

6

BREATHING LESSONS

*or Collaboration is . . .*¹

MICHELE EODICE

My purpose here is to invite an *apperception*, what William James says in *Talks to Teachers* “means nothing more than the act of taking a thing into the mind” (1958 [1899]). It sounds simple, but with all the different minds reading this, I understand the challenge I have in making my think piece yours. Despite the fact that we share some prior knowledge of writing center work, what each of us brings to this reading “no sooner enters our consciousness than it is drafted off in some determinate direction or other, making connections with the other materials already there.” In the 1890s, James wrote:

A little while ago, at Buffalo, I was the guest of a lady who had recently taken her seven-year old son for the first time to Niagara Falls. The child silently glared at the phenomenon until his mother, supposing him struck speechless by its sublimity, said, “Well, my boy, what do you think of it?” to which, “Is that the kind of spray I spray my nose with?” was the boy’s only reply. That was his mode of apperceiving the spectacle. (1958 [1899], 112)

You will, of course, build a first perception (of the following proposition, say) based on your previous conceptions and experiences (with collaboration, for example), although it is my hope that you will recognize a “natural wonder” when you see one.

Collaboration is a word I wish was not a word at all. I wish then that collaboration was understood as ineffable in all we do, not because I don’t wish it ever to be challenged or acknowledged, but because I believe, as Michael Blitz does, that collaboration is like the “air we breathe.”² Like many travelers who sometimes wish for fresher, healthier air in a cabin full of strangers, or like a poor swimmer gulping and gasping, I often have my moments of distress: wishing for breathable air, for a writing partner, for voices of collusion; longing for the better angel of my nature.

Yet whether the air is fresh and sweet or rank and polluted, I find I do most of my *writing* work with others. And yes, whether the air is fresh and sweet or rank and polluted, I find I do most of my *work* work with others. In analyzing these trace elements in the air—the alchemy of collaboration—I find its daily work of “transforming something common into something special”³ so rooted into my habits and deeds that I no longer question its life in mine.

But air is not *nothing*, not neutral, and we know that academics are often dismissed if critique is missing. So I take up a tactic that other academics have used: I avoid my interior work and focus instead on what is wrong with everyone else. For example, I find fascinating those who insist that this alchemy of collaboration is an “inexplicable or mysterious transmuting”⁴ which is too scary to engage in, or, when it is in fact a practice for some, there is no effort to make it visible and valued. One result: institutional resistance to collaboration gives students permission to ignore, dismiss, or cheapen learning and writing with others. Thus, I foolishly set out in my pedantic, missionary way to convert other academics to my practice of *uber* collaboration and to help them experience the joys I find inherent in writing with others.⁵

Along the way I have learned something about conversion experiences: first, I am driven to get you to write with others and to get students to embrace a collaborative view of writing themselves, yet I watch all kinds of text-production marching on, oblivious to my mission. Where I believed I must bring collaboration, I find it working fine; I realize that writing centers themselves practice one of the most powerful forms of collaborative learning (and yes, collaborative writing) embodied in the peer-consulting model. However, when asked, many writing center directors will say that their peer relations, their relationships with their institutions, their identity politics, are anything but collaborative, and they may even say that what happens in consulting sessions is not *really* collaborative writing. Paradoxically, then, a set of tropes continually employed to describe our relationships and positions in our institutions foreclose on possibilities of uncovering (and thus *teaching*) what undergirds both our tangible daily practice and our abstract desire: collaboration.

Collaboration (in, over, during?) text production—the writer-to-writer talk, the mix of handwriting coloring a document, the shared excitement about a simple (re)construction, the alternate achievement

of clarity or chaos in the feedback, the way time passes differently, the un-aloneness of work—all of these embody our centers. The material practices and the ethos generated in writing centers emanate and travel—whether to online environments or virtual peer tutoring, or to satellite locales in residence halls or community centers, or to your home office or favorite coffee shop. Although we seem to recognize these activities when they fall within our own brick and mortar or electronic environments, we often fail to carry them beyond—to the offices, committees, programs, and faculty who could learn from us.

