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## The Tropes We Tutor By: Names and Labels as Tropes in Writing Center Work

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THE TROPES WE TUTOR BY: NAMES AND LABELS  
AS TROPES IN WRITING CENTER WORK

Scott R. Sands

153 Pages

The following study explores the way names and labels function as tropes in writing center work. Building on Lakoff and Johnson's work on metaphors, and using Kenneth Burke's concept of the trope, this study analyzes the way names and labels for writing center spaces, people, activity, and preparation function metaphorically, synecdochically, metonymically, and ironically to shape the way people understand and value writing centers. This study demonstrates the ways in which names and labels used in writing center work both focus attention on particular aspects of that work and also minimize or hide other important aspects of that work. Ultimately, this study argues that the names and labels currently in use do not accurately reflect writing center work, and encourages scholars of writing center studies to either fully extend labels in use or adopt new labels. The final chapter suggests a framework by which those in writing center studies can select and articulate metaphors ethically, consciously, and with purpose.

**KEYWORDS:** tropes, writing centers, writing tutoring, humble irony

THE TROPES WE TUTOR BY: NAMES AND LABELS  
AS TROPES IN WRITING CENTER WORK

SCOTT R. SANDS

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for the Degree of

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THE TROPES WE TUTOR BY: NAMES AND LABELS  
AS TROPES IN WRITING CENTER WORK

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S. R. S.

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## CHAPTER I

### “WHAT’S IN A NAME?”: NAMES AND LABELS AS TROPES

#### IN WRITING CENTER WORK

#### **Tropes and the Economy of Attention**

*“[T]he refinery that converts “data” into “information” is human attention.*

– Richard Lanham  
“The Economics of Attention”

In 1997, Richard Lanham argued that, while many had asserted a shift to an “information” economy, the commodity for which companies were clamoring was actually human attention. In retrospect, he was surely right: once called the “information superhighway,” the internet is now composed of strands designed specifically to capture and keep our interest. From updating our statuses on Facebook to curating our obsessions on Pinterest to catching the latest movie or TV show on Netflix, the World Wide Web presently functions as a fine mesh through which much of our perception of the world is filtered.

In the case of disciplines like writing center studies, tropes function as that mesh, as what Kenneth Burke would call a “terministic screen.” Terms like “center,” “tutor,” and “teaching” direct our attention, focusing it on particular aspects of our surroundings while diverting it from others. In some ways, this effect can be helpful; names and labels can be valuable tools that enable us to focus on particular streams of information in a data-saturated world. But when the terms we use to determine what is important and what is not to become invisible, they risk transforming from tools to shackles. By analyzing, examining, and extending the tropes used in writing center work, I hope to

refocus our attention, allowing us to see not just what is in our field of vision, but the very frames that allow us to see in the first place.

### **“It Helps that the Whole Concept Has a Name”: Labels in Writing Center Work**

In 1991, Jeff Brooks penned an article in the *Writing Lab Newsletter* describing a tutorial technique he called “minimalist tutoring,” a method by which the writing tutor would help the student writer improve as a writer by “making [that] student do all the work” (2). In 2005, the editors of the *Writing Center Journal* asked Brooks what he thought about minimalist tutoring, which had enjoyed a decade and a half of popularity as part of what Shamon and Burns have called the “Bible” of writing center scholarship. Brooks’ response is instructive: “I suppose it helps that the whole concept has a name. That makes it easier to talk about and think about” (“Whatever Happened to Jeff Brooks,” 5). By attributing some of the popularity of his method to the act of naming a concept, Brooks demonstrates the way naming assigns value to a concept, helping humans to integrate it into their daily lives.

As valuable as names are, however, they can lead us to describe concepts inaccurately. Immediately after praising the value of “minimalist tutoring,” Brooks underlines the inaccuracy of his own label: “If you think about it, ‘minimalist’ is a funny label for something that’s so much more work than the other kind of tutoring” (“Whatever Happened to Jeff Brooks,” 5). Brooks’ observation underscores the way the terms with which people describe concepts can hide some aspects of that concept (student-centered tutoring requires the tutor to engage in “work” or labor) while

highlighting others (student-centered tutoring requires the student to engage in “work” or labor).

### **The Dominant Tropes in Writing Center Studies**

Though writing center theories and pedagogies have shifted along with changing technologies of writing, the growing transnational character of writing center work, and the valuable influence of knowledge exchange across disciplinary boundaries, the field describes its work using a particular set of labels. Three categories of names guide the theoretical, epistemological, and practical assumptions of writing center studies: *place names* like “center” and “lab,” *person names* like “tutor” and “consultant,” and *activity names* like “consulting” and “tutoring.” These three categories of names are further linked under the controlling label of the “center,” which structures how the names within the categories create a systematic understanding of writing center work.

Stakeholders in writing center work used labels like “consultant,” “tutoring,” and “center” to highlight those qualities of writing center work that distinguished it from other kinds of academic work in useful ways. Throughout the history of writing center scholarship and practice, such names helped supporters of writing center work to articulate foundational principles of practice, to assert the importance of writing in academic work, and to make a rhetorical case for a certain way of conceptualizing knowledge and learning in academia. For example, the trope of the “peer tutor” draws on research in social psychology (cf. Bandura; Csikzentmihalyi; Pajares), which underlines the important role that peers’ impressions play in students’ learning processes, particularly when learning to write. In addition, the trope of the writing “center” has

helped some writing center administrators to contrast the actual importance of writing and student support of writing with the “marginal” support often accorded to those centers in both financial and infrastructure terms (cf. Bishop; Brannon and North).

But, like Brooks’ choice of “minimalism” to describe a method of tutoring that in fact requires a great deal of work, tropes like “writing center” and “peer tutor” are problematic, giving practitioners in the field an erroneous sense of the “central” place of tutoring in the instruction of writing, or of the egalitarian nature of power relationships in writing tutorials. In particular, the trope of the “center” has taken root within writing center studies strongly enough so as to have become all but invisible.

Continued debates among writing center scholars about whether to call the writing center a “center” or a “studio,” whether the people who work in writing centers are “tutors,” “consultants,” or “coaches,” and whether the work that is done is “tutoring,” “consultation,” “coaching,” or something else, reflect a constant, and often beneficial, push within the field to renew and revise the place of writing centers within the academy. But the continued recurrence of specific tropes in writing center discourse indicates that such work has stagnated. Tropes that writing center practitioners and scholars use today carry with them references to ways of working that do not reflect current writing center practice, but that instead suggest ways of thinking about writing center work that contradict the collaborative *ethos* that has guided the field for much of its existence.

Many of the tropes with which scholars and practitioners of writing center work explain and articulate that work have been examined so little in the past 30 years that they have become effectively invisible. These unexamined tropes have continued to highlight

specific aspects of writing center practice while hiding other elements of that practice, including theories, interpretations, and assumptions that have evolved in the field in response to present realities.

I assert that writing center work needs to examine the tropes that guide its theory and practice, rearticulate and extend those tropes where possible, and adopt new tropes where necessary. Thus, in the following chapters, I will build on the work of prior writing center scholars to show how studying the tropes inherent in the labels used to describe the people, places, and activities surrounding writing center work might help those who work in writing centers to more productively describe who they are, where they work, and what they do.

### **Analyzing and Extending the Tropes Used to Name Writing Center Work**

Clearly, figurative language is an important part of work in all disciplines of English Studies. Scholars of writing center studies have most often relied on the term “metaphor” to describe the way that figurative language has functioned in their work (cf. Carino, “What we Talk About”; Thonus; Boquet, *Noise*). While this terminology may not be perfectly accurate, instances of figurative language often function similarly to each other, enough so that scholars both within and outside of English Studies at times use the term “metaphor” as a near synonym for “figurative language.” Lakoff and Johnson, for example, collapse “metaphor,” “metonymy,” and “synecdoche” into the single concept of “metaphor.” They do this by defining “personification” as an ontological metaphor (33 – 34), and treating metonymy as a kind of personification (35). They next classify synecdoche as a “special case” of metonymy (cf. 10, 35 – 40), which allows them to refer

to instances of metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche simply as “metaphors.” And while Kenneth Burke names metaphor as one of the four “master tropes” along with metonymy, synecdoche, and irony, he asserts that “the four tropes shade into one another,” explaining that a person who examines a concept thoroughly enough using one trope “will come upon the other three” (503). Thus, while the term “metaphor” may not accurately describe the specific instances of figurative language that scholars of English Studies use and criticize, Lakoff, Johnson, and Burke demonstrate that many elements of figurative language function similarly to one another.

This dissertation will examine the way important concepts within writing center studies are named, and explore how those names function rhetorically to guide thinking and writing about important ideas and concepts in writing center work. In so doing, I borrow Kenneth Burke’s frame of the “trope” to explain how such names function within writing center studies scholarship. That is, I argue that the names given to the sites, people, and activities involved in writing center work are tropes in the Burkean sense, and are thus in some ways metaphoric, metonymic, synecdochic, or ironic. I follow Lakoff and Johnson in defining *metaphor* as an instance when one concept is “partially structured, understood, performed, and talked about in terms of” another (5). Thus, for example, while “writing clinics” are not places where medical care is delivered by doctors to patients in a literal sense, people who work in, visit, and write about “writing clinics” nonetheless think of “diagnosis,” a medical procedure, as an action that occurs in a “writing clinic” (cf. Moore, Pemberton).

I follow Lakoff and Johnson in defining both *metonymy* and *synecdoche* as instances in which one entity stands in for, or represents, another (cf. *Metaphors We Live*

By, 36). Specifically, *synecdoche* occurs when one part of a thing is used to represent the whole. For example, in writing center work, “talk” can be understood as a synecdoche of the concept of “conversation,” where actual speech (“talking”) refers indirectly to the more complex operation of “conversation,” which involves talking, silence, thinking, body language, turn-taking, and other elements. *Metonymy*, by contrast involves something that is not a part of the thing being represented nonetheless standing in for that thing. For example, when a tutor asks her colleague “Is that my session sitting in the waiting area?” she is using the upcoming event she and the writer will participate in as a metonym for the writer.

I follow Kenneth Burke in defining *irony* as “based upon a sense of fundamental kinship with the enemy, as one needs him, is indebted to him, is not merely outside him as an observer but contains him within, being consubstantial with him” (“The Four Master Tropes,” 514). In part, I take Burke to mean that every term depends upon its opposite to be fully understood. In this sense, writing center practitioners who refer to their status within the academy as “marginal,” “on the margins,” or “marginalized,” (cf. Beatriz Newman, Lunsford and North) are in fact using the “center” label ironically by acknowledging that for a “center” to exist, “margins” must also exist.

I also follow Lakoff and Johnson in asserting that a trope’s primary effect is to highlight or draw attention to some aspects of a thing, while minimizing or hiding other aspects of that thing (10 – 13). Brooks’ use of “minimalist” is one such example. His choice of “minimalist tutoring” as a name for what should occur in writing centers helped him structure his readers’ understanding of student-driven tutoring. Through Brooks’ label, readers understand student-driven tutoring as “minimalist,” or involving little work

on the part of the tutor. By highlighting a desirable element of student-driven tutoring, the name “minimalist tutoring” rhetorically encourages tutors to adopt a specific set of core principles in their daily practice.

While Brooks’ use of “minimalist” appears to be a conscious attempt to employ a trope rhetorically, not all such uses of tropes are conscious. Thus, one aim of this dissertation will be to examine the ways in which the tropes employed by scholars in writing center studies function unconsciously, below the level of explicit examination, to encourage particular ways of thinking about places, people, and activities. Understanding the ways in which tropes can function rhetorically will enable scholars and practitioners of writing center work to consciously interrogate, analyze, and select tropes that better represent important concepts. Lakoff and Johnson illustrate the problem of acting on unexamined tropes, the systematic nature of which

allows us to comprehend one aspect of a concept in terms of another (e.g., comprehending an aspect of arguing in terms of battle) [while] necessarily hid[ing] other aspects of the concept. In allowing us to focus on one aspect of a concept (e.g., the battling aspects of arguing), a metaphorical concept can keep us from focusing on other aspects of the concept that are inconsistent with that metaphor. For example, in the midst of a heated argument, when we are intent on attacking our opponent's position and defending our own, we may lose sight of the cooperative aspects of arguing. Someone who is arguing with you can be viewed as giving you his time, a valuable commodity, in an effort at mutual understanding. But when we are preoccupied with the battle aspects [of argument], we often lose sight of the cooperative aspects (10).



