Making Writing Center Research a “Featured Character”*

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For the last ten years, writing center scholars have been cheerily optimistic about the untapped research potential in writing centers. In 1993, for example, Michael Spooner referred to writing centers as “hot-houses of knowledge making,” acknowledging the tremendous amount of understanding about literacy that develops as one works in a writing center. Spooner, an academic book editor, was hoping some of “the breadth of expertise” would make its way into print (3). In the same year, Joyce Kinkead and Jeanette Harris concluded their edited collection, *Writing Centers in Context*, by commenting on a lack of writing center research, and particularly a lack of work on cultural and linguistic diversity. They encouraged research in this direction, speculating that the lack of development of writing center research might be because scholars had not yet addressed “the direction a writing center should take as a research center” (247). More recently (summer 2000), Kinkead and Harris observe that writing centers have still not reached their potential as sites of research, noting that most writing center directors have been too busy keeping programs “alive and healthy” (24).

I have heard many people who work in writing centers exclaim how much they learn in one day in a writing center. Indeed, many say that they learn more about how to be an effective teacher by working in a writing center than by taking courses in composition pedagogy. If there is so much learning happening in writing centers, what are the reasons for the untapped research potential, particularly research on the cultural and linguistic diversity that are the focus of so much writing center work? In this chapter, I’d like to explore that question as well as suggest ways to achieve the research potential of the writing center. An area of scholarship called the New Literacy Studies offers an exciting framework for thinking about research in writing centers, yet that potential

cannot be achieved without an understanding of the issues that have blocked the development of writing centers as research centers.

One of the reasons for the blocked potential is suggested in Kinkead and Harris's reference to directors being too busy keeping programs alive to develop a research program. That programmatic busy-ness interferes with research time is echoed by other writing center directors. Harvey Kail (2000), for example, admits that he is intrigued by calls for research emphasizing what is learned in a writing center (he is referring to earlier calls made by North 1984 and Trimbur 1992). Nevertheless, he writes, "The problem for me in answering such calls is that it is late in my day when I get around to thinking of the writing center director as the writing center researcher—very late in the day" (27). Kail describes his priorities in ways with which many writing center directors will identify—"teaching, service, service, service, and then research—on our service" (28). Kail says that in order to make research "a featured character, not a walk-on part," we'd need to renegotiate the writing center statement of purpose.

Kail is right. Too often, writing center work is perceived as service, service, and more service. Although I have no problem thinking of the writing center serving students, I do have concerns when the same writing center is also perceived as serving faculty. In fact, I think one of the primary obstacles to making writing center research a "featured character" is located in this muddied vision of service to two different constituencies. Much of the muddiness is historical; many writing centers were established to remediate student writers and thereby lighten the burden of faculty. Linking the remediation project with the notion of faculty burden has created confusion about the primary constituency of a writing center. In the early years at the MTU Writing Center, we went to faculty to ask them to "send" their students to us, and we engaged in efforts to please faculty, to survey faculty, to assess faculty satisfaction, to gain faculty approval. Although writing centers have always prided themselves on the individualized work they do with students, there has always been a sense of looking over the shoulder to be sure the faculty approved.

As a result of this dual service mission, there has been a good bit of writing center scholarship directed at persuading faculty to value the work that happens in a writing center. In the early days, much of this work was essential—writing centers needed a supportive constituency. If the faculty saw no use for a writing center, budget cuts were inevitable.

Today, *some* scholarship still needs to be focused on educating faculty about what writing centers do. The faculty constituency is always changing and as it changes, fresh reminders about what happens in a writing center session are important. We must also continue to do research on our service. In the *NWCA Resource Manual* (1998) and elsewhere, Neal Lerner has thoughtfully demonstrated the range of questions we need to be asking about our practices, and I agree with his point that we must continue sharing the results of our local studies. I do not intend to undermine or replace these important kinds of research.

However, if writing centers focus exclusively on the kind of research that explains our services, there is little time left to develop research projects based on the unique level of access writing centers have to students, particularly students with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. I believe that if writing centers developed a research direction that capitalized on this access, then faculty would have another reason for valuing what happens in a writing center. This would result in a healthier, more dialogic relationship with faculty, one that continued to ask for clarification of their expectations in student writing, but also brought to their attention the issues that students face when negotiating academic literacy. If the writing center mission were clearly focused on what we do with and for and because of students, then writing center research would bring this knowledge gained from interactions with students to the attention of faculty in local situations, such as faculty development workshops, as well as in more global contexts, such as publications intended for composition scholars. Spooner hinted at this shift back 1993 when he wrote, "It seems to me the writing center is uniquely situated not only to interpret the American academy to the transcultural student (or the non-Anglo American student), but also to interpret that student to the American academy" (3).