TROPES

In a 1990 article, Virginia Perdue and Deborah James found the following state of things unfortunate:

[B]ecause the teaching that occurs in writing centers is often informal, collaborative, and egalitarian, it is invisible. And this invisibility makes writing centers vulnerable to uncertain budgets, staffing, and locations, but most importantly, vulnerable to the misunderstanding that marginalizes writing centers . . . within our home institutions. (quoted in Harris 1992, 272)

Although written over a dozen years ago, this claim still gets some heads nodding. We have read plenty of listserv posts and articles about how to make ourselves visible: we need direct and clear reporting lines, we should learn to count beans and disseminate our data, and on and on. In addition to these sensible practices, what we could be doing to insure visibility is what we do best, and what we do in a powerful collection of moments all the hours we are open: collaborate. Writing centers have been called exemplars of the “best” kinds of communication (informal, collaborative, egalitarian), pedagogy (informal, collaborative, egalitarian), and caring (informal, collaborative, egalitarian) that the academy can offer. In “best” practices models, learners, teachers, and administrators read about and adopt methods that others have discovered to work. Who in your institution is adopting your practices? What can we do to help them do this?

By consistently reviving the tropes of marginality, disappointment,⁶ and disciplinarity-above-all-else, we have abetted our institutions, allowing them to draw our perimeters. It is perhaps what Elizabeth Boquet calls the “promise of containment” (2002, 66)—securing a program fund, a director, or a space in exchange for “squirreling away certain student populations” (67)—that makes us complicit, paralyzing our

efforts to get out more. The hold this margin/containment trope has on us has become embedded in our lore to such a degree as to become *doxa*—we pass along these beliefs and their resulting practices to the detriment of future generations of writing center leaders. As James Sosnoski reminds us:

Intellectuals like to think they are less subject to orthodoxy than they actually are. As “native” practitioners they may laugh at the naïve views “foreign” administrators have of their customs, but they obey the curfews. (1994, 99)

Why do we romanticize our status by hanging on to the idea that our land is more important than anything else (the Scarlet O’Haras)? Why are we always riled up for a feud, or reveling in our loner status, thinking ourselves such radical and subversive outposts? Alternative, supplemental, radical, marginal—our identity preempts contact outside our walls. A kind of reciprocity with institutions could help to convert the identity of a marginalized site, although this would no doubt force us to give up the cachet of self-defining as the subversive-radical-moveable feast-carnival-safe house-literacy club. Frankly, I am afraid some of these terms have become parodies of their original meaning. If we could flip the *working on the margins* thing to a *working the margins* thing (since, after all, margins are required, useful, in any textual work⁷, we might see that every department, every member of our academic communities, is struggling with a range of issues—from budget to pedagogy—and that while our farm may be on the outskirts of town, our campuses need what we grow there. How then do we now go back on our original and implicit “promise” to contain and remain apart in order to unlearn the tropes? I think the following story corroborates that these tropes have come to define us for ourselves in particular ways, and they have also influenced the way others construct us.

A faculty member in English stopped by, his first time since we opened five years ago, and his office is right downstairs. He said, “I know that you don’t usually work with really good writers, but I have a problem. I have a student who is writing good papers but she wants more. She gets A’s, but she keeps bugging me for more; she wants me to tell her how she could improve the papers even more, just for herself, not for a grade. I don’t know if you have anybody here who has dealt with that and maybe could talk to her?”

Instead of feeling defeated by his assumptions, his clear misunderstanding of what we do and in fact what teachers can do with student writing, I looked on this communication as an opening, an opportunity.

I thought he wanted some guidance, to hear about some (new) ways he could conference with his student, but it was suddenly clear that he expected only to hand off both the student and her papers to us. I suggested that he and the student and I and a writing consultant get together to talk; I was already anticipating what all of us could learn, what I could take back to our consultant practicum meetings; hell, I was even thinking of videotaping the session.

However, he wished not to be further involved in learning how he or we might do this work with a “good” writer. What ended up happening was that a few of our consultants took the papers and wrote responses to the writer in a kind of blind exercise (I didn’t tell them the back-story). We all took a look and then discussed the feedback, how it works when good writers don’t want to be done with their writing. We asked ourselves, what can school-sponsored writing do beyond its deadline, beyond its terminal grade? Finally, we hooked up with the student and had a great visit.