To return to Brooks' example, naming idealized tutoring activity as "minimalist" suggests that the amount of work is what is important, while hiding the potential importance of the kind or quality of work involved. Calling such work "minimalist" also hides the fact that the work itself is not reduced—that someone, in fact, must complete the work, and that for that person, such work has not been "minimized." I argue that scholars in writing center studies should more carefully and explicitly examine the names and labels they use, thus ensuring that the tropic effects of such names can be examined and employed consciously, ethically, and with purpose. In particular, I assert that those who use tropes to articulate concepts in writing center work would benefit from extending those tropes more fully.

### **The Ubiquity of Tropes, and the Need to Use Them Well**

Tropes abound in everyday life. In academia especially, tropes like metaphor and synecdoche help scholars and teachers to articulate complex ideas, and to connect those ideas to other, related ideas. Writing center studies is no different—tropes like "center," "consultant," and "professional development" have been used by writing center scholars for decades to articulate the value and nature of writing center work, to argue for the status and importance of that work, and to suggest new directions for said work, among other goals.

At this point in the history of the field, however, most of the tropes employed within writing center studies fail to take full advantage of the nature of tropes to fully explore and articulate important ideas. For many reasons, writing center scholars use only part of the tropes available to them. This dissertation focuses on three such reasons,

provides examples of how scholars and practitioners of writing center work might resist or avoid partial articulation of tropes, and explains why doing so might be valuable to practitioners in the field, and the field at large.

Most tropes used by writing center scholars and practitioners are under-articulated simply because they are used either unconsciously, or without carefully examining how and why a particular trope may—or may not—fit the occasion for which the writer has selected the trope. Tropes that fall into this category include the “center” trope and the “tutor” trope. Because these tropes have long been used by members of the field, writers often employ them automatically, without considering how they may be taken up by their readers, or how the present context may influence the way the trope is received or interpreted by others.

Other tropes are used primarily aspirationally—that is, to describe what the writer wishes or hopes writing center work will become, rather than how that work presently proceeds. Along with the “center” trope, many of the activity tropes, including “talk” and “teaching,” fit into this category. Aspirational tropes have had tremendous value in writing center work and will always have a place in that work. But when a trope is articulated and used solely in an aspirational way, its power as an explanatory tool that can help practitioners to productively guide writing center practice is diluted. In particular, aspirational tropes tend to hide real aspects of writing center work that are undesirable, making resistance to or transformation of said aspects more difficult.

Finally, writers will often mix tropes, using several disparate tropes to describe various elements of a complex concept or a related set of concepts. This can result in a lack of coherence among the tropes used, and this lack of coherence can blunt the power

of the tropes to accurately and persuasively portray the concept being articulated or examined. Most tropes in use within writing center studies fall into this category at some point; I argue that scholars and practitioners of writing center work can increase the persuasive and explanatory power of their arguments by attending to the ways their selected tropes do or do not cohere with each other.

### **Operations and Principles for Uncovering Useful Tropes**

To avoid tropes that are unexamined, solely aspirational, or incoherent, I propose that scholars and practitioners of writing center studies *select, articulate, and extend* tropes that possess the necessary qualities to represent the field of writing center studies. This should result in tropes that are *accurate, aspirational, complex, and coherent*. Below, I further explain the operations of selection, articulation, and extension, along with the principles or properties of accuracy, aspiration, complexity, and coherence that those operations should uncover in useful tropes.

Writing center scholars should engage in three operations to find appropriately useful tropes to represent writing center work: *selection, articulation, and extension*. To *select* a trope simply means to choose a new one. Scholars and practitioners of writing center work engaged in this fruitfully in the late 1980s and early 1990s, exchanging tropes like “lab” and “clinic” for “center,” and tropes like “tutor” for “consultant.” I argue that for some elements of writing center work, current tropes do not accurately express that work, necessitating the selection of new tropes.

To *articulate* a trope means to demonstrate how that trope usefully conveys elements of the target, including, but not limited to, how elements of the trope “map”

onto elements of the target. To take one example, Peter Carino and Michael Pemberton both articulate the “center” trope as usefully conveying writing centers as sites of interdisciplinarity and creativity. I assert that the more carefully articulated a trope is, the more useful it becomes to writing center studies as a discipline. Thus, scholars and practitioners in the field should articulate tropes as fully as possible.

To *extend* a trope means to carry the articulation of a trope as far as possible—often, even beyond the boundaries at which most people might stop articulating a trope. Extension should involve attempting to use every possible facet of a trope to aid in understanding how that trope may be usefully articulated, or how it might be taken up by those outside the field. While many tools may be used to help extend a trope, Burke’s concept of “humble irony” is an especially useful tool for doing this. As I show in Chapter 2, for example, the “center” trope communicates not just status and power, but also an obligation to service and a mandate to serve the marginalized. By engaging in the operations of *selection*, *articulation*, and *extension*, scholars and practitioners of writing center studies should discover tropes that possess the three qualities of *accuracy*, *aspiration*, and *coherence*. I explain these qualities in greater detail in the following paragraphs.

A trope that is *accurate* accounts for the way something actually functions according to observation. Given that writing center work can be misunderstood (cf. Runciman, “Tutor”; Pemberton, “Madhouse”; Harris, “Sticky”), the accurate articulation of writing center work remains important. As I argue in this dissertation, the “center” trope as it is currently articulated does not accurately convey what occurs in writing center studies. Thus, either the “center” trope must be rearticulated and extended so that

it is understood in a way that is more accurate, or a new trope must be selected to replace it—and that trope must then be articulated and extended to show its accuracy.

Earlier in this chapter, I asserted that some tropes are problematic because they are *aspirational*—meaning they describe more about what scholars of writing center studies wish for the field than how that field actually functions. While I see primarily aspirational tropes as limiting, there is an important place for aspiration in the way scholars and practitioners of writing center work think about and articulate that work. Thus, tropes used to name the elements of writing center work can and should be *aspirational*, in the sense that they should anticipate the ways the people, places, activity, and training of writing center work can grow and transform. The “center” metaphor is perhaps the best example of such a trope. In the past, it served an admirable aspirational function, helping scholars and practitioners in the field to assert the status they needed to fulfill their role. As writing center studies is now a discipline with national and regional organizations, publishing venues, and other hallmarks of status, writing centers must look to new tropes, or to fresh articulations and extensions of existing tropes, to find worthy future aspirations.

A *complex* trope contains enough facets, dimensions, or qualities to account for all of the facets, dimensions, or qualities of the item or concept that it represents. Thus, tropes sufficiently complex enough to represent elements of writing center work will contain many facets, dimensions, or qualities. To ensure that a trope is sufficiently complex, it should be carefully articulated to determine how elements of the trope match up with elements of the represented concept. Tropes should also be extended as fully as possible to ensure that the full range of their complexity has been discovered and used.

A *coherent* trope is systematically consistent with the tropes used to name related elements and concepts. Writing center work often employs tropes that do not cohere with those for related concepts. The “center” trope, with its commonly-articulated focus on status and power, for example, does not cohere with the more collaborative and egalitarian tropes used to name those who work in writing centers, like “consultant” and “peer tutor.” In fact, some definitions of “consultant” and “tutor” clearly suggest authority, meaning their use to name inhabitants of a “center” would work coherently to convey authority and expertise, and against the collaborative, negotiating *ethos* described so often in writing center scholarship. By contrast, the “commons” label carries with it connotations that strongly favor collaboration and power-sharing. Pairing the “commons” label with similarly hierarchy-flattening person labels like “peer” or “facilitator” would create a coherence among the labels used, leading the labels involved to present a more consistent, rhetorically effective message of power sharing.

### Chapter Summaries

In this first chapter, I have introduced the three central categories of names in writing center work. I have argued that such names function as tropes, and laid out a methodological frame with which to analyze those names and examine how they function in writing center work. While I acknowledge the positive work such labels have accomplished, I argue that these same labels often hide the complexity of writing center work and undercut the collaborative *ethos* developed by writing center practitioners over the past several decades. By articulating the way names like “writing center” emphasize one aspect of a concept (e.g., the importance or “centrality” of writing) over others (such

as the recursive nature of writing), I demonstrate the need to newly articulate the tropes used in writing center work to better represent the people, places, and activities of that work, and perhaps to replace problematic tropes with new ones.

Chapter 2 explores the “clinic,” “lab,” and “center” tropes that have been most commonly used to construct writing centers as physical and intellectual spaces. First, I explore the specific rhetorical work each label did within its historical context, including the way that labels like “lab” and “center” helped sites of writing tutoring both claim authority within academia, and make claims about the nature of knowledge itself. Following that, I analyze the way that such terms function to highlight particular elements of writing center practice, while minimizing or hiding others. I argue that only by acknowledging both the positive and negative aspects of writing center work can scholars of writing center studies create a discipline that lives up to the “center” label, and suggest that applying Burkean “humble irony” to the dominant tropes of the discipline can accomplish this task.

Chapter 3 explores “tutor,” “consultant,” and “peer,” three of the tropes most commonly used to name writing center practitioners, and examines how those tropes subtly suggest what such practitioners should or should not do when working with writers. By examining how writing center practitioners are named, I reveal the ways that such naming encouraged writers and tutors to identify with each other in particular ways. I also analyze several assumptions undergirding the way writing center practitioners are named, including the unidirectional nature of identification, and explore the way coherence among tropes can strengthen the rhetorical power of individual tropes.

Chapter 4 examines the most prevalent tropes used to name writing center activity, focusing on “talk” or “conversation,” “counseling,” and “teaching.” I show the way scholars of writing center studies have used such activity tropes to conceive of writing center work as both inherently collaborative and metacognitive. I also explore the ways in which both adopting and resisting the “teaching” trope demonstrates scholars’ ambivalence toward the increasing professionalization of the field. Analyzing the way in which activity tropes reduce writing center work to single facets of that work, I argue that complex, multipart tropes like “conversation” and “metacognition” should be extended as fully as possible so that they more accurately represent writing center work. I furthermore assert that applying humble irony dialectically allows writing center scholars to see concepts like identity and activity tropes like “teaching” and “tutoring” as exigent-dependent, rather than sides of a dichotomy.

Chapter 5 analyzes how the preparation of writing center practitioners is named. In particular I explicate the ways in which naming preparation for writing center work “orientation,” “training,” or “professional development” calls attention to either the spatial or temporal aspects of writing tutor preparation, while hiding the other aspect of that preparation. In addition, I further explore the effect that the field’s ongoing professionalization has had on the way scholars and practitioners of writing center work are prepared to join that work. I argue that scholars of writing center studies should seek and articulate tropes in a way that articulates the time necessary to learn about and improve at writing center work. I furthermore assert that such tropes can be found in terms already in everyday use in academia and in writing center studies itself.



In Chapter 6, I return to the “center” metaphor prevalent in writing center studies, analyzing how that metaphor influences the ways in which writing centers articulate and go about their work. I show that the “center” trope is problematic, and that rearticulating or replacing it will help writing center workers to better accomplish their goals. In particular, I argue that writing center tropes should be aspirational, accurate, complex, and coherent in order to effectively represent the spaces, people, and activities that make up writing center work.

CHAPTER II  
THE PRIMACY OF PLACE: TERMS THAT NAME THE SITE  
OF WRITING CENTER WORK

**Introduction**

Chapter 1 asserted that three specific categories of names function as tropes to guide writing center theory and practice, and outlined the methodology I will use to examine those names. This chapter will address the category of *place names*, those used to describe where writing center work occurs. We will focus on the terms of “clinic,” “lab,” and “center,” showing the way each suggested a specific understanding of the character and importance of writing center work that fit the historical moment in which it arose. Most often, scholars’ place names helped them to assert a place of authority and privilege within the academy. While labels like “clinic” and “lab” helped scholars in the field to adopt authority by aligning their work with science and empiricism, the “center” label helped them to argue that authority rested in the groups that constructed knowledge.

