

4

SEPARATION, INITIATION, AND RETURN

Tutor Training Manuals and Writing Center Lore

HARVEY KAIL

It has often been said that one of the characteristics of the modern world is the disappearance of any meaningful rites of initiation.

MIRCEA ELIADE

Much of the daily business in writing centers takes its shape from the ongoing necessity of recruiting new tutors and training them for the complex conversations between writer and reader that constitute the main event of writing center life. The entire training process—from interviewing potential recruits to designing and teaching the training course to celebrating the graduation of yet another group of peer writing tutors—prominently shapes the way tutors and tutor trainers alike come to the literacy work that they do together in writing centers. It is reasonable to assume, then, as I do here, that tutor training manuals are among the most important texts for authorizing writing center lore, our collective knowledge of ourselves.

Training manuals obviously make available to researchers a particularly concentrated source of information about tutor training practices, and because tutor training is at the center of so much of writing center life, these texts also provide a relatively complete picture of the educational theories and loyalties that have shaped the development of writing centers since the early 1970s. The research value of tutor training manuals might be even more broadly conceived than that. A tutor training manual might also be viewed as a kind of master narrative, an educational creation myth, if you will—a tale of the writing center tribe. What I propose to do here is to interpret tutor training texts as if they were narratives rather than manuals, read them for their story rather than focusing exclusively on their exposition and advice.

My research proceeds by excavating from the expository materials of the training manual genre the initiation tales that tutor training texts can be interpreted as implicitly telling. This excavation process, which I hope both to demonstrate and to justify, proceeds on the assumption that there are, in fact, meaningful initiation rituals in modern life, and that training writing center tutors might just possibly be one of them. Such a reading takes us not only into the theory and practice of writing centers, it may take us as well into their originating impulses and ambitions.

In his classic study of cultural celebrations and initiations, *The Rites of Passage* (1909), anthropologist Arnold van Gennep identified three major phases of the initiation story: “separation, transition, and incorporation.” In his *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1956), Joseph Campbell brought van Gennep’s classic work into a more contemporary, psychoanalytic context. I have used Campbell’s better-known narrative schema of *separation, initiation, and return* as a template for this study and a tool in my analysis of tutor training manuals. It is my thesis that an initiation story, a *bildungsroman* of sorts, can be read among the metaphors and minutiae of tutor training texts, an initiation story that can tell us, like all good stories do, a bit more about who we are and what we care most about.

In Campbell’s composite narrative of the rites of passage, the action proceeds as follows:

The hero sets forth from his or her commonday hut or castle, is then lured, carried away or else voluntarily proceeds to the threshold of adventure. There the hero encounters a shadow presence that guards the passage. If the threshold is successfully crossed, the hero journeys through a world of unfamiliar yet strangely intimate forces, some of which threaten or test the hero, some of which give magical aid. When the hero arrives at the nadir of the quest, he undergoes a supreme ordeal and gains a prize or reward. The final work is that of return. At the return threshold the hero emerges from the nether world of the quest bringing a boon that restores the world. (30)

Based on the crucial events in the initiation sequence of “separation, initiation, and return,” my research systematically asks the same set of questions of a number of tutor training texts.

- Who or what calls the prospective tutor to the “adventure” of the training course in the first place?

- What happens at the threshold crossing? What sort of break is suggested in educational business as usual?
- What trials and tests must be undergone? What kind of aid is received?
- What is the prize or reward to be gained at the “nadir” of the quest?
- What difficulties, if any, must be endured as the tutor “returns”?
- What does the tutor bring with her to “renew the world”?

Call to Adventure? Nadir of the Quest? Renew the World? Such quasi-anthropological terminology and the cultural assumptions that underpin it might all seem a bit preposterous when applied to tutor training manuals. In our quotidian writing center world, where the institutional deadlines of the academic calendar have long since supplanted the tribal rituals of the initiation ceremony, and where magic no longer has cultural currency and myth has become a subject rather than an experience, we are hardly likely to think of tutor training manuals in the same context as the founding tales and texts of human consciousness. It surely is a stretch to think of tutor training as residing within the same mythic ether and narrative impact as Odysseus’s journey home to Ithaca or Coyote’s ascent from the underworld or even Luke Skywalker’s quest for atonement with his father. Writing center tutors are not culture heroes, after all, not “world redeemers.” Tutors are simply ordinary folk, usually young, doing relatively mundane work, occasionally tedious but hardly dangerous, in ordinary not magical ways.

At the same time, I am persuaded that tutor training can and frequently does involve a powerful and transforming rite of educational passage, one that vividly plays out the trajectory of separation, initiation, and return. Peer tutors emphatically do separate from the mass of other students on campus, endure a rigorous initiation into writing and learning, and then return with this dawning knowledge and developing self to tutor their peers. A transformation may be at hand in their lives. I am not alone in this belief in the transforming power of an initiation into writing center work. Tutor training manuals all claim that the experience of becoming a writing tutor is something very special in the world of higher education, and that being selected to go through a tutor training program and then becoming a writing center tutor uniquely empowers individuals. As Paula Gillespie and Neal Lerner point out in the *Allyn and Bacon Guide to Peer Tutoring* (2000), to cite only one example, the experience of writing center tutoring may “change your life, if you allow it to” (9).