Unfortunately, when writing centers are represented as places driven by service, colleges and universities think about the writing center director as an administrator rather than a researcher or scholar. Recently, John Trimbur (2000) noted that although many writing centers are becoming multiliteracy centers, too often the role of writing center director is still perceived as entry level or non-tenure track staff. Such perceptions are serious obstacles to research. Trimbur recommends that a writing center director position be tenure track *and* potentially at an associate level. This would address the daunting expectation that a new Ph.D. can start a writing center and a publishing record at the same

time. Importantly, Trimbur also calls attention to the developing multi-literacies function of a writing center, a reformulation that offers exciting possibilities for research as long as the institutional status of the writing center director is at an appropriate level. In addition, he points to universities where writing center directors have been hired at higher levels. Also, at this point in history, many writing centers now have tenured directors.

Like Trimbur, Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford (2000) are also enthusiastic about the potential for writing center research. They comment specifically on the team-based, collaborative research paradigm that writing centers offer, and the ways that writing centers, as multi-bordered, multi-positioned sites, could be catalysts for educational reform. By way of offering advice for developing the potential of writing centers to be catalysts for educational reform, they caution against having too local of a research vision. They credit writing center scholars like Muriel Harris, Lou Kelly, and Jeanne Simpson for having the stamina “to think and work globally as well as locally” (35). Many of the issues that arise from working with students, particularly students with diverse cultural and linguistic experiences, do have global dimensions, yet unless writing centers are perceived as places for addressing those issues, these dimensions will be unexplored.

To develop my ideas about how research can and should be a “featured character” of writing center work, I want to turn to some predictions made recently by Muriel Harris. In the millennial issue of *The Writing Center Journal*, Mickey authored a chapter entitled, in her characteristically optimistic fashion, “Preparing to Sit at the Head Table.” Speculating on the future of writing centers, Mickey pictures writing center directors in influential academic positions. Always the realist, she cautions that we won’t be sitting in those power chairs unless we pay attention to where the world is headed. According to Mickey, two issues particularly worth our attention are the role of technology and the changing demographics of our nation. Responding to the idea that commercial online tutoring may threaten campus writing centers, Mickey argues, “It’s time to probe more deeply and to learn how to explain what we have to share with colleagues in other departments and schools on campus” (19). In this research call, Mickey is suggesting that we share what we have learned from students, but she is also saying we need “to learn” how to do this. Sharing what writing centers learn from students is clearly a kind of research that is not only an appropriate

focus for the new millennium but also necessary for survival. If our students don't survive, neither will our institutions as we know them.

But saying so doesn't make it so. If making research a featured character of writing center work is something upon which so many scholars agree, there must be some other significant obstacle lurking underneath the surface. I think one of the primary obstacles to development of the rich research potential in a writing center is what literacy theorist Brian Street (1984) calls the autonomous model of literacy. Within the autonomous model, literacy is regarded as an individual skill. There isn't much to research if literacy is considered a value-neutral skill, and the individual writer is the sole locus of meaning making and skill building. When an individual fails to master the supposedly value-neutral skill of academic literacy, then the individual is to blame. Under this model, some students seem to work harder than others, or some students are smarter than others, or some students aren't focused, or some students don't know how to manage their time, or some students are simply unprepared and therefore don't belong at the university.

Many universities and many writing centers operate under an autonomous model of literacy, and many approaches to teaching composition are still strongly autonomous, focused on literacy as an individual attribute with little acknowledgement of the mainstream values and authority structures that are carried in academic literacy practices. The "hands off" indirect approach fostered in so many writing center training programs is also a part of the autonomous model. Many of the current expectations for writing center "research" are also informed by this model of literacy. The pressure to *prove* that writing center "intervention" makes a difference in student writing is part of the autonomous model. This expectation, usually voiced by higher administration, seems to be that one should be able to scoop up a piece of student text and determine that a few writing center sessions improved that text. Far too many variables, including the impossibility of deciding what constitutes "proof," affect the outcome, and far more is learned and understood and renegotiated in a writing center session than could ever be determined from looking at a student's text. Neal Lerner offers a thorough discussion of these issues in his chapter on assessment in this book. He, too, would like to see writing centers leave behind the twenty years of guilt about failure to prove their institutional value.