While place names like “clinic,” “lab,” and “center” have done valuable work in assisting writing center practitioners to assert a place of status and power within academia, I argue that it’s time for those who do writing center work to articulate, extend, and select tropes that name such spaces in more accurate, aspirational, complex, and coherent ways. One way to rearticulate and extend tropes involves what Burke calls “humble irony.” In plain and simple terms, taking a humbly ironic stance toward the tropes of writing center work means acknowledging the ways in which the less-savory interpretations and applications of those tropes do accurately describe writing center

work. It means embracing the conception of writing centers as entities of service—entities that belong to a greater whole, and thus, must serve other parts of that whole. It means seeing serving remedial writers as a core part of the function of writing centers, rather than as a misconception, or worse, a distasteful duty to be discharged with haste. It even means that conceptualizing writing center work as occurring in Burkean parlors requires us to see the ways such parlors also function as storehouses and garrets.

Though the move I suggest may seem radical, there are at least two good reasons for writing center scholars to see the tropes of their work as containing the representations that might be least desirable. The first is that one cannot avoid what one does not acknowledge. The fastest way for writing centers to be reduced to sites of remediation or relegated solely to serving other disciplines is to deny the history that plainly tells us that writing centers have indeed been agents of remediation and instruments of service, or to pretend that the field can somehow transcend that history without acknowledging the students, administrators, and faculty who just as plainly tell us that remediation and service are part of the way writing centers are perceived today.

The second reason writing center scholars should articulate and extend place name tropes ironically is simpler than the first: a writing center that is “bold and audacious,” that, as Carino describes it, aspires “to powerful definitions as in ‘the center of a circle, of revolution, of centripetal attraction’” (38), must be bold enough, audacious enough, to claim all the senses of “center” as its own, and not just those that seem appealing or expedient. In other words, for writing centers to truly be “centers” in the most ambitious sense, they must have the courage to claim the margins--not just as a rhetorical gambit, but because the marginal is itself an essential part of writing center

work. To that end, I will rearticulate the “lab” and “clinic” tropes to show how each does in fact *accurately* represent at least some elements of writing center work. I will also select and articulate the “learning commons” trope to show how it may also function to describe writing center work *aspirationally*.

### **“There’s A Place for Us”: Aspirations of Autonomy and the Writing Center Story**

Throughout the field’s history, writing center scholars have been concerned with a lack of autonomy and authority within academia. This concern is aptly reflected in the material conditions common to many writing centers of the late 1970s and early 1980s, which often involved drastic limitations in space, location, and staffing. In writing center studies, such conditions have become the core of a recurrent narrative in writing center scholarship about the way writing centers come to be. Daniel Mahala’s description of Lil Brannon’s efforts at Texas A&M University provide an apt example of this narrative:

Lil showed photographs illustrating how she developed a writing center with Jeannette Harris in 1975 at Texas A&M University, transforming what had been a “writing lab” narrowly focused on grammar exercises—and comically located, as her blurry photograph showed, in a third floor’s janitor’s closet—to a bonafide “writing center” located on the the first floor of the building that housed the English department (Mahala 3).

Even this short description demonstrates how both the name of the writing center and its physical location convey important information about status and authority: while a “bonafide ‘writing center’” is located on the first floor, the “‘writing lab’” is “narrowly

focused on grammar exercises—and comically located...in a third floor’s janitor’s closet.”

What strikes me about Brannon’s account and Mahala’s articulation of it is how much the account depends on tropes for its persuasive power—and in fact, how much the reader is asked to fill in each trope. The “writing lab,” in Brannon’s account, becomes a *synecdoche*, reducing the writing center to a “narrow...focus...on grammar exercises.” And location itself becomes a *metonym* for importance, as the “writing lab” becomes a “bonafide ‘writing center’” by moving from the third floor to the first. The reader is left to assume that the first-floor space later occupied by the writing center is not a “janitor’s closet,” or some similarly small, out-of-the-way space. The reader is also left to assume the kinds of work the writing center began to do that transformed it into a “bonafide ‘writing center.’”

In fact, I argue that names like “center,” “lab,” and “clinic” are themselves synecdoches—meaning they represent the sites they name by reducing those sites to markers of status. But by selecting and articulating place names in ways that foregrounded their functions as markers of status, scholars of writing center studies have overlooked the opportunity to represent writing center work in more accurate and complete ways.

### **The Clinic and the Lab: Representing Writing Center Work as Science**

Especially in the years following World War II, writing center workers sought to legitimize their work by connecting it to the positivist pursuit of knowledge represented by science. In the 1940s and 1950s, humans used scientific principles to split the atom

and uncover the building blocks of life, among other discoveries, making science a powerful ally in humans' search for knowledge. Based solely on its mid-20th century achievements, scientific inquiry positioned itself as a powerful and seductive role model for any field of inquiry or study.

Aside from its achievements as a tool, the scientific method also presented itself as a value-free, ahistorical method of uncovering truth. In *Science as Power*, Stanley Aronowitz makes this point while laying out four specific assumptions that undergird scientific inquiry: Quantitative data is elevated over qualitative data, empiricism is valued over speculation, the method of inquiry is given supreme importance in the discovery of knowledge, and knowledge unearthed through scientific inquiry emerges free of any ideological slant (x). Aronowitz goes further, however, arguing that science's clarion call cut across disciplines, making these four assumptions of scientific inquiry practically dogma in all areas of study (x).

In the 1940s and 1950s, writing center scholars signaled their status as practitioners of scientific principles by adopting names like "clinic" and "laboratory" for the sites of their work. As Peter Carino notes, early conceptions of the "clinic" probably derived from the dictionary sense of the term as " 'An institution, class, or conference, etc. for instruction in or the study of a particular subject; a seminar.' " ("What we Talk About" 33). Yet, Carino is also aware of the role the "clinic" term has as a signifier of the scientific legitimacy of knowledge. "In two of the quotations used to exemplify this [i.e., the institution, class, or conference] sense of clinic," Carino observes, "the word is appropriated euphemistically by economists and business people to elevate their activities to the scientific status of medicine" (33).

Carino asserts that writing center workers likely gravitated to the “lab” label because of its association with experimentation and discovery (“What we Talk About,” 34 - 35). While this might be true, it’s also likely that university faculty in Moore’s time identified with elements of the “lab” label for the same reasons they favored the “clinic” label: both framed instruction as objective, scientific, inquiry—in short, as legitimate knowledge. In other words, writing center workers adopted the “lab” and “clinic” labels *aspirationally*, meaning they selected tropes to represent their work in ways that asserted for themselves the status to which they aspired.

But the “lab” and “clinic” labels also carried with them negative associations that those in writing centers eventually saw and sought to avoid. As scholars like Peter Carino and Michael Pemberton note, the “clinic” and “lab” labels encouraged the medicalization of students, transforming them to sites of disorder and disease. Perhaps the most prevalent example of this medicalized mental frame is recorded in Robert Moore’s 1950 *College English* article “The Writing Clinic and the Writing Laboratory.” Moore asserts that “The clinic is primarily concerned with the diagnosis of the individual student's writing difficulties and the suggestion of remedial measures that might profitably be pursued” (388 - 89). The primary activity within a clinic--that of “diagnosis”--makes sense within the medical world called up by the term “clinic.” But it also encourages the staff of writing clinics to see visitors as deficient and remedial—as problems to be solved or fixed, rather than as people to help. And such a label further encourages those who work in such spaces to see themselves as having agency, while conceptualizing writers who visit such spaces as passive in regards to their own fate. In other words, while the visiting writer is simply a source of error, it is the clinician who

has the knowledge required to “diagnose” his patient and “prescribe” the necessary “remedial measures” (Moore 392). The pervasiveness of medical language in Moore’s discourse is an example of *coherence*: medically-inflected activity names like “diagnose” and “prescribe” make sense when used along with the medically-inflected place name of “clinic.”

Just as naming a place a “clinic” encourages us to see the people and events within such a space in medical terms, to name a place a “lab” encourages us to see the people and activities involved in scientific terms. According to Moore, university personnel employing the laboratory method face “problems” to be “solved.” And they solve these problems using the “machinery” and “devices” available to them (cf 389 – 392, 393). As with the writing clinic, naming a place a “laboratory” has visible effects on the kinds of language used to describe the people that inhabit such a space, and the activities that take place in it—in particular, terms like “machinery” and “devices” are *coherent* with the scientific place name of “lab.”

This *coherence* arises in part because Moore’s conception of a “writing clinic” is structured by a different concept through metaphor. Lakoff and Johnson define *metaphor* as an instance when one concept is “partially structured, understood, performed, and talked about in terms of” another (5). In Moore’s case, his use of medical terms like “prescribe” and “diagnosis” to name the actions that occur within a “writing clinic” demonstrate that his concept of a “writing clinic” is “partially structured, understood, performed, and talked about in terms of” the concept of a medical clinic.

The sense of “clinic” as a site of medical intervention was also shaped by the social context within which the term was used. As represented by the timing of Moore’s



article, the medicalized senses of “lab” and “clinic” that informs Moore’s description gained the most traction as universities confronted the overwhelming influx of students that occurred during the “open admissions” period of the 1950s, ’60s, and ’70s. In fact, this period probably began earlier—during wartime itself, as those who did not want to join the war effort sought admission to universities as a kind of de facto asylum from military service. But the medical sense of “clinic” likely gained its greatest traction as the Civil Rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s prompted more Americans to seek out college study as a method of social advancement. The heavy influx of new students, and those students’ status as “unprepared” or “underprepared,” encouraged university faculty and staff to adopt the sense of “clinic” as “ ‘an institution attached to a hospital or medical school at which patients received treatment free of cost or at reduced fees’ ” (“What We Talk About, 34). It is important to understand, as Carino does, that this shift was likely not conscious—that is, scholars did not explicitly come to see the work of the writing center as changing from “instruction” to “treatment.” Moore does not, for example, call students “patients” or refer to them as “ill.” In reality, this shift was not only unconscious, but also driven in part by the way terms like “clinic” interact with subcultures like “academia.”

As Carino indicates, the “laboratory” label has very specific connotations within academia—primarily as a “course supplement” (35). And according to Carino, while in some ways, seeing labs as supplementary opened up the opportunity for “coordinating lab and classroom instruction and using the lab for research,” it also allowed those in academia to structure the “writing lab” as “the place to do the dirty work of grammar that would free classroom teachers to concentrate on the new process of pedagogy” (Carino

35). As Carino notes, this was “not a conspiracy, but a cultural reading of the [laboratory] metaphor” (35). I theorize that the cultural context of academia inflected the reading of particular terms, creating a hegemony that subordinates all other terms to the tacitly accepted “central” site of instruction: the classroom.

This shift in the usage of the “lab” label is echoed by a similar shift in the way “clinic” came to be used in writing center scholarship. The way the academic context privileges the “classroom” as the site of instruction helps to partially explain the shift in the usage of “clinic” from a site of expert instruction to a site of medical triage. Beth Boquet has noted that the term “clinic” originally described a method of instruction, rather than a site (“Our Little Secret,” 465 – 466). It’s reasonable to conclude that when the “clinic” became seen as a site independent of the classroom, the cultural resonances of the term “classroom” forced the term to adopt a new meaning--one that would preserve the hegemony of the classroom as the primary site of knowledge-making and dissemination in academia.

Today, there are few “writing labs,” and even fewer “writing clinics.” In part, this is because scholars in writing center studies saw the way such terms encouraged them to think of students and looked for better names. For example, in 1992’s “The Prison, the Hospital, and the Madhouse,” Michael Pemberton argues that conceptualizing writing centers in terms of medical institutions “grossly misrepresents” them and “subverts their entire approach to the learning (and writing) process” (12). Seeing a writing center as a hospital, Pemberton contends, “carries with it a number of misunderstandings about the nature of writing problems” (13). Pemberton asserts that writing center professionals must continue the task of defining themselves, stating that “[m]ore than anything else, we

need to educate students and instructors about what writing centers really are” and that “we need to educate them especially about what writing centers are not” (13). Instead of terms like “lab,” and “clinic,” Pemberton advises writing center workers to turn to terms like “workshop” and “studio” to describe the spaces in which they work (13).