I would like to demonstrate my research into tutor training manuals by examining in detail the initiation stories that might be excavated from three early and particularly influential tutor training manuals: Muriel Harris' *Teaching One-to-one: The Writing Conference* (1986), Kenneth A. Bruffee's *A Short Course in Writing* (1972), and Irene Lurkis Clark's *Teaching in a Writing Center Setting* (1985). For those interested in writing center lore, these three texts open up a rich vein of scholarship and theory, a mother lode from which many other tutor training manuals have mined much of their own ore. Be forewarned, however. Reading tutor training manuals *as if* they were coming of age stories told in the heroic mode of the questing hero of saga and myth will no doubt distort as well as reveal what they attempt to explicate. My attitude on this issue is that one sees some things inevitably at the expense of others. On with the stories!

MURIEL HARRIS, *TEACHING ONE-TO-ONE: THE WRITING CONFERENCE*

Muriel Harris's *Teaching One-to-One: The Writing Conference* is surely one of the most influential of the writing center tutor training manuals. It brings copious yet sensibly pruned composition scholarship to bear on its discussion of the writing and the tutoring process. It grounds itself firmly in empirical research data while, at the same time, it situates tutoring within a wide matrix of information and research styles, thus providing writing tutors with access to valuable interdisciplinary information and strategies. It makes judicious use of mock tutor dialogue, a now conventional but particularly tricky feature of tutor training manuals. It is even-handed and generous in its tone, offers sound and practical advice on preparing to tutor, and takes itself seriously without a hint of patronizing either the veterans or the rookies it hopes to convert to the one-to-one conferencing method. It is a classic.

If we read *One-to-One: The Writing Conference* as a covert initiation story, however, the same materials take on a somewhat different and more charged perspective. A very interesting tale of separation, initiation, and return emerges. It might go something like this:

Students and teachers have become separated from each other by the authority and the mystery of the teacher's knowledge. This difficult and seemingly unavoidable separation must somehow be bridged and a reconciliation effected. In order to prepare the student writer for true independence of thought, one must help demystify the writing process.

Demystifying the writing process, however, necessarily involves the teacher and student in an act of reconciliation, for it was within the very conventions of the traditional classroom relationship that the mystery of learning to write took shape in the first place! Through the rehabilitation of the relationship between teacher and student, the writers may be set free to think and write on their own. The one-to-one writing conference is the ground upon which this reconciliation can best be won.

The Call to Adventure

Teaching One-to-One calls prospective tutors to the adventure of tutor training from two distinct yet allied academic communities: experienced classroom teachers, on the one hand, and novice tutors, on the other. Both are likely to be imprisoned behind a wall of suspicion, ignorance, or lack of confidence. The experienced classroom teacher may have even become bewitched, as it were, by the falsehoods of classroom pedagogy. He may be unaware of the problems inherent in his world of abstract discussions about essay organization or textbook generalities about the writing process, or, even more importantly, he may unwittingly be involved in the unproductive relationships that characterize much composition teaching in traditional classrooms, where we “abandon [students] when they are most likely to need help” (8). Stuck in the assumptions and miasma of classroom life, the experienced classroom teacher may even have strenuous objections to the idea of the one-to-one conference: “How can it be done with thirty students per class?” or “What a tiresome way to proceed” or “It simply takes too much time” (4). Why, he asks, take a chance on something different? Why not simply stay put?

Novice writing lab tutors, on the other hand, are similarly if ironically trapped by their *lack* of teaching experience. Although their absence of classroom experience frees them from the false assumptions and prejudices about the one-to-one conference method that holds back the experienced teacher from the adventure of one-to-one conferencing, it simultaneously leaves the novice tutor with a corresponding lack of confidence and “unwarranted fears” (2) about their ability to help others to write well. Why put oneself in the embarrassing position of being expected to help a complete stranger with his writing when one is burdened by self-doubt? It is much safer for novice tutors to stay home in their “commonday hut or castle” than to venture out.

“These people,” according to Muriel Harris, “must be lured into some elbow to elbow contact with students” (1). They must be persuaded to leave the ease and pleasures of the status quo of the classroom for the genuine rigors of the quest. The “call to adventure” in *Teaching One-to-One* is sounded in a variety of ways, all designed to break down the misconceptions about conferencing that keep the hero stuck at home. In a self-described tone of “evangelistic fervor,” Harris offers the reluctant heroes bias-busting arguments that favor one-to-one pedagogy. She quotes testimonials from well-known composition researchers such as Charles Cooper and Janet Emig, who have themselves already successfully answered the call of the writing conference adventure. Furthermore, and perhaps most persuasively, she cites numerous empirical research studies that demonstrate how the one-to-one method makes advantageous use of the writing process model. Study after study, Harris argues, show not only an improvement in writing but also an actual savings of time as a result of the conferencing method. Reasonably speaking, then, there is nothing to stop the potential tutor-in-training from advancing forthwith to the “threshold of adventure.”