We often collect these stories to justify a further retreat to our margins; by doing so we rub salt in our wounds and nurture our cynicism. My attempt to collaborate with this faculty member enacts, rather, a kind of collaboration with refusal. As my friend and assistant director, Emily Donnelly, says, “collaboration is not collaboration only when it is with those who deserve it or with those who are sufficiently enlightened.” I really hate the fact that Angela Petit’s (2001) assertion below can still be true:

As long as significant numbers of students and faculty believe that writing centers are places where only ‘bad’ writers go, these centers will affirm the distinction that the academy wishes to draw between its own study of privileged texts and the types of writing students produce. (52)

My impulse to turn this encounter into more than placating a faculty member helped to maintain the construction of our writing center as a place for collaboration, not as a place for “affirming the distinction that the academy wishes to draw.” From this experience, and others like it, I wish to offer a way of seeing that what we do with collaboration every day in our writing centers can empower us to dismantle its borders and perform a kind of collaboration that will benefit both us and our institutions. In order to do this, I invite you, as reader, to collaborate with my proposition as well.

RIGHT UNDER OUR NOSES

It is a joy to be hidden but a disaster not to be found.

D.W. WINNICOTT

Let's start closest to home and move outward. John Trimbur urges us "to see tutoring not simply as a dyadic relationship between tutors and tutees but as part of the wider social and cultural networks that shape students' emergence into literacy" (1992, 174). The best thing we can do (indeed the thing we do best) is to help students see how several dimensions of their lives are collaborating in a text; after all, the act of visiting a writing center isn't the only thing that constructs a student as a writer. As Stephen Ferruci reminds us, "students do not operate in the context of a single department or discipline" (2001, 7); they are, in fact, getting around much more than we are. Trimbur seems confident that we can take some credit for this foundational kind of collaboration: "I can't think of a place as ideally situated to carry on the kinds of extended conversation necessary for students to make sense of their . . . experiences as readers and writers" (178). Richard Behm (1989), like Alice Gillam, Kenneth Bruffee, Andrea Lunsford, and others, captures the spirit of our work:

[T]he tutor and the learner are truly collaborators, peers involved in a give and take, a communal struggle to make meaning . . . a very basic act of sharing, one that often extends well-beyond completing a particular academic exercise. In fact, I am convinced that peer tutoring and other kinds of collaborative learning gather power in proportion to the degree of cooperative involvement in the endeavor. (6)

One step, then, can be recognizing and studying the collaboration—and I would say the collaborative writing as well as the collaborative learning about writing—that takes place in our centers. Muriel Harris asks us to "examine the difference . . . to disentangle" and distinguish the types of collaboration that we see and practice (1992a, 369), but I want to see the sameness, too, by collapsing the categories she defines as collaborative writing and collaborative learning about writing into an encompassing collaboration. What we do with student writers is much more like the collaborative writing we practice when we academics, writers, or teachers seek feedback, participate in peer review, or work with editors; it is much more a form of intrusive caring about texts; it is much more an exchange than a one-way service.

Without the bumpy seams between forms of collaboration, we can see spread out before us the many viable research questions embedded in our

everyday work. Can we extrapolate from what we do daily with students and engage genuinely in corresponding practices? Below I provide some examples of research questions stemming from my daily work. Look at what gets generated when we simply let our “insider” inquiry get turned outward:

I admit I engage in—and inculcate my writing consultants to do—what Sally Crisp calls “assertive collaboration.” What always surprises them then is when I reveal that one of my primary goals in working collaboratively with writers is to help foster self-directed learning. Now I am interested in how the consultants themselves view collaboration: How blurry are their lines? What collaboration experiences have they had that they link to the development of their own self-directed learning? Have they worked through how these are related? Have I?

What happens when this talk and facilitation and pen passing is over for the moment? What do students count as “help”? What matters to them enough to call a session successful, fun, or a waste of time? How likely are student visitors to characterize their work here as collaborative?