Let me be clear that I am not saying it is unreasonable to expect writing centers to provide evidence of what happens there. As a writing cen-

ter director, I gather quantitative data on an annual basis. What I am saying is that grade analysis, retention data, counts of student visits, and surveys of student satisfaction do not shift writing centers from narrowly defined service units to a more broadly defined research mission. As Joan Hawthorne (2001) recently observed, “counting writing center visits doesn’t really tells us whether or not our sessions are valuable to the students who work with us.” Hawthorne does suggest (and I agree) that writing center research should be willing to ask hard questions. She refers to the “confidence with which we can be wrong” as a possible motive to pay closer attention to what happens in writing centers.

The ideological model of literacy, which Brian Street (1984) proposes as an alternative to the autonomous model, is one that demands a willingness to question our good intentions. It doesn’t suggest that we blame ourselves for past misunderstandings, but rather that we change our practices so that misunderstandings don’t reproduce. An ideological model of literacy pays attention to literacies rather than *a* Literacy, and it views these literacies as social practices rather than individual skills. As a social practice, literacy is always attached to social values, belief systems, and worldviews. With an ideological perspective on literacy, a writing center researcher pays attention to much more than words on a page. Instead, the scope of attention is broadened to include not only the text but also the conceptions, attitudes, and belief systems of the individuals involved in the literate activity. An ideological model of literacy requires a fundamental renegotiation of writing center purpose. It asks us to serve students better by achieving a better understanding of how literacy works as a social practice. It suggests a discovery approach to research rather a prove-it approach. It insists on paying attention to linguistic and cultural diversity. An ideological understanding of literacy also changes our understandings of what counts as data and how one interprets data. It encourages us to look at relationships, identities, cultural understandings, and more. It includes as data stories, interviews, case studies, and ethnographic observations.

An ideological model of literacy is much more than a writing-across-the-curriculum approach that attends to the different ways of making meaning and using evidence and documentation in different disciplines. Although these issues remain important, an ideological approach also destabilizes some traditional writing center dogmas. No longer is the individual student alone the primary focus, but the individual’s collective identity is also considered, along with the history of that

collective identity in relationship to the power structure of the university. Within the ideological model of literacy, color blindness is no longer an option. No longer is a tutorial represented as a peer relationship, but rather the asymmetries in the relationship of the two students working together are taken into account, particularly the differences in social situations and academic histories. If the tutor is white, urban, middle class, and the tutee is rural working class, then it is likely that the different values, assumptions, and experiences they associate with school literacy can undermine a tutorial relationship if they are not taken into account. This includes not only differences in dialect or language that appear on the surface of a text, but also ways that class and region affect the way one constructs an argument and the assumptions one makes about what counts as evidence.

Within an ideological model of literacy, no longer is the student represented as “needing help,” but rather as coming to the writing center *to work* on understanding a potentially conflicted social context in which he or she is writing or reading or speaking or designing a particular kind of text for the first time. No longer is research done only to prove something to the institution, but also to change the thinking of the members of the institution. No longer does the pedagogy emphasize a hands off, indirect approach, but rather a direct and explicit unpacking of the understandings, beliefs, attitudes, and frameworks that underlie college literacy work. No longer is the writing center student represented as an undeveloped writer, but rather as someone who is an authentic beginner in a new discourse, new language, new social context, new culture, new power relationship and at the same time a fully developed individual in a community/culture/class unfamiliar to many in the university.

For example, within an ideological model, when a student from China “fails” to document sources, he is applying a cultural model that is embedded with Eastern values of group ownership. He may also be applying different conceptions of the role of writing in school. Under the pressure of deadlines and performance anxiety, he may also have been unable to sustain the dual identity needed to write as a Chinese citizen in an American university. Additionally, he is no doubt totally unaware of the tremendous sense of betrayal and despair that American teachers feel when they discover one of their students has plagiarized. In contrast, under the autonomous model, the Chinese student has simply cheated and is subject to disciplinary action for plagiarism. Within

an ideological model, the conceptions, pressures, identities, and political relations are taken into consideration. These issues are considered within a context that acknowledges English as a world language. The fact that there are now more non-native speakers of English in the world than there are native speakers is entered into the conversations about how the university regulates language use (Kalantzis and Cope 2000, 144).