Except, of course, the hero’s own inertia. Having no reason *not* to engage in doing something is not quite the same thing as having a very good reason really to want to go, to answer the call, to trade in one way of doing something for another. *Teaching One-to-One* promises the prospective tutor more than just effective arguments against his arguments to stay home. It suggests not only efficiency and productivity in the teaching of writing through conferencing, but additionally and most importantly, it also promises that a new relationship with students can be forged in the process. Instead of the “fear” and alienation that most students feel toward their composition teachers (21), a relationship based on trust and mutual respect can be forged. The “invisible walls between teacher and student” can be “dissolved,” and in their place may come a recognition of the “human connections and . . . the individuality of the person with whom we are sitting” (41). At this point, the reluctant but now sufficiently intrigued heroes begin packing their bags. The crossing of a threshold is at hand.

The Threshold of Adventure

To achieve this desired new relationship, the classroom teacher must cross the Threshold of Adventure, going through a kind of transforma-

tion. Instead of appearing to the student writer as the authoritarian source of mysterious rules and ruthless red ink, the hero/teacher must emerge on the other side transformed into a coach, a mentor, a kind of magic helper. "Personal attention is magic," Muriel Harris argues, citing a colleague. "It gets writers going again when they've hit some rough spots, and it makes them want to write again"(9).

Crossing the Threshold of Adventure itself, however, is risky business. Not only are one-to-one conferences "exhausting" and the level of concentration demanded "high," but the give and take of one-to-one teaching is so intense that it can even "fry one's brain" (27)! Even more ominously, both experienced classroom teachers and novice tutors risk inviting chaos into the teaching-learning process by converting to the one-to-one method. Unlike the structured and predictable classroom environment, with its conventionally determined rituals and familiar order, its comfortable distances and hierarchical certitudes, the writing conference may "sometimes. . .amble down several paths before finding a direction; at other times, it's difficult to define what was accomplished in all that talk." To make matters more complex, there are no typical or predictable tutorials: "Exact similarity isn't possible because writers are not alike. Even the same writer at different times, with different assignments, has different concerns."

Breaking with the traditional expectations of classrooms in exchange for the perplexing and unpredictable intimacy of the conference format calls for a radical change in the teacher's orientation to learning and teaching. In spite of the dangers that lurk at the Threshold of Adventure, Harris urges the heroes to "plunge in" anyway (1), to take heart and embark on a night sea journey of discovery! This journey on the "Road of Trials," as Campbell calls it, will involve the questing hero in a succession of tests that may tempt him to fall back into or reassume the teacher role that is so deeply engrained in our sense of what it is to be a teacher. For instance, one may be tempted to share with writers the solution one has in mind for the problem the writer is trying to solve. Indeed, one's very training in composition may ironically serve to undermine the power of one-to-one conferencing and to stop the quest dead in its tracks. Teachers "primed and ready to discuss composing strategies, cohesion, audience awareness, or whatever else teachers value" (33) are likely to fall into the trap of making student writers dependent on the teacher's expertise rather than directing the writer toward the most important goal of the educational process, the writer's

independence. “The dangers of robbing students of the initiative are great,” Harris points out, and resisting the temptation to lecture at the student or ask obvious, leading questions—to simply transfer classroom consciousness to the conference setting—requires experience and discipline.

To gain understanding and practice, Harris provides tutors with intricate strategies and procedures to help them help others along the road of trials. Tutors learn to listen and to question, to diagnose, and, as appropriate, to show and even to tell. They are also introduced to interdisciplinary resources that they can call upon for “magical” aid, becoming acquainted with exotic domains of knowledge, such as cognitive psychology, therapy and counseling, even cultural anthropology. None of these strategies or approaches, however, resembles the usual textbook explanations that state rules or give examples or guidelines to follow. Instead, they are embedded in the context of the one-to-one conference, where teacher and student are always “working together on the student’s own writing” (132). These conversations are not “mysterious” but “normal,” not abstract but specific, not general but rooted in the goal of “helping this student seated next to me to become a better writer” (133)

The Nadir of the Quest

As the hero gains practical knowledge, working in the immediacy of the one-to-one setting, the myths of teaching writing that have formerly trapped experienced teachers and novice tutors alike in a world of generalities, abstractions, and unreal relationships will begin to be exposed for the falsehoods that they are. Instead of the usual mystification and missed connections, the heroes of this tutor training manual will experience a vision of how they can arrive at real contact with students. My research suggests that it is this contact or union between teacher and student writer that gives Muriel Harris’s *One-to-One: The Writing Conference* its underlying sense of vital purpose.

It is as if the relationship between teachers and learners has been corrupted by schooling itself, and needs repair and reunification. The institutions of higher education, with their emphases on products rather than people, evaluation rather than instruction, competition rather than collaboration, through long practice have formalized and structured the separation between student and teacher into the curriculum itself, rendering their human relationship adversarial rather than mutually supportive. In Muriel Harris’s writing lab creation myth, the

teacher/coach and student/writer break through these forms of alienation and atomization and embark together, writer and writing guide, on a mutual “journey of discovery.”