While writing center scholars like Pemberton and Peter Carino argue correctly that the “lab” and “clinic” metaphors associated writing center work with a conception of students as disordered and diseased, I would further argue that the “lab” and “clinic” tropes fell out of favor in writing center circles because they no longer functioned *aspirationally*—meaning they no longer connected writing center work with the status to which writing centers aspired. Later in the chapter, I will explore how the “center” trope took up this aspirational mantle from the “lab” and “clinic” tropes.

Carino is right to note that scholars’ adoption of medicalizing terminology to describe students is unconscious. His observation, in fact, should be instructive to the field. The desire for agency and autonomy that drove writing centers to adopt labels like “lab” and “clinic” remains a part of academia, and can itself become a kind of unconscious motor for our actions—especially if we forget that the sociocultural forces driving those desires are not entirely under our control. “Labs” and “clinics” are now few and far between, but both the persistent presence of quantitative data in our yearly reports and present calls for “replicable, aggregable, and data-driven” (“RAD”) research should remind us that the thinking that first animated those decisions remains a part of our daily context. And while that way of thinking itself is not necessarily harmful, we would be wise to avoid adopting any such mental framework uncritically.

The Burkean conception of “humble irony” can serve as a useful tool with which to rearticulate and extend tropes, especially to increase the accuracy of the trope in representing its target. Rearticulating writing center place names like “lab” and “clinic” with humble irony means acknowledging the ways in which such tropes do in fact represent elements of writing center work--both in problematic ways, and in ways that might be more valuable than they might first appear. Below, I use Burkean “humble irony” to rearticulate the ways in which my current institution can accurately be described by the terms “lab” and “clinic.” The Writing & Reading Center at the University of Houston-Downtown (UHD), where I work, for example, functions as a “lab” in many ways. On the problematic side, both students and faculty often see the writing center as ancillary or secondary to coursework. The existence of this perspective makes securing funding to keep the center open during low-traffic times, including after 5 p.m., on weekend days, or during low-traffic terms like summer semesters, a challenge. It also means that I am constantly working to inform and persuade UHD’s students and teachers of the writing center’s value as a site to assist with applications for scholarships or to enter a major, or to work on resumes, cover letters, and other writing tasks that aren’t connected explicitly to coursework.

But the Writing & Reading Center also functions as a lab in many positive ways. Because we have a high volume of computer workstations, we look much like a “computer lab,” and students consequently see the center as a prime spot to stop in and do homework or check email. While on the surface, being mistaken for a place we are not might seem like a bad thing, the fact that the center resembles a place at which students are expected to gather and complete work independently actually fits with the

*ethos* we are trying to assert for ourselves. The stigma effect attached to writing centers and other sites of academic support is well-documented (cf. Bizzaro and Toler, Dvorak, Garner, Wingrad and Rust). But being the kind of place that attracts a wide variety of people who make use of the space in a wide variety of ways lessens the stigma effect that some might feel as a result of frequenting a site of remediation or support. In addition, creating written work in today's world means having access to digital tools like word processing software, along with access to communicative technologies like email. Thus, meaning when students do stop in to check email or do homework, they are demonstrating that the WRC is supporting their writing and composing practices.

Finally, the Writing & Reading Center functions as a “lab” in the experimental sense, too—as a site of exploration, research, and discovery. During my tenure alone, student staff from the center have presented at two academic conferences, both times to share preliminary results from ongoing empirical research. Such experiences have given the undergraduate and graduate students who work at the center valuable real-world experience drafting and revising a research proposal, selecting and applying an analytical framework to data, and articulating their ideas and findings in front of a group. As I write this, I am preparing to work with a graduate student in technical communication who is also a Writing & Reading Center tutor on an assessment project she designed for a graduate course. These and other events that occur in the WRC remind me that while “lab” can describe a site that is ancillary to the classroom, it can also describe a site that serves as a necessary complement to that same classroom.

The Writing & Reading Center functions as a “clinic,” as well. Problematically, that means that medical language seeps into our discourse from time to time, as when

faculty ask us to help them “diagnose” a writer’s “condition,” or when, usually during mid-semester, working with a high volume of writers during short windows of time inevitably invites tutors to compare tutoring to “triage.” But we also present on writing-related topics like how to conduct research, or navigating specific citation styles. While the negative connotations of the word “clinic” is likely part of the reason we call these events “workshops,” there’s no denying that the sense of a “clinic” as “An institution, class, or conference, etc. for instruction in or the study of a particular subject; a seminar” (Carino 33) animates what we actually do during such events.

Scholars of writing center studies have spent much time and a great many pages interrogating and criticizing the ways in which tropes like “lab” and “clinic” can suggest limiting, and even harmful, ways of thinking about the work that writing centers do. There is much in that body of analysis to credit: students are not reducible to medical or mechanical phenomena, and working with writers means much more than just confronting and erasing error. What strikes me about these criticisms is the way they reduce students and writers to objects of study. Conversely, my experience as a tutor and administrator in several writing centers has encouraged me to see writers—those who work in writing centers and those who visit them—as agents. Writers and writing tutors cannot be reduced to objects of study, after all, but neither should they be denied their very real status in today’s writing centers as clinicians, possessed of a unique kind of expertise, and remarkably generous in sharing that expertise with their peers. And while naming something a “lab” may connote its status as secondary to the classroom, academia at large could do with a reminder that much of what people learn does not take place in a classroom.

In the prior section, I have articulated how the “lab” and “clinic” metaphors can indeed serve as an accurate name for at least one actual writing center. Before I continue, I wish to clarify that the intent of that articulation was not to argue that either “lab” or “clinic” is a more appropriate label than other available labels, like “center” or “studio.” Instead, I hoped to show that, despite containing or referring to elements that are undesirable among writing center scholars, the “lab” and “clinic” labels can indeed function accurately. I do this to strengthen my argument that selection, articulation, and extension of tropes must consider both (1) tropes like “lab” and “clinic” that are not necessarily “ideal” in the eyes of most writing center scholars, and (2) the elements of more ideal tropes, such as the “center” trope, that do not express what writing center scholars most aspire to or desire writing centers to represent. In other words, I assert that all tropes—even those that, for whatever reason, are not ideal—must be included in scholars’ search for useful tropes to express writing center work accurately, aspirationally, with complexity, and with coherence.

### **“From the Margins to the Center”: Accuracy, Aspiration, and the Center Trope**

At present, few writing centers have “lab” or “clinic” in their name. Instead, while outlier terms like “place” and “studio” are presently in use, most sites of writing assistance have come to be called “centers.” Labels like “lab” and “clinic” were meant to frame writing center work as a kind of scientific inquiry, thus claiming the allegedly objective and disinterested authority of science. The “center” label, however, relied on a new way of looking at knowledge that writing center scholars began to articulate in the

late 1980s and early 1990s—one that focused on a way of verifying claims that was anything but objective or disinterested.

While it's unclear when the term "center" first came into use, several scholars debate the efficacy of the term's use in 1992, suggesting that it came of age in the late 80s or early 90s. Both Michael Pemberton and Peter Carino make similar arguments on behalf of adopting the "center" label to describe the site of writing tutoring, contrasting "center" with the stigmatizing labels of lab and clinic. As part of their arguments, both scholars call attention to the common understanding of "center" as "gathering place." Carino, for example, notes that "the writing center metaphor likely has connotative affinities with such compounds as convention center or community center, with *center* defined as 'the main area for a particular interest or activity, or the like,'" a definition that "evokes the communal aspect of the center as a microculture in which camaraderie replaces the competitive atmosphere of the classroom" ("What we Talk About," 37-38, emphasis in original). Similarly, Pemberton argues that to call the site of writing tutoring a "center" is "productive and natural," asserting that adopting the "center" label would "enhance its [a writing center's] image as a gathering place for people and information. Its [i.e., 'center's'] resonance with terms like 'community center' would indicate a place where people meet, collaborate, and resolve issues that are of interest to a wide spectrum of people" (15).

This vision of "center" as a community gathering place echoes the growing recognition of the importance of collaboration in educational settings seen in scholarship on the teaching of writing in the early 90s—an importance underlined for writing center scholars in Andrea Lunsford in "Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of a Writing



Center.” Arguing that “collaboration both in theory and practice reflects a broad-based epistemological shift, a shift in the way we view knowledge” (2), Lunsford saw the rise of collaborative learning as an opportunity for writing centers to redefine themselves as spaces in which “knowledge and reality [are viewed as] mediated by or constructed through language in social use” (2). In a telling move, Lunsford makes her point by arguing for the adoption of specific terms to structure her colleagues’ thinking. Rather than “storehouses,” which simply store and distribute knowledge as needed, or “garrets,” where individuals sequester themselves and await moments of genius, Lunsford suggests that writing center scholars adopt the label of the “Burkean parlor” to describe the site of writing center work. She does this to relocate the “locus of control” in writing center work: A “Burkean parlor” writing center, Lunsford contends, “would place control, power, and authority not in the tutor or staff [as in a storehouse], not in the individual student [as in a garret], but in the negotiating group” (5).

Just as the cultural context of the academy shaped writing center scholars’ efforts to employ labels like “lab” and “clinic,” so does it shape such scholars’ efforts to use the “center” label to emphasize the importance of writing in academia and the role of student as agent. Beth Boquet, for example, notes the extent to which “scientific” terms like the “lab” and “clinic” have also served as “domesticating” conceptions--mental structures that rely not just on a gendered division of labor, but on a vision of the “writing center” as a particular kind of place. Thus, the medicalization of students, Boquet reveals, tacitly authorizes the classroom as the place where male faculty can “do the ‘real work’: engage with interesting ideas, mentor the ‘smart’ students, do their own writing” (*Noise* 15). By contrast, Boquet notes, most present day writing center workers might describe that space

as a “safe” one where “couches, plants, and coffee pots are *de rigueur*” (28), and, in contrast to the “sterile classroom experiences of most college students” (28), “present faces that appear welcoming to outsiders...and to students who may feel left out of the general university community” (29).

Lunsford’s conception of community, however, is neither sterile, nor necessarily welcoming. Lunsford represents community as a “Burkean parlor,” a site that, for Burke, is steeped in contention. Burke’s articulation of the term “parlor” asserts that those within it are

engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before (Burke, 110-111).

In Burke’s mind, joining this conversation is at once both risky and inherently provisional:

You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress (Burke 110-111).

This “negotiating group” sounds very little like the “center” that Pemberton describes, in which “people meet, collaborate, and resolve issues that are of interest to a wide spectrum

of people” (15). And the kind of negotiation that Burke (and by extension, Lunsford) has in mind is anything but a panacea of cooperation: “collaboration,” in the Burkean parlor, looks more like the result of discord and disagreement than of coming together to serve a common cause.

While Lunsford remains committed to the “parlor” trope, Carino focuses solely on the “center” trope, and Pemberton suggests the “workshop” and “studio” tropes as possible replacements for “lab” and “clinic,” all leave one intriguing trope out of their analysis: that of the “commons.” Given that a “commons” is defined as both “the common people regarded as a part of a political system,” and “land or resources belonging to or affecting the whole of a community” (Oxford English Dictionary online, senses 1 and 2), the term clearly carries with it connotations that strongly favor collaboration and power-sharing. In addition, tracts of land known as “commons” also tended to be centrally located (Dictionary.com, sense 16). These three factors make the “commons” trope an ideal *aspirational* trope for writing center work. In addition, however, scholars of library science have already explored how the term “learning commons” might describe a site of academic inquiry (cf. Elmborg and Hook). In addition, because “learning commons” uses “learning” over the more widely-used and stigmatized terms “tutoring” and “support.” Furthermore, a “commons” can be understood as a hall used for dining or recreation on a college campus (Dictionary.com, sense 19). This sense of the term “commons” in particular associates the space with the sharing of food, an activity long considered a building-block of community. In these ways, the trope of the “learning commons” further distinguishes itself as one that might usefully *aspirationally* describe the site of writing center work.