Some excellent models for literacy research can be found in recently published edited collections like *Local Literacies* 1998, *Multiliteracies* 2000, and *Situated Literacies* 2000, all of which incorporate Street's ideological model. The researchers in these collections think of themselves as representatives of the New Literacy Studies (NLS). I'd like to summarize just a few of the orientations found in the New Literacy Studies in terms of their potential for writing centers. Because the New Literacy Studies views literacy as a social practice rather than an individual attribute, it makes connections between empirical data and social theories. Some of the social theories that Barton, Hamilton, and Ivancic (2000) mention as significant to literacy research are "theories of globalization, media and visual design, social semiotics, bureaucracies and power relations, time, cultural identity, and scientific knowledge" (1). Their recent book, *Situated Literacies*, provides examples of research studies that begin with a detailed analysis of a particular literacy event. That event is then linked with theories that create a rich context for understanding. As a group, the NLS scholars share a commitment to a vision of literacy education which "recruit[s] rather than attempt[s] to ignore and erase, the different subjectivities—interests, intentions, commitments, and purposes—students bring to learning" (New London Group 2000, 18).

James Gee (2000) explains that the New Literacy Studies (NLS) is one of many movements that took part in the social turn away from emphasis on individual minds and behaviors and toward an understanding of how cognition and behavior are rooted in social and cultural understandings. As a NLS scholar himself, Gee argues that "reading and writing only make sense when studied in the context of social and cultural (and we can add historical, political, and economic) practices of which they are but a part" (Cope and Kalantzis 2000, 180). Gee encourages researchers to focus on *enactive and recognition work*, which he defines this way:



We attempt to get other people to recognize people and things as having certain meanings and values within certain configurations or relationships. Our attempts are what I mean by 'enactive work'. Other people's active efforts to accept or reject our attempts—to see or fail to see things 'our way'—are what I mean by 'recognition work.' (191)

This project of enactment and recognition sounds like the focus of writing center work to me. University professors expect students to enact particular identities as writers and readers, and students either accept or reject (or misunderstand) these attempts. I would argue that the work of a writing center (or the research agenda of the writing center) is getting the rest of the university to see how literacy functions ideologically and to understand the implications of that for students.

Let me offer an extended example to illustrate the implications of a shift from thinking of literacy as an autonomous skill to thinking of it as a social and ideological practice. On my campus, our writing center has become the primary resource for students who speak English as a second language. Gradually, we are beginning to take a stronger role in orienting faculty and administrators to the literacy understandings of these students. Initially, this sharing of knowledge happened at a strictly local level and was confined to providing information about the "services" we provided to international students. But the more we paid attention to what we were learning from working with international students, the more quickly we made changes in the programming we offered. For example, several years ago, we recognized the need of international graduate teaching assistant students to practice oral English, and applied for funding for a new program that provided opportunities to practice oral fluency. Soon, the undergraduate writing coaches involved in that program began talking with friends and members of student organizations about how they were learning to listen to accented English and coming to understand what it means to call English a world language. In the process of learning to listen differently, their attitudes toward international non-native English users, especially international faculty members and GTAs, were changing. No longer did these undergraduates blame international teachers for having accents that interfered with their education. Instead, they became advocates in campus forums for a change in undergraduate attitude toward non-native teachers. These undergraduates even developed a special session for student orientation that focused on learning to listen to accented English. In

other words, they were campaigning for different (and more positive) ways of “recognizing” international graduate students. Eventually, these same undergraduate students began writing papers about these new understandings for regional writing center conferences, and graduate writing coaches began to choose ESL issues as a research focus for their dissertations.

These changes developed when we spent less time focused on faculty perceptions of students’ needs and more time focused on what we were learning from students about what they needed. Because we were also shifting our focus to an ideological model of literacy, it became easier to see the ways that local literacy issues linked up with larger social and cultural concerns. No longer were the ESL students simply having problems with documentation. Rather they were dealing with value conflicts between two different cultural ways with words. Our effectiveness with students improved as we developed a sense of how *deep* the issue of documentation goes. One frustrated dean recently compared learning to document sources to learning to drive on a different side of the road in another country. Although learning to drive on the other side of the road is awkward and initially disorienting, it doesn’t involve value conflicts on the cultural or personal level. Rather than bristle at the dean’s analogy, we can see it as a signal that more knowledge needs to be shared about how textual practices of documentation are embedded in cultural values.