The journey follows the intricate movements of the writing process itself, which, though it may bend and twist, and sometimes appear to flow backwards, always leads to a generative sea. One must, with the help of composition scholarship tempered by personal experience, learn to trust the writing and revision process. The tutor can learn what tricks and turns the writing process might take in its tortuous route toward meaning, and can warn the student writer of impending crevices and swamps, keep the student writer moving when he is discouraged, help the student retrace his steps when he has lost the way.

Should all go well in the course of their intimate travels together, student/writer and teacher/coach may find that the writing process becomes increasingly transparent, losing some of its mystery for the student and becoming, instead, the subject of an intense and highly specific conversation. Communication barriers may begin to come down. The authority of knowledge that has manifested itself in the form of grades and written teacher comments may be replaced with helpful advice and friendly talk. Writers and readers will begin to recognize each other in a more intimate and individual way. The institutionalized unreality of classroom consciousness will give way to the intimacy of two individuals traveling on the road to meaning together, with mutual respect and even affection. Along the way, a sacred, educational union may be achieved.

The Return

The intense and intricate dialogue that characterizes the relationship of the tutor and the writer during the Journey of Discovery becomes not only a source of immediate and individualized information for the writer but also, ideally, a part of his own, individual, writerly consciousness. Because the tutor has not merely talked about the writing process to the student writer, but participated in that process with him, the dialogue between tutor and writer may prove sufficiently intense and productive that it will be internalized in some measure into the novice writer's own understanding and memory. The more the student writes, the more the encouraging but firm voice of the magic helper/coach will be sounded from within the writer, himself. Citing Deanna Gutschow, Harris argues that when students “master this inner dialectic,

they can . . . look inward rather than outward for critical evaluation” (22). In effect, the voice of the tutor will become intertwined with and a vital part of the student’s writing process itself.

It is here that the reconciliation between writing teacher and writing student is confirmed. As a result of the intellectual intimacy of one-to-one tutoring, the writing tutor’s passage across the “return threshold” is achieved through another act of transformation. The tutor is carried, as it were, across the return threshold within the very protocols of the student’s own writerly memory, an integrated and integral part of how the writer writes. Thus, teacher and student are fully reconciled. When the hero-writer emerges into the world of meaning-making, she will bring with her the internal voices of a demystified writing process, and thus the boon of independent thought.

KENNETH A. BRUFFEE’S *A SHORT COURSE IN WRITING: COMPOSITION, COLLABORATIVE LEARNING, AND CONSTRUCTIVE READING*

Kenneth Bruffee’s groundbreaking work on collaborative learning and peer tutoring is widely acknowledged in writing center scholarship, yet his tutor training text, *A Short Course in Writing*, first published in 1972 with the subtitle *Practical Rhetoric for Composition Courses, Writing Workshops, and Tutor Training Programs*, is surprisingly rarely cited. Perhaps it has been too well disguised as a composition textbook to be recognized as a tutor training manual. Still, there is arguably no more influential story for writing centers than the one Kenneth Bruffee tells in it.² *A Short Course in Writing* presents a purposeful, systematic, and detailed pedagogy for training writing center peer tutors that has been and continues to be at the forefront of social constructionist theory and practice in composition studies and in writing center lore.

Reading *A Short Course in Writing* through the lens of *A Hero With A Thousand Faces* presents an immediate problem and an immediate reward. The problem is that *A Short Course in Writing* tells a story without a hero. Central to Kenneth Bruffee’s project in this training manual is the premise that collaborative learning deconstructs the very image of the writer as hero. In *Elegaic Romance: Cultural Change and the Loss of the Hero in Modern Fiction* (1983a), Bruffee argues that the novels of such writers as Joseph Conrad, Ford Maddox Ford, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Robert Penn Warren illustrate that the hero of the quest romance novels of the nineteenth century did not survive into the twentieth. “There

is no modern hero,” Bruffee announces. In the hero’s place emerges an “exemplary modern figure,” a literary type “who exposes and copes with the delusion of hero worship and outgrows it” (15).

The immediate reward to a narrative reading of *A Short Course in Writing* is that it is hard to imagine a more ironically appropriate lens through which to examine this training manual than the progression of “separation, initiation, and return.” As it turns out, even narratives without heroes have a story to tell. The collaborative learning story told in *A Short Course in Writing* might go something like this:

The “exemplary figure” and a group of like-minded friends arrive at the threshold of adventure together. In order to cross it, they must depart from one community, of which they are an integral part, and join another, which may not necessarily be overly glad to see them. This difficult process of saying good-bye and saying hello may be facilitated by the formation of a transitional community of knowledgeable peers. Formed for the purpose, this temporary community must carry the exemplary figures, who may come from diverse and even antagonistic backgrounds, across the threshold of adventure together, seeking to learn the language, mores, assumptions, and goals of the new community they wish ultimately to join. To succeed, they must learn to learn with and from each other, to strive toward mutual aid rather than to struggle in mutual competition. At the nadir of their quest they achieve at-one-ment with the new community. Their final task is to avoid the allure of the status quo of change, the danger of becoming enthralled by their own transitional experience. If the exemplary figures are successful in breaking free of the temporary loyalties and obligations they have established as part of their journey together, they will be welcomed at the return threshold, where they will begin yet another conversation in the never-ending conversation of mankind.