Moving, for example, to the term “consultant”—which implies collaboration—rather than tutor—which stems directly from a transmission model of learning—might help us redirect our understanding that for the consulting model to work, the consultant must lean in, must be invested in learning from and with the client, must be prepared to exploit the moment.⁸

So then, realizing the richness of research questions springing from our home soil, might we move what is central to our centers out of the center? This next step can be inspired by our daily practice (or perhaps nonpractice) and asks us to look at what we do as writers ourselves. In a book called *Weaving Knowledge Together: Writing Centers and Collaboration*, Carol Haviland admonishes us:

[I]f we believe the writing center is a community for all writers, we have to use it for our own writing; we have to occupy the writer position as well as the tutor, teacher, and director positions. It is not enough to claim that any of these can be a learning position; it is important to act on our claims. (Enriquez, Haviland, Olson, and Pizurie 1998, 120)

After getting into “the writer position” ourselves, we can bring our many conceptions of collaboration into dialogue with one another, and begin to hear how our identity and thus our relationships are negotiated in the academy. Nancy Grimm, in *Rearticulating the Work of the Writing Center* (1996), recognizes that even though over 90% of colleges

have writing centers, “we might expect a stronger presence of writing center voices in composition forums” (523). In many cases our individual effort to influence our closest cousins has fallen short; yet we should not miss the opportunity to go beyond moving (only) our English department colleagues. The core activities of academics—team research, committee work, peer review, grant writing, visiting the library, watercooler exchanges, conference presentations, listserv participation, advising students, grading papers, and teaching scheduled classes—all fall within the scope of collaboration. I look for ways in; for example, like Carol Haviland, I want to talk back to the pervasive attitude that faculty *collaborate* but student writers *cheat* (Enriquez, Haviland, Olson, and Pizurie 1998, 119). Ironically, it seems collaboration is the *only* practice to which academics do not want to acculturate their students. While both plagiarism and collaboration are addressed by writing centers for the faculty community, collaboration is most often framed as a qualifier in relation to an official writing center position on plagiarism. If this is the only way we can conceive of intervening on this issue, we have not collaborated; we have merely fallen back on our promise to contain. I take Grimm’s call to “share more . . . to move out of silence and into dialogue” (1996, 539) not just to carry student voices and experiences outside our doors, but to carry ourselves and our gifts to our distant relations. Haviland and Denise Stephenson (2002) are certain, as they echo Ede and Lunsford (2000), that “at their best, writing centers can use their intensely collaborative work to make traditional university borders more permeable than can other more firmly fixed programs” (381). Collaboration trumps the old tropes.

LEAN IN

We must clink that glass and talk to our colleagues.

MURIEL HARRIS

Many of us would count our administrative reporting as the most necessary and tangible form of communication beyond our centers. With Richard Miller (1998) and Jo Koster (in this volume), I recognize the asset they believe will lend the helping hand in conveying our local and global goals for higher education reform: our proficient rhetorical skills. Summoning these skills to our advantage makes sense, of course, but don’t we know that and do that pretty well already? Might we be a little too attracted to and obsessed with this form of communication (this is not collaboration, yet)? Are we overlooking an additional solution

right in front of us, because we fear that this effort might compromise (our) identity in untenable ways?

Lean in.⁹ It's okay to be what Richard Miller (1998) calls an "intellectual-bureaucrat." We are already adept at hosting this blend—both inter- and cross-disciplinary, both service and scholarship, both teacher and administrator—but do our institutions recognize our skill at hybridization? Have we communicated this well with our colleagues? Have we even accepted this hyphenated identity ourselves? In his discussion of the identity crisis of the writing center director and our positions relative to our institution's organizational structures, Stephen Ferruci states that "by establishing the context of the relationship in oppositional terms, us against them, [we] undermine the director's authority as an administrator, since the director needs to be 'near the center' of the institution to enact change" (2001, 5). His critique of Tilly Warnock and John Warnock's suggestion that "it is probably a mistake for centers to seek integration into the established institution" (5) is useful support for my position: we should not "maintain a critical distance from the institution"—we should, in fact, become integral as models for its leadership through collaboration.

It is in our interest for growth in our work to work at our "growing edge." If we start by accepting this hybrid role we already embody—understanding that the intellectual in us can "collaborate" with the (welcome or conscripted) bureaucrat in us—we then possess the capacity to expand beyond our borders. We already possess the traits of the intellectual-bureaucrat; any reflection on our work, our interests and talents, and our future goals should tell us this. What Miller outlines is what we see when we look in the mirror:

[O]ne who takes on the hybrid persona of the intellectual-bureaucrat would . . . possess remarkable tolerance for ambiguity, an appreciation for structured contradictions, a perspicacity that draws into its purview the multiple forces determining individual events and actions, an understanding of the essentially performative character of public life, and a recognition of the inherently political character of all matters emerging from the power/knowledge nexus. (1998, 213)

I carry this persona into my campus interactions, but this necessitates abandoning the traditional connotation of bureaucrat in order to allow a balance of intellectual contributions. Two affirmations from sociology motivate me: 1) my work requires others and 2) gosh darn it, people

like me (and I am learning to like them too). If we can insert ourselves more into campus life, because this “consistent social intercourse” is a *requirement* “if human characteristics are to be preserved,” then a significant personal and professional development can obtain: “the selves we are are to a great extent a product of our social contacts” (Sprott 1970, 28). In short, we are the relationships we have.