Shifting from an autonomous to ideological understanding of literacy is a subtle but powerful factor in determining what one pays attention to, what one argues with, what one ignores, how one responds. Next year we plan to add more detail to our explanations of documentation in our work with ESL students, including some discussion of the emotional stake that American professors have in this literacy practice. We also plan conversations with the Dean of Students’ Office, the place where the plagiarism cases are investigated. Research has become a ‘featured character’ of our writing center practice. Both graduate and undergraduate writing coaches expect to learn from their students, to connect that learning to social theory, and to share the connections they have made.

Because an ideological model of literacy pays attention to world views, to collective identities, to differences in cultural value systems, it shows us ways to improve our practice, and it points to places where research is needed. No longer is it easy to disregard the ESL student

who has been accused (rightly or wrongly) of plagiarism. Rather, research into the situation is called for. What is the student's country of origin? What values does that country have regarding textual authority? What sort of identity has the student been expected to "enact" in the assignments leading up to this one? Is there a changed expectation in the assignment under question? Did the student "recognize" the change in identity expectations? What steps can be taken to clarify this enactment and recognition work on the part of faculty who gave the assignment, as well as the students responding to it? What rhetorical moves are available to a student who wants to enact a dual identity in a writing assignment? Is there a way to "recognize" the teacher's tacit expectations and still enact a different approach? Is there a way that writing center researchers can help faculty understand the layers of attitudes, values, world views attached to notions of text ownership, so that the social practices of documentation can be taught more effectively and recognized as far more than a technical skill? Is there (maybe) even room for asking if the American university might begin to think differently about documentation?

In addition to opening up a new research direction, the theoretical realignment offered by the New Literacy Studies actually strengthens the service that writing centers provide to students. One of the primary questions NLS researchers ask is "who benefits"? Rather than engage in research removed from students and everyday life, the NLS scholars are interested in studying how real people use literacy for real purposes in their everyday lives and how official literacies obscure power relations. Too often people think of research as something detached from students, and since many writing center people are attracted to writing center work because of the human contact and the satisfaction of working closely with others, academic research can sound unattractive. Because the NLS encourages research that makes learning conditions better for students, it may prove to be a more motivating approach to research for many writing center professionals. The desire to be of "service" has contributed to the service mission, and in its extreme form can lead to directors overextending themselves, but this same desire to serve can be linked more productively to a the strong sense of advocacy in the research conducted under the banner of New Literacy Studies.

The New Literacy Studies also provides encouragement for writing center researchers to involve students in research on extracurricular literacy practices, paying close attention to what students at the university

do with literacy in their domains of choice. Because writing centers have direct access to students' lives, writing center researchers can learn more about how literacy is used in the rock climbing club, the bible study group, the fly fishing club, the coordination of winter carnival. Because we know so little about how students use literacy outside of school, I can't predict how these studies would inform what happens in the classroom or writing center, but I am certain such research would make things better for students by providing a clearer understanding of what's at stake for them in the classroom, of the ways their identities interact with academic expectations, and of the ways they use different kinds of text. Such an approach to research would feature students in active participant roles, whereby they create a legacy at the university and use literacy purposefully.

In addition to a strong sense of advocacy, another principle advocated in NLS research that may be appealing to writing center researchers is that which insists that all texts be treated equally. As Simon Pardoe (2000) explains, the research principle of *symmetry* disrupts the assumption that a dominant text is "coherent, homogeneous, purposeful, function or rational" while the novice text is "varied, inconsistent and lacking in coherent purpose" (162). When Pardoe applied the symmetry principle in his own research, he found that students' difficulties could often be traced back to the obscurity and ambivalence of the *official* accounts they were using as models. His study of students who were learning to write environmental impact assessment statements showed that while the professional documents were clear to the professor, a close study showed that there was lack of clarity about the relation of an environmental assessment to a development plan, that the relation of the assessor to the developer was obscure, that there was uncertainty about the data and methods used to predict future impact. Pardoe is not simply advocating for "charitable" readings of student texts, but rather for studying the links between a novice writer's text and the professional discourse. These links are both rhetorical and sociological. Studying them, as Pardoe argues, is a way to develop the sociological understanding that can inform our pedagogy. In my mind, the NLS research approach allows writing center researchers to frame understandings that derive from our practice, and to do so in a way that ultimately benefits students. Frequently, writing center workers learn to be better teachers in a writing center. We do this by learning to read official

texts as students read them. This shift in perspective often reveals the gaps and lack of clarity in official texts.