The Call to Adventure

The Call to Adventure in *A Short Course in Writing* is sounded from a community outside the writer’s own. Let us call it the community of literate adults. Its members are a stern and imposing lot, but they are not without charm. More importantly, they have real power and authority that, for educational reasons, they wish to redistribute. They call to the exemplary figure, barely discernible from his or her peers, all of them deeply embedded in their social context, to join them in a world of sophisticated literacy in which the important work of the academy, government, business, and the professions gets done.

What happens next is crucial. If the exemplary figure and peers want to identify themselves sufficiently with the virtues and benefits of sophisticated literacy, or if they feel sufficiently compelled to do so, they will have to make a break from the security offered by not being literate in the discourse of the academy. They will to some degree have to give up the attraction of the old neighborhood, the satisfactions and security of the known, along with the safety of their familiar, home grown vernaculars. These ties with the status quo are powerful, so much so that even exemplary figures are not likely to make the break alone. If, however, a skillful and dedicated representative of the community of literate adults—call this agent a tutor trainer—intervenes in the process by helping students form themselves into institutionalized, accredited, academic gangs, they might make the break into literate discourse together.

The Threshold of Adventure

The crossing of the threshold of adventure in Bruffee's collaborative learning story is a very stressful time, since it necessarily involves a conflict of social loyalties and individual identities, a period of "brother-battle" in Joseph Campbell's terms. The transitional subgroup of potential tutors, with its collective aim of joining a new community, raises considerable conflict among its individual members. Issues of authority, loyalty, and identity are likely to be felt, if not remarked upon, by all. At the threshold crossing, tutors-in-training are likely to be looking in two directions at the same time: back to the familiar and the comfortable, forward to the strange but the promising. For the transitional subgroup, there may be no easy way back and no easy way forward. The familiar life horizons are being outgrown; the crossing of a threshold is at hand.

The crossing of the threshold of adventure is made possible when the members of the subgroup become so absorbed in their mutual work that, tenuously at first but with increasing confidence, they transfer their allegiances from their former communities to their newly formed transitional subgroup. In effect, the exemplary figures learn to say good-bye to one community by learning to say hello to another. The threshold crossing remains a dangerous time in the collaborative learning story, however, long after the work has advanced. The attraction of the old ways might prove so enduring and the stress of the new ways so discomfiting that the transitional subgroup might well dissolve at some point, its members fleeing back across the threshold, back home.

This complex process of intellectual and social acculturation is shaped by the writing and peer response tasks that are at the heart of the peer tutor training process in *A Short Course in Writing*. Writing an original argument paper and then writing a detailed critique about someone else's argument paper while he or she writes a detailed critique of your essay systematically engages the exemplary figures in the roles of writers, readers, and critics. Through the extended intimacy of this elaborate exchange ritual, the exemplary figures begin to exercise and develop their critical judgment among themselves, learning through mutual risk to grant genuine authority to each other. As a result, they begin to recognize themselves as serious and effective writers and thinkers. The nadir of the quest is close by.

The Crunch

At some point along the road of adventure in *A Short Course in Writing*, the exemplary figure may come up against “the crunch.” The crunch is a form of rebellion directed against the strict authority of the formal writing assignments that constitutes the writer's training in *A Short Course*—the infamous three-paragraph essays on which Bruffee steadfastly insists. Students are likely to become “irritable and impatient” with these forms of argument—proposition and two reasons, strawman and one reason, concession, etc.—feeling that this kind of controlled writing is destructive of their creativity if not their very identity. This is the writing course “crunch,” Bruffee says, and “no writing course should be without one” (130). It provides the moment at which student writers and peer tutors-in-training face the same question: “Am I going to govern my words and my ideas, or am I going to go on letting my words and ideas govern me?”(131). The crunch is a period of change in the writers' sense of their relationship with writing and with discourse conventions. Because of the “deep and complex relationship” between language and identity, “people cannot change the way they formulate and express idea without undergoing some change in themselves” (130).

The Nadir of the Quest

Thus, to learn is to change—learning is change—and “change hurts,” Bruffee points out (131). Throughout this uncomfortable period of saying good-bye and trying to say hello, the tutor trainer can help the struggling exemplary figures by providing them with as much

sympathy and encouragement as possible. At the same time, the trainer must firmly hold to the *Short Course* forms and tasks. The crunch, like some psychological ogre that threatens us at the gates of knowledge, must be confronted and defeated. "To grow as writers," Bruffee maintains, "[tutors] must endure the crunch and come out successfully on the other side with new confidence in their writing ability and new confidence in the worth of their own ideas" (132).

With the sequenced writing and critiquing tasks to guide its members, and if the crunch is successfully endured, the transitional subgroup arrives at the nadir of its quest: at-one-ment with the community of literate adults. The quest culminates when the exemplary figures have "learned the language, mores, and behavior that is the norm in . . . the new community. . . and by accepting the assumptions and goals that are the working premise of the new assenting community" (*Collaborative Learning and the Conversation of Mankind*, 642).