Despite their differences, Lunsford’s articulation of the Burkean parlor label shares a crucial detail with Carino’s and Pemberton’s arguments on behalf of the “center” label—a difference that, I argue is the primary reason the “center” trope is more common than tropes like “learning commons” that convey similar ideas. All three scholars articulate the “center” and “Burkean parlor” tropes in a way that situates the writing center as a locus of authority and power. While Lunsford and Pemberton foreground the power and authority of a collaborating group, Carino was primarily concerned with writing centers as institutional sites of power. In this sense, Carino in particular argues for adoption of the center as an *aspirational* trope, a place name that expresses goals that writing center work should reach for. For example, while he agrees with Michael Pemberton that the term “center” evokes a sense of community-building and collaboration, Carino argues that “center” is “a bold and audacious metaphor aspiring to powerful definitions as in ‘the center of a circle, of revolution, of centripetal attraction; and connected uses’ ” (38, emphasis mine). Unlike Lunsford’s “parlor” or the sense of “center” endorsed by Pemberton, Carino’s articulation of “center” places power in the site itself—a site that can spark revolution, attract followers, and connect those who write across disciplines.

Though in the present day, the “center” label has not outrun the writing center’s conception as a site where assistance is rendered to the disordered, Carino’s bold strokes must have seemed refreshing to many of his colleagues at the time, whose spaces, staffing, and budgets reflected their politically marginal status in most educational institutions. In 2000, for example, Lil Brannon and Stephen North argue that “While we saw our work as (even argued that our work was) **CENTRAL** to the work of the

university, we were, in fact, from the vantage point of the institution, marginal” (8, emphasis in original). On the campuses where they worked, they note, writing centers were not given institutional budget lines, but were forced to come “hat in hand” to beg for the resources needed to serve an ever-increasing number of students (Brannon and North 7). Carino’s “bold and audacious” claims of importance for writing center work stand in contrast to the environment described by Brannon and North, a vigorous aspirational project for writing center workers whose prior attempts at naming had themselves been co-opted.

Along with authority and power, writing center scholars were concerned with their centers’ autonomy. Patrick Leahy’s argument against adopting the “center” label reflects this when he calls attention to the ubiquitousness of “centers” on college campuses: “At Boise State University,” he writes, “I can count twenty ‘centers’ without even looking in the directory, from the Quick Copy Center at one end of campus to the Outdoor Rental Center at the other” (43). This strain of Leahy’s argument calls attention to a common thread in writing center scholarship: The desire to stand out, to be unique.

This desire to stand out functions as another way to claim authority. Writing centers enacted this desire by positioning themselves as more authentic than traditionally empowered groups like faculty and administrators; by this logic, writing centers understood and met the needs and values of the academic community better than others on campus. Brannon and North, for example, assert that “The writing centers we began in the late 1970s were viable to the students because the work we were doing offered a different model of teaching and learning than was offered anywhere else at the university” (7). Writing in 2003, Beth Beatriz Newman would likewise turn away from

the administrator audience for student constituents, proclaiming that “the very component that disrupts institutional norms—the writing center—is what helps borderlands Hispanic students center themselves in the institution” (43). Beatriz Newman’s use of the term “center” conceives of writing centers as “a ‘center that holds,’ an agency that helps them [borderlands Hispanic students] understand and join in the conversation of the academy” (44).

Brannon and North’s use of the tension between the terms “center” and “margin” is one often employed by scholars of writing center studies. The point made using this tension is practically a refrain in writing center studies: while writing plays a “central” role in learning, writing centers suffer from “marginal” status within the academy. Brannon and North, then, are using the “center” label *ironically*, by contrasting the “center”—the original part synecdochically selected to represent most sites of writing tutoring—with the “margin”—an element that anything with a center must have. Though most writing center scholars turn the irony outward, using it to criticize the academy’s treatment of writing centers, it would be a useful tool to turn the irony inward—to ask, in other words, what lies at the margins of writing center work. After all, the “center” metaphor carries in it much more than the sense of communal discourse attributed to it by Lunsford and Pemberton, or the sense of status and power ascribed to it by Carino. Taking an ironic approach to the tropes we use to name the places, people, and actions of writing center work might help scholars of writing center studies to more fully examine the ways in which the tropes they use could be taken up by others, along with uncovering new ways to name the important concepts of writing center work. Thus, in the following paragraphs, I rearticulate the center metaphor using Burke’s concept of “humble irony” to

highlight the ways in which the “center” trope can be interpreted counter to writing center scholars’ visions. I assert that while such interpretations may not fit the goals writing center scholars have in mind, they nonetheless describe writing center work *accurately*—and thus, they cannot ethically be ignored.

While Carino, Pemberton, and other scholars propose to use the term “center” to describe writing centers as sites of collaboration, or of importance and power, modern writing centers are understood using a different, if related, sense of the word: as “an office or other facility providing a specific service or dealing with a particular emergency” (“Center,” definition 7). In this sense, today’s “writing center” is seen much the same way the “clinic” of the mid-20th century was seen, along with today’s “academic support centers,” “math centers,” and “quantitative skills centers”: As places where the emergent problems of unprepared and underprepared students are remediated.

As I argue throughout this dissertation, writing center scholars must become more aware of and purposeful about using the terms that name the important concepts within writing center work. The “center” trope, for example, functions as a *synecdoche*--one part of a larger whole that stands in for the whole itself (cf. Lakoff and Johnson 35). In the simplest sense, that means that a “center” represents both “the middle point” of a place “as the point within a circle or sphere” (“Center,” definition 1), and the entirety of that place—including all the things, people, and activities that occur within it. But terms like “center” also function synecdochically in the sense that they represent several connotations and denotations at once. In other words, all language is synecdochic in the sense that each term can be taken to represent both one sense of that term, and all senses of that term, simultaneously.

Synecdoche can be a powerful ally to scholars and professionals making a rhetorical case for the importance of their work. The synecdochic function of a term like “center,” for example, allows its users to describe a site as a “center” to encourage that site to be seen as a gathering place for people from many disparate points of view to collaborate, while benefiting from the fact that the term “center” also encourages people to see that same site as “the source of an influence, action, force, etc.” (“Center,” definition 3), or as “a point, place, person, etc., upon which interest, emotion, etc., focuses” (“Center,” definition 4). But the same synecdochic effect that encourages people to see a “center” as a place of collaboration and simultaneously one of importance and power also encourages people to see centers as sites “dealing with a particular emergency,” whether that sense of the term is desired or not. In other words, terms that function synecdochically can represent any aspect or sense of that term--and seeking to control what sense is operative in any given moment is difficult, if not impossible. To this point, writing center scholars have attended chiefly to the definitions they want their chosen terms to convey without more carefully considering all the ways in which such terms may be taken up by others. This gap in knowledge about the ways writing center tropes are actually used presents an important opportunity for future research.

At present, the “center” trope is most often employed *aspirationally* as a way to either assert or interrogate the status of writing centers, the discipline of writing center studies, or of professionals who work in writing centers. As recently as 2017, Sherry Wynn Perdue and Dana Lynn Driscoll employed this tactic in “Context Matters: Centering Writing Center Administrators’ Institutional Status and Scholarly Identity.” Arguing in the pages of writing center studies’ most prominent publication venue, Wynn



Perdue and Driscoll deploy the “center” metaphor ubiquitously to argue that status matters. From their use of “Centering” in the title of their article, to the very first sentence of their article, which declares that “The field of writing center studies continues its movement from the margins to the center of academic inquiry” (186, emphasis mine), to their quoting of writing center scholar Harry Denny, who argues that writing center administrators “may become agents in our own intellectual/disciplinary marginalization if we are not disseminating scholarly knowledge through publication and are instead mired only in everyday intellectual labor of the type described by our participants” (120, qtd. in Wynn Perdue and Driscoll 191, emphasis mine), the authors repeatedly employ the “center” trope ironically to assert that writing center administrators are in a perilous position, lacking in the status they need to truly propel the discipline forward.

Because the irony analyzed above is *aspirational* rather than humble, it chiefly functions to imagine a future for writing centers without exploring how the “center” trope actually expresses writing centers *accurately*. While I do not mean to minimize the value of encouraging and supporting writing center work as rigorous, intellectually challenging, and important, it is unfortunate that such a rich and versatile trope has been reduced almost entirely to defending institutional and disciplinary status. That the trope is repeatedly deployed in this way suggests that writing center studies as a discipline is stuck seeing “writing center” as an aspirational name, rather than an accurate one. In the same article, Wynn Perdue and Driscoll assert that writing center studies boasts multiple avenues of publication, a professional association allied with the National Council of Teachers of English, and a yearly Summer Institute to prepare new writing center administrators for work in the profession, among other markers of professional status

(186). That, to me, sounds less like a marginalized discipline, and more like the “bold and audacious” one Peter Carino argued for more than 20 years ago.

### **Conclusion: From Aspirations to Accuracy**

Scholars of writing center studies have used the “center” label to conceive of writing center work in a variety of ways: as a nexus of knowledge and expertise, as a site of importance, and even as an instrument against hegemony. Yet, all of these uses have one thing in common: They assert for writing center practitioners a position of power and prestige—one in which writing centers do not simply respond to social forces, but guide and shape such forces. In the 1940s and 1950s, the lab and clinic labels allowed writing center scholars to claim the prestige and power attendant to researchers methodically uncovering and disseminating objective truth. Thirty years later, writing center scholars advocated adopting the “center” label to re-focus the locus of authority away from objective inquiry and toward the power of the negotiating group.

In the process, the “center” label also became a tool by which scholars in writing center studies argued on behalf of their own importance. Writing center scholars adopting the “center” label also sought to claim uniqueness and autonomy, framing themselves as working against hegemonic forces in education and adopting “outsider” status. Thus, such scholars have re-imagined the “center” as a space that defies the institutional norms of the university, favoring comfortable couches and artwork over desks and chairs.

But like all linguistic expressions, the names used by writing center workers and scholars are also inflected by the hegemony of terms within academic culture. Owing in

particular to the cultural assumption that the “classroom” is the dominant site of instruction in academia, names like “clinic” and “lab” slowly came to describe ancillary sites of instruction, sites that “supported” academic work rather than enacting it directly. When the “center” label first came into prominence, its primary meaning within academia as a hub connecting and coordinating various sites of inquiry was noted by historians in the field. But the same cultural forces that pushed “labs” and “clinics” to the periphery influenced those who spoke on behalf of the “center” label, encouraging them to see the “writing center” as the site of a new discipline--one that, like other departments and programs, deserved the status and independence enjoyed by other academic disciplines.

To argue that writing centers continue to be seen as sites of remediation does not, of course, preclude that they may also function as sites of collaboration, or of prestige and power. Such an argument, however, runs counter to the notion that Carino implies: Namely, that changing the name of a site from “clinic” or “lab” to “center” can avoid or ameliorate the social and cultural forces that seek to define such places and assign them significance. I agree with Michael Pemberton’s charge that “we need to educate students and instructors about what writing centers really are” and that “we need to educate them especially about what writing centers are not” (13). But doing so means more than just adopting a name one sense of which may communicate what we think writing centers do, or what they should aspire to. It means articulating and acknowledging the ways in which discarded tropes like “lab” and “clinic” do *accurately* represent elements of writing center work, as well as *rearticulating* and *extending* tropes currently in use to demonstrate that they, too, are *accurate* names for writing center work—even if that

means uncovering elements of writing center work that are not prestigious, or that may not even agree with the aspirations of the field.

Ironically, the “center” metaphor has become a new kind of synecdoche, one that reduces the field of writing center studies to a question: Do writing centers even matter? To that, I answer emphatically “Yes!” To fully explore why, however, requires that we explore what lies between the “margins” and the “center.” In other words, to demonstrate how and why writing centers really are “central” requires examining, critiquing, re-articulating, and adding to, the tropes that name the people, activities, and preparation that fill in the space between the margins and the center.

CHAPTER III  
TUTOR, CONSULTANT, PEER: THE ROLES PLAYED  
BY WRITING CENTER WORKERS

**Introduction**

Chapter 2 examined the names most commonly used to construct our understanding about writing center spaces. Building on that work, Chapter 3 will turn to the names most commonly used to conceptualize writing center practitioners. A closer look at the three most commonly-used practitioner names of “tutor,” “consultant,” and “peer” will reveal the ways that these labels help to legitimate specific kinds of relationships between writing center practitioners, students, staff, and faculty, and discourage other kinds of relationships. Examining how writing center scholars used labels to conceptualize writing center work as both collaborative and independent, and considering the way sociocultural forces have shifted the meaning of writing center scholars’ preferred practitioner labels will lead to a more nuanced understanding of the challenges facing writing center workers’ efforts to name themselves in a way that is both accurate and persuasive.