Another emphasis in New Literacy Studies is the importance of understanding education as a process of transformation rather than assimilation. It sees learning not as a matter of development or leaving the old self behind, but rather as an expansion of repertoire. Importantly, it also emphasizes that the mainstream needs to be transformed in this process as well. To accomplish this, it tries to understand literacies in relation to their specific cultural location. Questions it asks seem appropriate to writing center practice: "Where is this text from? What are its multiple sources? What is it doing? Who is it doing it for? How does it do it? How do we get into it? What could it do for us?" (Kalantzis and Cope 2000, 148). According to Barton, Hamilton, and Ivanic 2000, we need to understand "what people do with texts and what these activities mean to them" and "how texts fit into the practices of people's lives, rather than the other way round" (9).

Another principle congruent with writing center work is that NLS researchers pay close attention to social context, often finding links between shifts in social context and changes in literacy practices. For example, NLS researcher Kathryn Jones (2000) presents her study of the literacy practices at a livestock auction in Wales, demonstrating the processes by which farmers become part of the abstract bureaucratic discourse. One of the key figures in the interactions is Stan, a retired Welsh farmer in his early seventies who enacts the face work commitment for the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food bureaucracy. Helping the farmers as they fill out the new forms, Stan switches back and forth between Welsh and English, interacting with the farmers in ways that mitigate the controlling elements of the abstract discourse. By focusing on Stan's work, Jones shows readers how small town farmers are being inscribed into the global farming market, how a bilingual local event is taken over by monolingual forms, and how globalization is realized in a specific local literacy event. A small town social event becomes assimilated into the bureaucracy, and it loses its local character and neighborliness. Stan, as the key figure in this event, functions in ways similar to many writing center tutors in that they show students how to write at the university, how writing in college is different from high school, how to remove traces of neighborhoods and countries left behind, how to remove marks of lived experience in favor of abstract logic and reasoning.

Reading this account of the livestock auction evokes a sense of loss, but also a sense of wonder about how things could be different, how local differences and languages could be negotiated in the face of overwhelming economic forces. Because so much clearly depends on Stan, it is possible to read this thinking about how the “Stans” in writing centers might negotiate differently. It is also possible to see how Jones’s analytical approach might be used in writing centers. For example, if such a research perspective were used in a writing center, a series of sessions with an ESL graduate student could be studied as literacy activities occurring in a specific university, at a specific time in curricular history, during a time of increased globalization, under a particular period of relations with that student’s nation of origin. Within such a view, understandings of English as a world language, of economic trends, of political realities, of particular national identities, would be as significant as the particular text and discourse communities that this student operates within.

I want to make it abundantly clear that I am not proposing that anyone can just come into a writing center and begin this approach to research. In fact, the NLS would say that one cannot research in a context one doesn’t understand. The projects I propose here, the ways of enacting and recognizing the multiple literacies in a writing center, are intended for writing center workers. Because this is research that addresses issues students face, it should involve writing center students in participant roles, be done by individuals familiar with the writing center purpose and theoretical mission, and respect the context of a particular writing center. To have a non-writing-center-affiliated faculty member or graduate student simply pop in to do a semester’s research project would be a violation of all I am advocating here. I also make these suggestions assuming that the director is in a stable position and can set conditions about who can or can not undertake research in the writing center.

Some of this research might result in dissertations, books, or journal articles, and some of it may be suitable for web publication. Some of it may be appropriate for a writing center audience, but much of it should be appropriate for a larger audience of composition teachers and writing program and university administrators. If students are actively engaged in these projects, there is much they can learn about conducting research in real contexts, and much they can tell composition teachers. Some of the research questions that come to mind include the

following: What stories might academically successful students of color have to tell entering students about adjusting to the Anglo mainstream university? What strategies have American students of color and international students developed for maintaining dual identities as writers? What approaches work best to explain American beliefs in documentation? How do students use literacy in their extracurricular activities, and how can we use this knowledge in ways that recruit (rather than ignore) their existing subjectivities? What options are there for making room in student texts for non-mainstream rhetorical choices? What do faculty need to know about schooling in China (India, Malaysia, etc.) that could support their reading of texts written by students of other cultures? What are the extracurricular strategies that third world students use in order to develop English literacies?