The Return

Even as the student writers/tutors attach themselves to their new community of knowledgeable peers, their passage across the return threshold is not certain. Nostalgia—"the allure of the status-quo of change"—may set in among the members of the transitional subgroup. They may become stuck in a sentimental attachment to their transitional subgroup culture. It is up to the representatives of the community of literate adults to make sure their new members feel that the hazardous journey was worthwhile and that they are now, indeed, writers among writers, teachers and learners recognized among other teachers and learners. This acceptance is confirmed by the new members' acknowledged ability to engage in "normal [writing center] discourse," the proficient use of their new community's prevailing symbol system. Their reward is their ability to participate in and thus to renew the never-ending "conversation of mankind."

IRENE LURKIS CLARK, *WRITING IN THE CENTER: TEACHING IN A WRITING CENTER SETTING*

Irene Clark's *Teaching in a Writing Center Setting*, originally published in 1985 and now in its third edition (1998), brings a new dimension to the dynamic relationships involved in writing and tutoring writing: a vital sense of place. If the theme of Muriel Harris's *One-to-One* is reconciliation between teacher and student in the name of the writer's inde-

pendence, and if the theme of Bruffee's *A Short Course in Writing* is the redefinition of those relationships in the name of interdependence, the theme of Irene Clark's *Teaching in a Writing Center Setting* is the shaping importance of the setting of the quest, the writing center itself. The setting of this story is the story. In a very palpable sense, the writing center is the major theme, if not the actual hero, of this tutor training tale. It might go something like this:

The prospective tutor is irresistibly attracted to the adventure of tutoring by the educational energy on the other side of the threshold. Something dynamic is going on over there in writing centers. They are somehow flourishing in the academic desert! What are they all about? To make his way toward this energy source, the tutor-in-training must renounce the dark forces of product and embrace the uncertainties of process, both in writing and in tutoring writing. Once he crosses the threshold of adventure, the tutor-in-training will first enter into a state of anxiety and trepidation. He will go through self-analysis and role playing.

The psychotherapist Carl Rogers will appear to help ease his way. He will read scripts of tutor dialogue and be introduced to an extensive range of composition scholarship as it becomes transparent and experientially achieved in the happy marriage between theory and practice that constitutes the writing center setting. If all goes well, he will arrive at the nadir of the quest, the very heart of the writing center, where he will hear the tale of the goddess of learning, Mrs. Prestopino. Activated now by both self-knowledge and tutor lore, the tutor will soon be free to intervene in other students' writing process at all stages. At the return threshold, his final challenge is to follow the arduous path between legitimate and illegitimate collaboration. The hero crosses the return threshold holding aloft his boon: the keys to the writing center.

The Call to Adventure

The threshold of adventure in *Teaching in a Writing Center Setting* marks the boundary line between the old ways and the new ways in composition studies. Crossing the threshold is accomplished by listening to the story of the Great Paradigm Shift and the Rise of the Writing Center. Back in the old days, years and years ago (in a university not unlike this one), colleges and universities were pretty much the province of the elite. Students liked to write because they passionately liked to read. In fact, college students were identifiable as college students precisely because they already knew how to write when they arrived on campus. That's the way it used to be. Then things began to change. People who

didn't love to read and write (at least in English) started going to college. They were smart enough, no doubt, but perhaps not experienced enough or lucky enough at writing. This made the students nervous, and it made their colleges and universities nervous, too. The students didn't know what to do, and the professors didn't know what to do. So, relying on tradition, the professors talked at the students about writing, and then marked up the students' papers when the students were done writing them and "handed them in." Sometimes, it must be acknowledged, the professors wrote nasty things to the students, perhaps not realizing what they were doing—such was their despair. The situation really was untenable for students and faculty alike. The crossing of a threshold was at hand.

Astonishingly, the writing center, heretofore thought of as the remedial fix-it shop of college writing programs, emerges to occupy some of composition studies' prime educational real estate, located on the other side of the Threshold of Adventure. It is just down this hall, then up the stairs, turn left and look for the blue sign: Writing Center. It is in the library. It is in the English building. It is in the student center. It is in the study skills center. (It is actually in a box at Ohio University). Wherever it is to be found, the writing center is the place where contemporary composition theory and practice are most efficiently and usefully joined within the powerful, writing-process paradigm: One helps others to write for college not by giving lectures on writing or by assigning how-to books or by marking up products in order to grade them. One helps others to write by engaging them in acts of "writing, talking about writing, getting feedback on one's writing, and then rewriting and rewriting, preferably in a comfortable, nonthreatening setting" (vii). What could have been better for the composing process than writing centers? What could have been better for writing centers than a research based, step-by-step elaboration of the composing process?

The special source of the writing center's surprising institutional vitality, however, is its flexible and nonthreatening setting, where grades have been banished, where instruction adapts to individual necessity, and where students can obtain help with their writing at any stage in the composing process. The writing center becomes in *Teaching in a Writing Center Setting* not merely a room where students happen to be tutored, but a far more encompassing yet particularized setting in the academy, a unique locale with its own institutional history and its own legitimate brand of scholarship. Flourishing on the margins of academe while

simultaneously redefining its geography, the writing center, a utopia of composition theory and practice, calls the hero to adventure.