As I have argued, it is important to examine those parts of writing center work that our tropes reduce or obscure. For one, the only way to resist an unwanted perception or behavior is to confront it. For another, the ambition set by writing center scholars demands that the field “own” the less desirable elements of its practice along with the most desirable. But it is also true that some of our tropes rest on assumptions that bear examining--assumptions that may be kept, discarded, or rearticulated, but only if they

come under examination in the first place. For example, the field's favoring of the "peer" trope over tropes like "tutor" or "teacher" makes two such assumptions: (1) that identification occurs in only one direction at a time, and (2) that identifying as a peer flattens hierarchies, while identifying as a tutor or teacher (a "colleague pedagogue") does not. I argue not only that these assumptions are faulty, but that the tropes currently in use amplify those faulty assumptions by enhancing particular elements of writing center work while obscuring others.

Tropes also function systematically, meaning that a single, complex concept may be represented through several related tropes. One example of this phenomenon in writing center work is the way Andrea Lunsford's "storehouse," "garret," and "parlor" metaphors suggest specific kinds of people who inhabit or use such spaces. I assert that when selecting, articulating, and extending tropes to represent one element of writing center work, scholars should take care to ensure the elements of the trope are *coherent*, meaning each individual part of the trope "maps" on to a specific element of the thing being represented. Selecting, articulating and extending tropes in this manner can only increase their explanatory and persuasive power. In this chapter, I will demonstrate this by using Burkean "humble irony" to extend the peer, tutor, and consultant tropes, and by further articulating and extending Harvey Kail and John Trimbur's power plant trope.

### **Peers and Consultants: The Push Toward Collaboration**

Perhaps the most important idea in writing tutoring is that writing—and the teaching of writing—are collaborative. As we have seen, Andrea Lunsford's "Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of a Writing Center" called writing center workers

to reconceptualize the sites of writing center work as “Burkean parlors” in which knowledge was socially constructed. But nearly a decade earlier, Kenneth Bruffee argued for the socially constructed nature of knowledge in “Tutoring and the Conversation of Mankind.” Where Lunsford’s case for social constructivism functioned as an argument that power and authority should reside with the “negotiating group” rather than the individual genius or information storehouses, Bruffee sought a different, if related, goal: To encourage a specific kind of identification between tutor and writer.

Writing tutors, Bruffee argues, ought to be “peers,” which he defines as “people whose status and assumptions approximate the writer’s own” (92). Bruffee gives two reasons for this: First, peer tutoring is collaborative learning (91). Second, in asking writers to engage with others as “status equals or peers” (92), peer tutoring creates a context for learning that closely resembles the one in which writers will be asked to write when they leave school. But buried within Bruffee’s surface argument is a deeper claim: that introducing students to the socially-constructed nature of knowledge should result in their experiencing a greater sense of belonging to the communities that create that knowledge. “Peer tutoring,” Bruffee argues, “is one way of introducing students to the process by which communities of knowledgeable peers create referential connections between symbolic structures and reality, that is, create knowledge, and by doing so maintain community growth and coherence” (96). By asserting that knowledge itself is socially constructed, Bruffee suggests that writing center practitioners should shift what they do with writers, focusing less on “providing a correct text and rehearsing students in correct interpretations of it” (96), and more on “creating contexts where students undergo a sort of cultural change in which they loosen ties to the knowledge community they

currently belong to and join another” (96). In other words, Bruffee employs the label of “peer tutor” in part to argue that the proper goal of tutoring is to encourage a particular kind of identification. While Bruffee appears to be attempting an accurate description of writing center work, I assert that he’s actually describing such work aspirationally—that is, he’s writing what he hopes is the case, rather than what actually is the case. Later in the chapter, I will rearticulate the “peer” trope in a way that allows it to function more accurately to describe who does writing center work.

While today, many writing centers still employ students and call them “peers,” the term “tutor” is less common, having been supplanted by terms like “consultant,” “coach,” and “assistant.” This shift began in the early 1990s, when scholars begin to examine terms like “tutor” and “consultant” to determine which might most accurately describe writing center work. These terms are taken up most substantively in Lex Runciman’s “Defining Ourselves: Do We Really Want to Use the Word *Tutor*?” (italics in original) and William McCall’s “Writing Centers and the Idea of Consultancy.” Both writers begin by defending the term “tutor”: Runciman acknowledges that the word evokes “the best students receiving the best kind of education—an almost entirely personal one founded on critical thinking and lively exchange with renowned scholars” (28), and McCall argues that the term is “rich with meaning, history, and educational significance, despite its obvious associations with prescriptive learning” (163). Yet, as McCall’s linking of the “tutor” with “prescriptive learning” may suggest, both he and Runciman eventually reject “tutor” as a problematic term, one that, in Runciman’s view, promotes confusion, because “while students and administrators think of tutoring as remedial instruction, those of us in writing centers use the word tutoring to mean something



different” (30). In other words, Runciman rejects the “tutor” label because he fears it does not *accurately* describe writing center work.

Runciman and McCall both echo Lunsford in their articulation of writing centers as sites of collaboration. Runciman, for instance, argues that when writing center workers use the word “tutoring” they mean “a wide variety of collaborative discussions” (30); later, he underlines “the collaborative nature of much business and technical writing and about how often such writing is the result of group or committee work” (31). And McCall notes the emphasis on collaboration in one handbook on consulting, arguing in part because of this fact that “the current use of *consultant* does, in fact, describe much of the work that we do” (169, italics in original). Thus, McCall’s selection of the “consultant” trope relies on his perception that it describes writing center work more *accurately* than the “tutor” trope.

In the end, both Runciman and McCall are willing to acknowledge that “consultant” is not necessarily the only, or the best, name to choose. Runciman, for example, seems more interested in divesting writing centers of the term “tutor” than he is of selecting a specific name to replace it, asserting that “[w]e ought to work hard to eliminate any use of any form of the word *tutor* in connection with writing centers” and asserting that those who work with writers might be called many names, including “*writing assistant...writing consultant...[and] writing fellow*” (32, emphasis in original). And McCall concedes that “no designation for writing center staff is without its shortcomings, and this is as true of *writing consultant* as it is of *tutor, writing fellow, or writing assistant*” (169, emphasis in original).

Both authors work halfway toward humble irony without quite getting there. By the end of his article, Runciman is prepared only to accept the negative aspects of the term tutor, declaring that words like “tutor,” “tutoring,” and “tutee” “limit both our clientele and our budgets; they make our activities appear both marginal and exclusively remedial” (33). I agree with Runciman’s charge that writing centers “define ourselves as accurately as we can” (33). But he misses the fact that it may take more than one label to accurately express what a writing center tutor does. More to the point, Runciman rejects the “tutor” trope and its concomitants without exploring whether such labels do in fact describe writing center work *accurately*. In fact, Runciman actually tacitly acknowledges the remedial character of some writing center work when he frets that using the “tutor” label would “make our activities appear both marginal and exclusively remedial” (33, emphasis mine). If indeed writing center work is at times “remedial” and “marginal,” then writing centers need to use language that communicates that, whether such work, or the terms that describe it, conveys status or not.

And for all his protestations otherwise, McCall seems equally certain that “consultant” is the ideal term to name writing center workers, arguing that “we might ask ourselves which term offers the best and most complete description of our work not only in the center but also out of the center, and, in this regard, the consultancy model also has much to recommend it” (169). But much of his argument centers on how faculty who work in writing centers function as “writing consultants,” including that “we are often called upon to act as consultants to faculty from other disciplines who want to incorporate more writing into their courses” and that “faculty who have drawn on the expertise of faculty writing consultants are probably less likely to raise the question of whether or not

students have actually done their own work, an otherwise common reason given by some for not sending students our way” (169). McCall claims that his argument that student tutors should adopt the same label is rooted in a desire for “coherence and clarity in describing our services” (169), but in proposing that a writing center refer to “writing center consultants, faculty consultants, and classroom consultants” (169) he mistakes uniformity for clarity and coherence.

While Runciman and McCall are right to acknowledge that any name for writing center workers has limits, Runciman’s zeal to erase one name from writing center work and McCall’s similar enthusiasm to install another across every role a writing center worker might inhabit, strikes me as unwise, to say the least. Today’s writing center workers tutor writers, consult with faculty, and assist classes, while fulfilling a variety of other roles. To strike down one term because it evokes remediation or to anoint another because it evokes collaboration can only hide the complexity inherent to writing and to those who work with it. We need, not fewer terms, but a better understanding of the ones we use and why we use them.

In Chapter 2, I wrote of the value of approaching tropes ironically, especially using Burkean humble irony. That same approach has value here, particularly in light of the way individual identities are intersectional. In his criticism of the “peer” trope, John Trimbur suggests that peer tutors struggle to balance the multiple roles they inhabit, while the teachers and administrators advising them do so more easily given their greater experience. I’m not so certain he is right—it seems more reasonable to conclude that balancing multiple roles is a challenge for anyone. If so, then what is needed are tools to help people learn how to balance the different facets of an intersectional personality.

One thing scholars and writing center workers need to do is explicitly acknowledge the synecdochic nature of roles like “tutor,” “consultant,” and even “peer,” and to provide tutors a space to confront, explicate, and even challenge some of the accepted ideals of writing center theory and practice. After all, while writing center workers do perform roles like “tutor,” “consultant,” and “peer,” they also perform roles like “student” and “customer.” But writing center scholarship has not adequately theorized the way minimized roles like “student” and “customer” function within tutoring sessions—meaning that explicating such roles is necessary to assist tutors in balancing the intersectionality of their identities. Instead, the tropes we use to name writing center workers structure experience by leaving the roles of people that interact with them only tacitly defined.

Lakoff and Johnson’s articulation of *synecdoche*, which they conceptualize as a special case of metonymy, explains how this might happen. According to Lakoff and Johnson, while “in the case of the metonymy THE PART FOR THE WHOLE there are many parts that can stand for the whole...which part we pick out determines which aspect of the whole we are focusing on” (Lakoff and Johnson 36). As articulated by Bruffee, Lunsford, Runciman, and McCall, writing center work is collaborative. But labels like “consultant,” “peer,” and “tutor” function synecdochically, representing collaboration by selecting on only one half of the collaborative relationship. In other words, the tropes that represent writing center workers do not represent them collaboratively. Below, I extend and rearticulate the “tutor,” “peer,” and “consultant” tropes, using Burkean “humble irony” to make explicit the “silent partner” implied by these tropes.

“Tutors” are most often said to work with “tutees,” or sometimes “students.” As others have noted, the “tutee” and “student” subject positions are inherently passive, suggesting that the tutor is the active member of the pair, while the tutee or student is simply acted upon. Scholars of pedagogy, rhetoric and composition, and writing center theory have justifiably criticized tutorial practice that encourages passive learning on the part of the student, on many grounds, among them that the approach does not result in lasting learning, that it shifts responsibility overwhelmingly onto the tutor, and that it thwarts student agency within the tutorial session (cf. Brooks, “Minimalist,” Gillespie and Lerner, “Guide,” and Barnett and Blumner, “Guide”).

But tutees and students do have responsibilities, and must function as agents for tutoring to be successful. For one, they must be able to ask questions that help them seek the information they need to succeed. For another, they must be willing to accept new information that challenges what they previously accepted as true. A tutee or student who cannot ask appropriate questions or who is not open to receiving information that contradicts prior knowledge renders the tutor’s content knowledge and skill in explaining concepts moot. Acknowledging the unique role that tutees must play in tutoring, however, exposes the tutor/tutee relationship as an inherently collaborative one.

“Consultants” are most often described as working with “clients” or “customers.” Unlike the “tutor/tutee” relationship, the “consultant/client” relationship constructs a different, if active, role for the writer: a client is a customer, someone who has paid for service and who has a right to expect something for his or her money. Yet, the customer’s chief claim to agency—the right to expectation—is itself a diluted form of freedom. Customers do have the agency to select among options, but their ability to

actually shape the options available is realized only indirectly. In “Should We Buy the Student As Customer Metaphor,” for example, communications scholars George Cheney, Jill J. McMillan, and Roy Schwartzman assert that conceptualizing the student as customer distances the student from the institution, promoting an adversarial relationship between faculty and students. They argue that “[i]nstead of being seen as partners with faculty, student-consumers become merely demanding receivers of services that faculty provide,” and conclude that “[t]his give and get mentality is unhealthy for what should be a richly cooperative educational setting.” To see students as customers, therefore, is to see them in terms that minimize the cooperative nature of their role in education, which undermines the purpose of adopting the name “consultant” in the first place.