Yet for many of us, it is difficult to trust the process, to trust the academy’s record of rewarding collaboration. I want to believe with social psychologist George C. Homans that the following is true:

Interaction leads to mutual liking . . . [and] if the interactions between the members of a group are frequent in the external system, sentiments of liking will grow up between them, and these sentiments will in lead in turn to further interactions over and above the interaction of the external system. (quoted in Sprott 1970, 53)

GOOD CITIZENS

It happens that currently here at my institution a different generation of administrators (and I use generation not in relation to a person’s age, but in relation to their paradigm, say) with “good intentions” considers me a “good soldier” (for weathering budget cuts, for leading difficult committees, etc.). I reject that title, but I am unashamed to embrace the title of “good citizen.” It is not difficult for me to accept this role, as I see it linked directly to the process of engaging in “good work.”¹⁰

With Miller (1998), I agree that composition itself has barely been able to carve out a disciplinary space beyond mainly talking to itself, and that it is indeed “a mistake to abandon the ethic of service that defines the field in the hope that doing so will bring about a broader respect for [our] intellectual work” (103). When I say we should reformulate and embrace service, I am not trying to invalidate the experiences of the adjunct, the untenured, those challenged by a disenfranchising relationship with the academy when I ask us to reexamine our conceptions of service. I am not suggesting a sacrifice in time, reputation, or values. Consider how fortunate we are even in being given the luxury of reading this book. Have our several advanced degrees helped us grow our *acquisitiveness* or our *inquisitiveness*? Are we ashamed to work for others, in service to others, in a helping profession? James Sledd (2000), in a curmudgeonly reflection, believed service ought to be a goal of our

work, one that might even allow the WPA or WCA to “become that rarity, an honorable and effective manager” (30). Many of us relay our disappointment at administrative work and its status; we begin to internalize a kind of managerial mind-set that allows us to reduce our work to tasks. What if we were to trade *management* for *leadership*? Annette Kolodny (1998) asks us to see future academic leadership as “an inclusive collaborative activity” so that all players can “work together as true partners, sharing information, and negotiating priorities” (30). In the name of improving learning experiences for students—whether they have walked into our writing centers or not—we should gather up our service energy, our rhetorical gifts, our diverse scholarship and “get out of this place.”¹¹

A COLLABORATORY

Where then should we go? Collaboratory models of interaction are found primarily in the sciences, where networks of cooperation and inquiry increase the potential for results and dissemination while strengthening the epistemic or knowledge-building culture of an institution (see, e.g., Lunsford and Bruce 2001).

Collaboratory models of interaction at our institutions—arrived at physically, like the one we built here in our library; or constructed as work groups, like the ones I helped form for our campus; or erected virtually in Blogs, Wikis, Blackboard and OWLs—can support both short-term projects and long-term commitments, and develop into sites of intense research and scholarship as well.

Whether we have a formal, visible collaboratory at my school or not, I have learned as if in one. In just this last year alone, I have learned from my colleagues in business about boundarylessness, in biology about memes,¹² in social welfare about the strengths perspective, and from the librarians I learned about all kinds of good stuff. For writing centers, whose history is full of scrambles for turf, for a stable budget line, for a physical space of their own, purposely seeking a boundaryless state sounds risky. Yet this move could take Boquet’s (2002) call for “high risk, high yield” tutorial practices to a new level: administration without a net. Replace *tutor* with *director* in the following prompts Boquet has created: “[H]ow might I encourage this tutor to operate on the edge of his or her expertise? Where’s the place where, together, we will really feel like we’re jammin’ and how did we get there?” (81). Taking this micro-to-macro view helps us see the parallels between our tutors’ work in here with our possibilities out there.