The Threshold of Adventure

After being introduced at the threshold crossing to the history of writing centers and to various approaches to composition theory that inhabit therein, the tutor is invited first to turn *inwards*, to anticipate what lies ahead on the journey toward that initial tutorial. By first interrogating his own writing process, by reflecting on his own positions concerning evaluating writing, and by remembering what it was like to be a student—the tutor/hero can safely cross the threshold of adventure, balancing the anxiety such a crossing provokes by discovering what he already knows about writing.

Buoyed by this information, the tutor is then instructed to turn *outwards* toward the needs of the student writer. What is helpful for her? What will put him at ease? How can the authority of the tutor be subtly negotiated so as to empower the student writer rather than the tutor? Finally, the tutor must look to the silent third partner in the tutoring relationship, the teacher taskmaster, who secretly inhabits the writing center cleverly disguised as “the assignment.” How can writing assignments be best understood? How can a response to them be invented? What tools are available? What does the teacher really want?

Through analysis and writing exercises, examples and strategies, student-tutor dialogue and interpretations thereof, the tutor-in-training moves through the complexities of the adventure toward the simple but profound tale at the nadir of the quest, the story of Irene Lurkis Clark’s graduation dress.

The Nadir of the Quest

Just at the point where novice tutors are starting to grapple with some of their most daunting training tasks, such as diagnosing student writing and helping writers to manage revision, they come face-to-face with a piece of writing center lore as iconographic as any we are likely to find in tutor training manuals. At the nadir of the writing center creation tale told in *Teaching in a Writing Center Setting*, the tutor comes face-to-face with one of the resident goddesses of writing center lore, Mrs. Prestopino.

All the young women in the eighth grade were required to take a sewing class in order to make their own graduation dresses. So every Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, a bunch of very silly and generally incompetent young girls would sit in Mrs. Prestopino's sewing room, diligently working on our creations. Of course, some of us were better seamstresses than were others, and so, the rate at which we worked and the kinds of problems we had varied considerably among us.

Mrs. Prestopino was able to cope with the differences in her students, though, because she was a wise woman with some extremely sound pedagogical principles. Rather than requiring every girl to work on the same task at the same rate, she sensibly allowed full scope for the individual differences. Serenely, Mrs. Prestopino would sit at her big sewing table at the front of the room, seemingly undisturbed by girlish chattering or the whir of the sewing machines. When any girl had a problem or needed instruction in the next stage of dressmaking, Mrs. Prestopino would then summon the girl to her table and give her the necessary help (93).

Mrs. Prestopino's wise pedagogical principles—praise something in each student attempt, give practical tasks that focus initially on global problems, keep tasks simple—provide an object lesson at the nadir of the quest. More importantly, her story also suggests an entire ethos for the writing center setting: the safe if somewhat disorderly environment created by Mrs. Prestopino's serene presence at the big table amid the undisturbed chatter of the students; the almost immediate access to genuine expertise that will be freely and wisely given; the talent for recognizing just what each student needs when she needs it; the indefatigable commitment to find something praiseworthy in every attempt; the arrangement of the pedagogical whole on the basis of the differences of the individual parts, not the other way around; and the unquestioned significance of the task that each girl has had set out for her by the authority of the institution—something appropriate to wear to her own graduation. Here surely is one of the master narratives of writing center lore.

Having heard this founding tale, and buoyed by what inspiration it may provide, the writing tutor must hurry on her way. There is much still to be learned in the highly developed world of contemporary writing centers: dealing with learning disabilities, working with computers, working with non-native and dialect speakers, tutoring students who are working on research projects or writing a literary essay, among others. The breadth and depth of expertise expected of the writing center tutor

is considerable, and the extensive wardrobe that the writing tutor must be prepared to model comes with all the accessories.

The Return

Having worked his way by now through a range of subdisciplines and practices, and an expansive bibliography of writing center scholarship, the tutor-in-training arrives at the return threshold. After so much travail and so near to the end of his quest, it may seem cruel, but here at the return threshold the very success of his journey is threatened by a nasty paradox: the more the novice tutor knows about writing center tutoring, the more difficult, not easier, it becomes to act within its limits. Even a lot of knowledge might be dangerous. The real world of writing centers, the one that is in actual operation on the other side of the return threshold, may well be flourishing, yet it must manage its flowering in the edgy ambiance and ethical brambles that mark academic culture. The very non-interventionist policies and strategies that had at one time promised to keep the writing center safely insulated from its vocal critics in the academy, those who would accuse the writing center of aiding and abetting student plagiarism, for instance, now threaten to congeal into an unfortunate orthodoxy that could well marginalize the center's very mission to improve student writing. The serene and ordered ethos offered by Mrs. Prestopino's sewing circle does not, as it turns out, entirely take into account the complex and troubling issues that full participation in university intellectual life are likely to raise. In order to cross the return threshold of adventure, and become a full-fledged member of the writing center fellowship, the tutor-hero must learn to walk "the fine line between legitimate and illegitimate collaboration," between not intervening too much in others' writing and not intervening enough. The return threshold crossing is marked by a narrow and perilous route that snakes its way across the dismal swamp of authority and authorship in the academy. To successfully cross the return threshold is to move from acting out of habit or defensive bureaucratic policy to the sort of flexible and informed judgment required in the real world setting of colleges and universities.