Though much criticism has been levied at the idea that students are customers, it is not my intention to “debunk” that status. Students are in fact also customers—they have purchased the right to attend classes at a school, as well as to participate in extracurricular activities and use other services provided by the school, including academic support services. The key problem with the “consultant” trope is that it suggests a “seller” or “merchant” role for a university’s teaching staff. Such a role conflicts with education’s goal to help students encounter and assimilate new information—especially information that might threaten students’ long-held beliefs. While customers are allowed, even expected, to purchase only what they want, students are expected to encounter and work with ideas, even when they disagree with them. Thus, while the “consultant” trope may carry the advantage of suggesting an active role for the student, it ends up dramatically shifting the relations between teacher and student, leaving it a less-desirable trope to adopt.

“Peers” by definition, work exclusively with other “peers.” Bruffee’s formulation of the “peer” role underlines the authenticity that the peer-to-peer relationship brings to the creation and investigation of knowledge, but scholars following in Bruffee’s footsteps have continued to engage with the assumption within Bruffee’s argument that power is roughly equal in peer-to-peer interaction, with each peer bringing different, yet equally important, knowledge to a writing conference. Some agree that the power differential inherent to most educational contexts is indeed attenuated; others consider the “equal power” warrant to be either problematic or entirely unfounded. John Trimbur’s analysis of the term “peer tutor,” for example, exposes the way the term can induce a sort of “cognitive dissonance” in tutors, as they struggle to negotiate the sense of loyalty to academia implied by the term “tutor” with the sense of solidarity with fellow students implied by “peer” (“Contradiction,” 24 – 25). Leanne Michelle Moore, by contrast, asserts that “if we agree [with Bruffee’s assertion] that knowledge is created among peers, then one cannot separate expertise from equal status” (2). “Tutors,” she asserts, “must ‘break out of limiting dichotomies’ in order to see themselves as peers who are tutoring or tutors who also inhabit the role of peers” (3).

I agree with Moore that dichotomies are limiting, though I think she hints at a much more important point: Students are people whose identities are composed of many intersecting subject positions. Rather than identify solely with one role—as a peer interacting with another peer, for example—writing center workers perform a chorus of identities both in turn and simultaneously, acting as student, teacher, tutor, peer, or consultant, depending on the situation. Writing center scholars are aware of this, and some have argued that the name writing center workers adopt for themselves should

depend on the situation. In “Educators or Consultants? Finding a Balance in Workplace and Professional Conferences,” for example, Diane LeBlanc and Peggy Marron assert that writing center workers adopt the role of “educators” when students arrive with coursework-based writing, and “consultants” when they bring writing related to contexts outside of the classroom (10). And like Thonus, LeBlanc, and Marron, Mary Soliday also focuses on the malleability of the writing center worker’s role, describing a writing across the curriculum program initiated by her writing center by saying that “tutors who thought they had helped students the most tended to shift between teacherly and tutorly roles” (60).

In the prior paragraphs, I have *rearticulated* and *extended* the three tropes of tutor, peer, and consultant using Burke’s concept of humble irony to make explicit the roles implied by each trope. This rearticulation and extension of the original tropes results not just in a more *accurate* understanding of each trope, but also reveals a fundamental truth about all person tropes: They suggest not just roles, but relationships among roles as well.

I assert that writing center work, too, is intersectional. Just as identities are choruses weaving a melody of myriad subject positions into an individual, writing center work is itself a lattice composed of the subject positions of everyone—student, teacher, tutor, and administrator alike—who participates in that work. The tropes we use to try to represent the discipline, however, assume that knowledge, expertise, and authority are unitary. Even the “peer” trope does this, by reducing everyone--writer, tutor, and administrator alike--to a single kind of subject position. For writing center studies to



grow, its scholars must adopt tropes that do not mistake unification for coherence. They must be, to borrow Gardner and Ramsey's term, polyvalent.

The only way to see writing center work polyvalently is to acknowledge that no single role governs what practitioners of writing center work are or do, and to shift the way we conceive of writing center roles. Thus, I propose that instead of asking "What role do I play, and which trope names that role most accurately?" writing center staff might more productively ask questions like

- "What roles do I play throughout the day?"
- "Which roles inform my writing center practice? How?"
- "Do any of the roles I play conflict with one another? Why or how so?"
- "When do I switch roles?"
- "How do I know when my role has shifted?"
- "What kinds of roles do I want others to play in my work?"
- "What do I do or say to encourage others to adopt or abandon particular roles?"

In addition, writing center staff should acknowledge the agency that visitors to the writing center have, along with the constraints on their own agency that come with participating as part of a longstanding social institution, by including questions like

- "Who chooses what roles I play?"
- "What do people do or say to suggest that I adopt a different role?"
- "What do people do or say to resist adopting a role I desire for them?"
- "Who do I interact with, and what kinds of roles do they play?"

While no single role can encompass all of what writing center practitioners do, questions like the ones I pose above shift our attention away from defining a single role for all writing center workers, and toward determining what role might best accomplish a desired goal, or fit a particular situation.

### **The Myth of the Individual: Writing Centers' Struggle for Independence**

To date, no one has directly studied how the tropes that name writing center workers are taken up by tutors, teachers, and students. But in “Triangulation in the Writing Center: Tutor, Tutee, and Instructor Perceptions of the Tutor’s Role,” Terese Thonus investigates who defines the tutor’s role. Thonus argues that the role tutors adopt in a writing conference must account for both the tutee’s and instructor’s expectations (“Triangulation” 61). Naming and its tropic effects are clearly on Thonus’ mind; she explicitly acknowledges the importance of naming those who do writing center work, asserting that contemporary “discussion of a greater range of role metaphors” by writing center scholars “is heartening” (60). Yet, Thonus is concerned that “the issue of how context constrains and even prevents the fulfillment of these roles is not adequately treated” (60).

While Thonus found that instructors varied in how they expected consultants to act, those expectations differed substantially from the picture Runciman paints of a robust collaboration between consultant and writer. Thonus found that some instructors expected the consultant to act as a surrogate for the instructor (cf. 65 - 66), while others expected the consultant “to carry out specific instructor recommendations” (66). And the way tutors themselves took up their role differed from instructors’ expectations: Rather

than see themselves as collaborators, tutors often viewed themselves as “colleague pedagogues” (68), and frequently evaluated instructors’ use of course materials (e.g., assignment sheets), along with their assessments of student facility with writing. Even students waffled between supporting the tutor’s status as an expert and asserting their status as “owners” of the writing for which they had sought help (cf. 72-74). Thonus concludes “that the tutor’s role must be redefined and renegotiated in each interaction,” recommending that tutors “be trained to become neither servants of their instructors nor their critics, but rather writing instructors of a different sort, supportive yet independent of the classroom” (77).

In the following paragraphs, I show how inaccurate assumptions about identification have led to faulty articulations of the “peer” trope, and rearticulate the “peer” trope by suggesting that identification can move in multiple directions simultaneously. As evidenced by the way scholars like Bruffee, Trimbur, and Moore have taken up the “peer tutor” label, writing center scholars and professionals tend to read it as encouraging identification between student writers and student tutors—in effect, intensifying the “student” element of each person's identity. But as Thonus finds in her study of role metaphors in the writing center, peer tutors often spin the “peer” label the other way, identifying with faculty as “colleague pedagogues.” And at the same time that peer tutors are identifying with faculty rather than students, the rise of the “managed university” and the increasing prevalence of the “student as customer” metaphor in academia works the other way, encouraging peer tutors to identify with students in a way that is both different from what Bruffee intended, and that, in fact, misreads the customer metaphor by assuming the “student customer” should have a kind of agency over the

educational “product” that most customers in reality do not possess. The presence of this conceptual tug-of-war in scholarship about writing centers and educational policy functions as a kairotic moment, offering writing center professionals the opportunity to reconsider the effect that naming writing center workers “peer tutors” actually does—or should—have.

If there’s one important lesson we can learn from Thonus’s work, it’s that identification works in myriad directions--sometimes whether encouraged to do so or not. Sometimes, tutors identify with the students they work with as peers, but sometimes, they identify with their teachers as colleagues. Perhaps more importantly, identification might be working in several directions at once at any given time. Platforms like RateMyProfessor are, in fact, built on the premise that students identify with their fellow students as peers, and also simultaneously as consumers.

Peer tutors are able to identify simultaneously with the students they work with as peers, and with the teachers and administrators that they also work with as colleagues. For a discipline that has worked for decades to build an *ethos* of collaboration for itself, that should be good news, because it means that tutors can--and do--see themselves as collaborators. Even better--tutors who identify as both student peers and “colleague pedagogues” identify as collaborators with groups that are otherwise encouraged to interact hierarchically. Writing tutors, then, rather than dismantling the relations of power that writing center studies as a discipline has been working against, have developed intersectional identities that can transform those relations of power, bridging levels that at one point could only be seen as stacked on top of one another.

The people we are talking about are students. They are writers, and peers. And they are also customers. Writing center workers spend a lot of time trying to get the students they work with to identify in particular ways—as scholars, as writers, as adults and citizens, among other roles. It might be easy to forget, however, that all of these roles are available to students, whether they are being actively courted or not. More to the point: It’s possible to perform multiple roles at one time. And while a good deal of hand-wringing takes place in academia over the idea that students are customers, the role of “customer,” like most roles with which people identify, is made up of many strands, both bad and good. To call students “customers” without acknowledging the ways in which being a customer itself is a part of being an adult, a citizen, a scholar, and a writer, too, strikes me as reductive. It robs us of an essential tool with which scholars, tutors, and teachers can understand, and even identify with, those with whom they share academia.

Thonus’ recommendation to train tutors toward independence from the classroom calls up the image of the consultant as an independent operator, one who exists outside of institutional structures like “classroom,” “course,” and “discipline,” and who can serve as a bridge between said structures. Seeing the consultant role as operating independent of the major power structures of the university dovetails well with what Gardner and Ramsey have called the “anti-space” in writing center scholarship, an idealistic, imagined space “where the oppressive and mass template methods of the academy can be undone” (“Polyvalent Mission” 26). Multiple scholars, including Jackie Grutsch McKinney and Peter Carino, have elaborated on the idea that writing centers represent a site of countercultural, revolutionary energy within the university (cf. McKinney, *Peripheral*

*Visions*, 37 – 38; Carino, “Early Writing Centers”). Yet, this imaginary space, Gardner and Ramsey argue, minimizes the ways in which mainstream educational practices mirror and support the goals and methods of writing center work. While “language stressing primarily separation and resistance” helped writing center workers to “express their alienation” in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Gardner and Ramsey argue that in the present, “[w]hat deans and boards require from writing center administrators is not an understanding of how they feel but a description of what they do and why they do it,” (37).

One way in which Gardner and Ramsey propose to be “descriptive” rather than “expressive” is through metaphor. Following Lunsford, Gardner and Ramsey both criticize extant place metaphors that they see as harmful, and propose new place metaphors that they suggest better represent writing center work. In both cases, they use what Burke would call irony or dialectic to propose metaphors that restore some of what others leave out. Curiously, however, their criticisms of Kail and Trimbur’s “power plant” metaphor and their proposals of the “magnet” metaphor to represent writing centers and the “mosaic” metaphor to represent universities themselves leave out the people who do the work of the university and the writing center. Are writing center workers like engineers, or nuclear physicists? Are they a force or field, like the one that gives a magnet its name? And if the university is in fact made up of “the plaster in which the tiles of all disciplines are set” (33), then are the faculty the tools that spread the plaster, or the quality of the plaster that allows tiles to adhere to the surface on which it is spread?

Gardner and Ramsey reject the Burkean parlor metaphor for writing centers, arguing that a parlor is classist metaphor (cf. Gardner and Ramsey 31). What Gardner and Ramsey don't analyze—what no one in writing center studies has yet made explicit—is the way the parlor as a site trope coheres with the tutor trope of “peer,” and the activity trope of “conversation.” Put simply, it is no stretch to imagine a parlor as a site in which peers engage in conversation. The tropes *cohere*, meaning they “fit together” as a way to describe writing center work.