The research questions provoked by an NLS theoretical framework are congruent with the research direction proposed by Joan Mullin (2002). Mullin argues for ethnographic and longitudinal studies that move writing center scholars away from tired, overworked themes. She calls for research that is based on a more inclusive definition of “text,” so that visual and oral texts become part of our focus, and she pushes for more consideration of the technological, international, global, and even spiritual questions that emerge from writing center work. She reminds us that we need to expect ourselves as well as our students “to dare to work at revision.”

The research attitude I am proposing has in many ways been exemplified by Mickey Harris. Mickey’s relentless efforts to educate varied audiences, her optimism, her insistence on connecting the local with the global, her habit of paying close, detailed attention to social issues, are all lessons appropriate to this undertaking. Mickey deserves credit for forging the initial productive and clarifying links with composition, a project that this sort of research would sustain and push even further. Although Mickey is often referred to in superhuman terms, she brings to her work and her interactions with others a sense of humor and humility, plus a strong connection with everyday realities. All of these qualities would support this research mission. Mickey says writing centers (particularly those most prepared to work with multilingual students) need to reeducate teachers and administrators about students who bring different languages to college. This is a “service” that requires the kind of research I am advocating here.

In conclusion, let me offer a few practical starting points for making research a 'featured character' of writing center work.

1. Revisit the writing center mission statement. Is it worded in a way that makes room for knowledge making and knowledge sharing? Does it take into account that this century's civic and workspaces will present the challenge of communicating a global context where understanding local diversity is essential?

2. Schedule time for research, reading, and reflection. Consider that time as inviolable as class time, or time for meetings with tutors and university administrators. Pick a time other than Friday afternoons, a time when the mind feels alert.

3. Put realistic restrictions on personal email and Internet access and other technological intrusions, which keep us responding to short-term urgencies rather than long-term priorities. If efforts to reserve time to think and to limit interruptions prove fruitless, perhaps it is time to begin campaigning for a support position for the writing center.

4. Find ways to layer research and service and teaching. Set up a personal reading program (include *Multiliteracies* on the list!) that also can be included in tutor training and that will generate ideas for scholarship in the writing center.

5. Form collaborative partnerships. Writing center directors at research institutions should look for partners at teaching colleges and community colleges. The many regional writing center associations can be places for creating research networks if conference coordinators dedicate time and resources for these liaisons. I don't mean simply setting up tables, but rather creating conference calls that encourage researchers to structure sessions that can lead to collaborative research on a particular issue.

6. Broaden the scope of writing center publication. Instead of another edited collection written for writing center professionals, plan a collection aimed at composition scholars or higher education administrators or (gasp!) the general public.

7. Find ways to allow personal passions and interests and histories to infiltrate academic interests. Whether that interest is labor history, visual design, self-help literature, contemporary spirituality, local politics, genealogy, or environmental advocacy, there are often ideas, perspectives, metaphors, and frameworks in those avocations that can enrich and motivate the exploration of writing center issues.



I believe that the dichotomies between research and service and teaching can be overcome. Research of the kind the NLS scholars endorse will improve the “services” of the writing center, and it will “teach” faculty and administrators and the general public about the new kinds of texts students can produce and the complicated identities they enact as composers. I hope that this fresh and theoretically informed approach to writing center research will encourage an exploratory fervor, one that replaces the victim-of-misunderstanding posture that emerges too often. The framework of the New Literacy Studies offers a way to renegotiate the writing center mission, to involve undergraduates in research, to improve retention by offering students legitimate roles as researchers, to contribute to the larger field of literacy studies, to enact principles of social justice, and to represent tutoring differently. It positions writing centers as change agents rather than protectors of the status quo, and it suggests a different way for writing centers to gain institutional legitimacy. It is research that changes people’s minds in the same way that one’s mind is changed by the diverse encounters in a writing center. In many ways, this approach has always been a part of the spirit of writing center work; it now deserves to be a ‘featured character.’