A collaboratory requires a level of comfort with boundarylessness. Todd Jick and others from business management education predict that

when vertical, horizontal, external, and geographic boundaries are traversable, the organization of the future begins to take shape. When these found boundaries remain rigid and impenetrable they create the slowness to respond and the lack of flexibility and innovation . . . that signals failure.¹³(quoted in *Electronic News*, 1996)

When readying to take such a risk, it helps to start with an existing strength and build outward, to see micro versions of interplay that can contribute to our health and growth in the bigger picture. Through my work with faculty and students in our School of Social Welfare, I have learned about an abiding theory in practicing “social” work, one that has, in fact, come to be identified internationally with my university’s program: the strengths perspective. According to the program’s web page:

[T]he strengths perspective arises from the profession of social work’s commitment to social justice, the dignity of every human being, and building on people’s strengths and capacities rather than focusing exclusively on their deficits, disabilities, or problems. As an orientation to practice, emphasis is placed on uncovering, reaffirming, and enhancing the abilities, interests, knowledge, resources, aspirations and hopes of individuals and communities. This approach assumes that the articulation and extension of strengths and resources increases the likelihood that people will reach the goals and realize the possibilities they have set for themselves.¹⁴

Most of our centers already work from this strengths perspective. For example, we do not endorse a deficit model of education; in writing centers, we start where students are. For this next generation of collaboration to work, all parties, including the students themselves, must “assume that students bring ideas and experiences to learning situations that advance and enrich the understanding of others” (Muir & Blake 2002, 3). By taking this strengths perspective to heart, we might begin to recognize and activate our fundamental resource: we are really good at understanding and practicing collaboration.

A story:

Andrea Lunsford (1995) wrote that “collaborative environments and tasks must demand collaboration” and I have taken this statement very seriously. A few years ago

I worked with our student senate here on a proposal to fund a writing center site in the main undergraduate library. The result is a space that is designed to offer a writing center service most evenings of the year, but during the rest of the time the space is called the Collaborative Learning Environment, a location in the library that is set up specifically to encourage group work, talk, and collaboration. So, this collaboration with the library staff and the student senate resulted in a collaborative learning environment for everyone—sans territorial possessiveness, sans demarcation of spaces for students and those for scholars. These kinds of achievements cannot be claimed by departments or programs working alone or working only from a motive to preserve or contain or justify their existence.

This result is potentially an exemplar of how we think learning is constituted and valued in our institutions; at a Research I (Doctoral Extensive) university such as mine, the “story” of this achievement is only as good as the scholarship that can be produced from it. The way then to move collaborative action at an administrative level is to pursue opportunities within our programs to engage in collaborative research. James Sosnoski (1994) calls this a move toward *concurrence*. From student writing groups to university-wide committees, to joint inquiry, *concurrence*

construes our work as collaborative rather than competitive . . . [it] is a non-hierarchical form of organization. Concurrence converges upon the mutual recognition of a painful problem . . . [and] by concurring, [groups] do not seek conformity; they seek the coincidences among their differences. A common ideal or *telos* does not hold the group together. Intellectual compassion and care hold the group together. (218)

Some of my best friends are librarians,¹⁵ and some are other writing center directors, two groups that Liz Rohan (2002) labels “hostesses of literacy” in an article that uncovers similarities in both of our service models. In her critique, Rohan recognizes that the kind of “theorizing” that Elizabeth Boquet (2002) calls for, or the “knowledge-making” that Sharon Crowley calls for, should work as a ballast against a purely service model of our work. Think of yourself—good citizen—arriving in the collaborative to now generate theory about the many dimensions of your work, your service, your leadership, your teaching. An organic outcome of our interactions with tutors, student writers, faculty, and all members of our college communities should be this continual discovery of useful theory. For me, the kinds of actions we take with others beyond our

walls can be brought together within the collaboratory; joint inquiry, co-authoring, collaborative grant oversight, team teaching—all and more can foster and exemplify this theorizing and knowledge-making—sending a clear message that our work goes well beyond residual notions of *service* (that we *serve* our English departments, for example) to incorporate the potential of an intellectual-bureaucrat’s brand of service. Rohan suggests, drawing on the work of Boquet, that we convert the rich archive of lore and narrative about our daily work to acts of unmasking, storytelling, and theory-building:

Boquet suggests that ‘theorizing,’ rather than purely managing or masking the stories and the conflicts that they may represent and foster, may help raise the status of the work performed in stereotypically domestic spaces, and make visible this parlor of the academy. . . .