If he can negotiate this last test, the tutor-in-training crosses the return threshold of adventure, holding aloft the prize, the boon, the magic talisman: the keys to the writing center.

I hope that my reading of these three tutor training manuals as if they were quest romances or creation myths has not gratuitously carica-

tured their pedagogical purposes, on the one hand, or overinflated their cultural significance, on the other. The temptations of these two extremes were constant companions throughout my research. At the same time, I would argue that my reading does persuasively interpret tutor training manuals as powerful stories of initiation. I would argue further that these “tales of the tribe,” such as they are, collectively and individually inscribe a number of the most enduring themes of writing center lore:

- By reuniting the learner with the teacher, the writer with the reader, one-to-one conferencing can humanize both participants and demystify the writing process.
- By systematically introducing students to each other as credible writers, thinkers, talkers, and listeners, peer tutoring can change students’ lives and reinvigorate campus literacy.
- By creating a knowledgeable and flexible academic culture around one-to-one conferencing and collaborative learning, writing centers can thrive.

What about those of us who are tutor trainers and writing center directors? What might these manuals-as-myths tell us about ourselves? For one thing, they suggest a more satisfying explanation of why we are so very, very busy. After all, we are the ones who recruit the tutors from their banal schedule of classes, calling out to them to step beyond business as usual and to come to a special place called “Peer Tutoring” or “English Internship” or simply “ENG 395.” We are the ones who construct and reconstruct the intricate, sequential writing tasks and the elaborate tutorial rehearsals that constitute the “road of trials” of tutor training itself—even videotaping the proceedings for later study. We are the ones who provide as much “magical aid” as scholarship and experience make available to us, perhaps more aid than even hero-tutors can take advantage of, so afoot are we with our mission. We serve, too, as the “shadowy figures” that guard the thresholds of adventure, making sure the rites of passage are fully observed. Once in a while we even have to say “No, you can’t have the keys to the writing center.” (We are not particularly good at that.) When we witness the heroes struggling across the return threshold, we are there, too, on the other side, offering congratulations and welcome to the new initiates, along with a slice of pizza with outlandish toppings or a hot bowl of chili made with our own hands in our own kitchens. “Would you be interested in going to the National Conference on Writing and Peer Tutoring?” we ask between

bites. “We’re having an organizational meeting next week to put together a proposal, and you are invited.”

Not only does the cycle of tutor training shape much of a writing center director’s professional and even personal life, but my research into tutor training manuals also suggests that we deeply identify ourselves with the themes of these tutor training initiation stories. Narratives of alienation and reunion, social and cultural transformation, marginalization and eventual validation—the tutor training stories as I have excavated them from tutor training manuals remind me very much of the history of our own collective “heroic” struggle to establish writing centers in universities and colleges. Our creation myth might go something like this:

Having answered the call to adventure sounded from the pages of the “MLA Job Information List” or “The Writing Center Journal” or from the bulletin board at the local employment office advertising a CETA job at Kishwaukee Community College, we embark on an arduous quest to achieve the elusive prize, the boon, the reward at the nadir of our writing center journey: at-one-ment with the academy. The Threshold of Adventure is hidden in a former classroom across the hall from the bookstore annex, at the literal and figurative margins of campus life. The sign on the door says “Writing Lab.” We open it, cross over the threshold, and find ourselves transformed and at the cutting edge of undergraduate education. We soon adapt to the paradox of our educational centrality and our tenuous status. We take ourselves seriously. Somewhere up ahead, if we can figure out where ahead really is, we hope to find a “tenure home” for the writing center. Magical aid is in short supply at the dawn of writing center time, but at least there are some federal dollars and local grants-in-aid to be had, some one-time monies to ease us across the threshold, to get us going. Along the way, we receive invaluable guidance from talented and generous colleagues, who know what we are in for and try to help. Mostly we make things up as we go along the road of trials, where no one else seems to understand or care a fig for what the idea of a writing center is; they just want a plumber to fix the literacy leak. A few of us miraculously get tenure-track positions, or at least long-term professional appointments associated with writing centers. We are at the nadir of the quest: at-one-ment with the academy. Some of us get tenure; many of us get screwed. Those who survive the tenure trial take a big, sabbatical breath and then set out on the long and necessarily repetitive passage to the return threshold, which is marked clearly by a sign we ourselves have

written. The sign reads “Wanted: Writing Center Director, Tenure-Track, Big Bucks! Enter Here.” Up ahead of us, hazy in the distance but clearly discernible, we can see others with whom we have journeyed crossing over the Return Threshold. They disappear from sight almost immediately, but the writing centers themselves, the true heroes of this story, soldier on toward the ever-receding horizon. They are thriving in the future that is taking place just on the other side of the Return Threshold, a future where writing centers have become as permanent a part of the academy as writing itself.