The future of education might lie therefore in knowledge-making achieved through dialogue . . . in which knowledge is conceived through dialogic exchange, or as Boquet suggests, through story telling. (69–73)

This storytelling requires both teller and listener.

A PROMISING FUTURE

When Kinkead and Harris predicted in “What’s Next for Writing Centers” (2000) that the twenty-first century writing center will be more “reliant on technology and need more second-language acquisition specialists,” they spoke of the needs *inside*, what I propose moves us *outside*, beyond even their observation that

[W]e are poised to assume a more prominent role in the institutions and communities in which [we] exist. Increasingly, writing centers are no longer seen as supplementary but as programs that are central to the mission of the school and essential to its being competitive in terms of attracting and retaining students. (23)

In addition, the terms *de-centered*, *satellite*, and *virtual* are often featured in predictions of our future—yet these terms are typically described as valuable always in conjunction with emerging technology, not as assets on their own or representative of a holistic programmatic goal to become more “central to the mission of the school.” Contraptions are only that—contraptions are not collaboration (and this coming from someone who loves contraptions).

Likewise, I run the risk of implying that I agree entirely with Terrence Riley's (1994) argument that an "unpromising future" is in store for us if we "lean in" too far, whether that means committing to technology or disciplinarity or marginality as our method of survival. I believe that we can—and should—uncover our shared intelligence and expertise about collaboration *in order to* "lean in," and then to "lean in" with a bucketful of it. With Riley, I fear that we are mapping out a disciplinary territory in order to assimilate to the mainstream of higher education (which supposedly means we have "arrived"), and then we have to account for all we have lost (and all we will lose if we withhold our collaboration) in the process.

In an attempt to secure something of value, we will end up recreating most of the debilitating hierarchies that we wished to escape. The peer relationship, collaboration, spontaneity, freedom, equality, courage; the excitement of interaction, the energy of student culture—replaced by constructions of expert and amateur, of protocol, instruction and tradition. (31)

The possible "lost" can be resuscitated. It is my assertion that identifying collaboration as the common denominator of our work—a universal conveyance (without assuming a cookie-cutter methodology that is played out the same way in all institutions)—allows us to overcome or supersede the very real effects of what Riley predicts we will encounter if our primary motivation is to build yet another academic empire. I, for one, would be willing to let go the tether of discipline for the subject. Valuing the subject (of writing, teaching writing, coaching writing, whatever) over the discipline, "in which staking out a certain argumentative orthodoxy seems to be more important than engaging with a sense of cultural dynamism" (Hills 2002, xiii), means working toward a sustainable rather than a contingent relation with education in the broadest sense. Which is exactly what we think writing itself has the capacity to do, right?

I used to be very irritated by the following assumption about the desired result of our efforts—a statement we have heard from many a naïve newbie: "We want to work ourselves out of job." We reacted: it is just plain wrong-headed thinking, we said, that we wouldn't really want to be available anytime for any writer; that "good" writers don't need us; that if we put enough student writers up on the lift, diagnosed their writing problems, and sent them on their way, eventually there would be no new student writers to serve. All this to say that now I wonder if writing

were imbued so deeply and naturally as a habit of mind and a habit of connection, and internalized so effectively as a habit of learning on our campuses, that we would no longer need a “Center.”¹⁶ We would carry on deliberate, productive conversations about writing, in writing, for writing with our technology support staff, our librarians, our student services folks, our center for teaching facilitators, our first-year-experience program designers, our faculty from anthropology to zoology.

This then is my small message to my affinity group: professional and social networks are already formed and formidable within the writing center community; these are powerful and productive and ferry our goodies back and forth to each other, but to go beyond this we need to become a “smart mob”¹⁷—a homegrown initiative that utilizes our workaday knowledge to reach others in ways that can impact policy, influence administrative and institutional leaders, and help us grow leaders from among our writing center fellows. We can and should *demand* collaboration and continue to work toward boundarylessness, even with the knowledge that these actions will never be fully accomplished, completed.

CODA

I think you know I would never presume to teach you to breathe, to do something you do so naturally already, something you do fairly well, something you do to continue along, much without thinking; but I might slap you on the back if you were gasping for air.

Or . . .

Look around, feel the spray, see the natural wonder.