Unfortunately, Gardner and Ramsey's tropes—university as mosaic, and writing center as both magnet and mortar between mosaic tiles—don't invite the same cohesion. Place names like Lunsford's “storehouse,” “garret,” and “parlor” all involve *places* in which particular kinds of *people* perform specific *actions*. A “garret,” for example, is home specifically to “artists,” and Lunsford's selection of the garret to represent writing centers as sites of expressivist epistemology in writing instruction is intentional in part because of the kind of person often said to inhabit such a place. Yet, neither Gardner and Ramsey's “magnet” metaphor for writing centers, nor their “mosaic” metaphor for universities calls up the same kind of inhabitant.

Metaphors and other tropes can be a powerful tool for both expression and description, but scholars of writing center studies should take care to both select and articulate tropes that do not leave out important elements of the work they are describing. In Gardner and Ramsey's case, their metaphor actually shifts the relation between person and site significantly: Rather than “parlors” that serve as a staging ground for conversation, or even “garrets,” in which artists suffer for the sake of their craft, Gardner and Ramsey's metaphors suggest that the writing center is a tool, something to be

wielded by a user that is not an integral part of that space, but exists outside of and independent of it. In an article dedicated to making a conscious shift away from one use of language and toward another, this oversight is perplexing, to say the least.

In the end, Gardner and Ramsey fall prey to the same mistake made by Carino, and others: Criticizing or selecting a particular trope based on just one or two facets of that trope. Kail and Trimbur use the “power plant” metaphor to argue against the “vertical” and “top-down” imagery that they saw as animating the conversations of writing center work. Gardner and Ramsey start in a promising direction, finding value in the metaphor by articulating an element of it that Kail and Trimbur overlook: That power can turn the lights on. But their final goal--articulating a new metaphor--leads them to abandon the power plant metaphor before they have fully explored its value.

But this is a common symptom among arguments made by scholars of writing center studies for or against particular tropes: Those elements of the trope that are most crucial to the scholar’s argument are carefully articulated, while others are left out. That Gardner and Ramsey take advantage of this failing in Kail and Trimbur’s argument is not surprising; that their own argument suffers from the same problem should also not elicit surprise. I argue that before writing center scholars rush to name and articulate new tropes, they should fully extend the tropes that are already part of the discussion--either to make them better suited for our purposes, or to illuminate what about the current tropes is lacking or problematic. In the following paragraphs, I will thus rearticulate and extend Kail and Trimbur’s “power plant” trope, demonstrating how its complexity lends it to an accurate and coherent portrayal of writing center work.



In their haste to articulate a new metaphor for writing centers, Gardner and Ramsey overlook the ways in which the “power plant” metaphor might actually serve as an accurate, coherent, and even usefully aspirational metaphor for writing centers. Like “storehouses,” “garrets,” and “parlors,” “power plants” are a site at which specific individuals work—distributors, operators, and electrical engineers to name just a few. Like “writing,” “power” is a versatile chameleon—it can turn on lights, cool and heat houses, and broadcast communications signals, among other things. And the comparison can work the other way, as well—just as power plants need special equipment to help people to create and distribute power, writing centers need special equipment to help people create and share writing.

While Gardner and Ramsey rightly point out that the linear, top-down imagery that Kail and Trimbur use the “power plant” metaphor to criticize leaves out the literally enlightening effect the generation of electricity has, they do not explicate how electricity gets to its destination: Not through top-down transmission per se, but through a “grid” or “network” that allows electricity to be shared across vast expanses. This oversight is surprising, primarily because Gardner and Ramsey at first appear to set out to better articulate a metaphor used as a mode of critique, and end up abandoning their articulation at what appears to be a critical juncture. Networks are inherently horizontal structures, rather than vertical, “top down” structures, after all, and this specific element of the way power plants function would appear to discredit Kail and Trimbur’s metaphor as a mode of critique altogether. More to the point, a “power plant” strikes me as a remarkably *coherent* trope to represent the site of writing center work, in no small part because the site it describes has room within it to contain the people who actually accomplish the

work, the special tools the use to accomplish it, and the unique and important character of the product of such work.

### **Conclusion: Consultant, Tutor, Teacher, Peer**

As close examination reveals, writing center practitioners have argued on behalf of a variety of names for those who do writing center work. In 1985, Muriel Harris asserted that writing centers' "need for flexibility and change is inherent because writing centers have to meet different needs, needs that change year by year" (5). More than three decades later, writing centers find themselves in the midst of not one, but many such changes. Among the more important of those changes are those that ask writing center professionals to identify with new kinds of work. Since the 1990s, writing center professionals have named themselves in ways that encourage writers and tutors to identify with each other as collaborators, thus discouraging writers from seeing the teaching of writing as an act of remediation.

The writing center community has yet to truly delve into what it means to shift from a community of "tutors" teaching "students" to one of "consultants" working with—or for—"customers." But, as Thonus warns us, to ignore the contexts within which the consultant label has previously operated, and the way those contexts are themselves becoming entwined with the day-to-day reality of our work, is dangerous. Those who study and work in writing centers can no longer pretend that the collaborative ethos that once energized the adoption of the consultant label is the only, or even the dominant, ethos now animating the name. Today's writing center is no longer a marginal entity, but a major player in the campus community. As such, writing center

professionals must consider what it means for writing center staff to work as “consultants” rather than “tutors” at the institutional level, and how that might change the way writing center administrators prepare those who “tutor” or “consult” to enter into writing center work.

In fact, the most problematic thing about what writing center tropes obscure is that those things remain hidden, rather than out in the open. Writing centers can only be central if that center stretches to include the margin, after all. And peer tutors are peers to some, but not to everyone, or in every situation. The name “writing center studies” itself suggests an assumption: That the “center” trope holds within it all the complexity that writing center work has to offer. It is time to discard that assumption in particular.

Throughout this dissertation, I have argued that the tropes of writing center studies must be selected, articulated, or extended so that those tropes represent writing center work accurately, coherently, and aspirationally. To truly understand the discipline, however, along with why the “center” trope as it is currently articulated no longer serves that discipline, requires that we turn to what writing centers actually do.

## CHAPTER IV

### “WHAT THEY DO TOGETHER IS CONVERSE”: NAMING

#### WRITING CENTER ACTIVITY

##### **Introduction**

In addition to naming where writing center work happens and who does that work, those who work in writing centers have also labeled the work done in writing centers. Perhaps the most prevalent example of this is the widespread use of conversation to describe writing center work (Bishop, “Talk”; Bruffee; Clark; Blau, Hall, and Strauss; Bruce and Davis; Lunsford; Wolcott). But other labels have been used, including that of “play” or a “game” (Lochman; Bruce and Davis), counseling (Murphy; Marx; Smith), consultation (McCall), factory work (Moseley), teaching (Raines), and collaboration (Trimbur; Lunsford).

This chapter will focus on three of the most prevalent terms used to name writing center activity. Examining the construction of tutoring as “talk” or “conversation” and as “counseling” will show how such labels serve to emphasize not just the collaborative nature of writing center work, but its focus on process and metacognition. Conversely, examining the ways in which writing center scholars have both asserted “tutoring’s” similarity to “teaching” and argued that “tutoring” is inherently different from “teaching” will reveal how the field’s desire to professionalize has been driven by a tension between the need to be independent and a desire to belong.

All of the tropes I will discuss in this chapter—talk, conversation, teaching, tutoring, and counseling—hide the complexity of writing center work by reducing that

work to one of its facets or elements. Conversation, for instance, is clearly an important tool that writing center workers use to gather information and to persuade writers, among other goals. But to equate writing center work to conversation is reductive. In fact, as valuable as tropes like talk and counseling are for articulating the social, cooperative, or affective elements of writing center work, they are equally problematic in that they hide other elements of that work.

To take just one example, writing center work is also research. Particularly given recent calls for replicable, aggregable, and data-driven research in writing center studies—calls that echo similar calls for data-driven decisionmaking in academia at-large—the value of calling writing center workers “researchers” should be apparent to scholars in the field. But more to the point, “research” accurately describes what writing center workers do. And by “writing center workers,” I don’t just mean full-time faculty and staff who work in writing centers: the network of national and regional conferences and professional organizations that have emerged over the past few decades in writing center studies is specifically designed with undergraduate and even K-12 student members of the field in mind. Students in writing center studies are also members of the field’s professional organizations and attend its conferences. And in their capacities as members of professional organizations and conference attendees, those students conduct research and share that research with their colleagues. The tropes used to describe writing center work should account for the complexity of that work—including the role of the field’s members in uncovering and disseminating new knowledge. In this chapter, I demonstrate how *extending* the “conversation” trope and *rearticulating* the “peer” and

“remediation” tropes can lead to representing writing center work more accurately, aspirationally, with more complexity, and more coherence.

### **Writing Center Work as “Talk” or “Conversation”**

One of the most common ways to conceptualize writing center work is as “talk” or “conversation” (Bruffee; Blau, Hall, and Strauss; Bishop). Scholarship in writing center studies that focuses on the “conversation” metaphor elevates process over product, and in so doing, either explicitly focuses on the importance of metacognition, or hints at metacognition as an important aspect of writing center work. The importance of metacognition has long been touted in scholarship in rhetoric, composition, and writing center studies (cf. Flower and Hayes; Reiff and Bawarshi; Rounsaville, Goldberg, and Bawarshi; Driscoll; Nelms and Dively). But scholars of writing center work who conceptualize writing center work as “talk” or “conversation” are not just advancing the theory that metacognition, or “thinking about thinking,” is important; they also assert that thinking itself is dialogic, and thus imply that metacognition requires dialogue to occur.

While metacognition is commonly understood as “thinking about thinking,” I borrow Michael Martinez’s more analytical framework to more clearly demonstrate the way scholars who describe work as “talk” or “conversation” link it to metacognition. Martinez defines metacognition as “the monitoring and control of thought” (696). He divides metacognitive functions into three categories: Metamemory and metacomprehension, which “refer to an understanding of one’s own knowledge state”; problem-solving, which refers to “the pursuit of a goal when the path of that goal is

uncertain”; and critical thinking, which describes “evaluating ideas for their quality, especially judging whether or not they make sense” (696).

Perhaps the earliest articulation of writing center work as “conversation” comes from Kenneth Bruffee, whose landmark article “Peer Tutoring and the Conversation of Mankind” ends with Bruffee declaring that “[w]hat peer tutor and tutee do together is not write or edit, or least of all proofread. What they do together is converse” (94). And just as his use of the term “peer” helped him make an important point about the nature of knowledge, Bruffee uses the term “conversation” to argue on behalf of a particular kind of thinking: When it is internalized, Bruffee argues, conversation becomes reflective thought (89).

In other words, Bruffee underlines the importance of metacognition, or “thinking about thinking,” to learning how to write. In particular, writing tutors help writers to think metacognitively by recreating the conditions under which most “normal discourse” occurs:

My readers and I (I suppose) are guided in our work by the same set of conventions about what counts as a relevant contribution, what counts as a question, what counts as an answer, what counts as a good argument in support of that answer or a good criticism of it. I judge my essay finished when I think it conforms to that set of conventions and values. And it is within that set of conventions and values that my readers will evaluate the essay, both in terms of its quality and in terms of whether or not it makes sense (92).

While Bruffee never explicitly mentions “metacognition” or “thinking about thinking,” it is clear that he is referencing the evaluation of ideas, one of the kinds of metacognition referenced by Martinez.

Bruffee’s comparison of tutoring to “conversation” not only hides the complexity of tutoring, but also hides the complexity of metacognition—what Bruffee terms “reflective thought.” I propose that writing center scholars use analytical frameworks like the one Martinez articulates for metacognition when comparing two complex elements of writing center studies. Doing so can help them to remediate the reductiveness of such comparisons by providing a framework through which to articulate the complex, multipart character of concepts like “reflective thought” when applying them to writing center work. Building on this project, scholars could present a complex, multipart representation of “conversation” to measure against the day-by-day elements of writing center work. This representation could account for elements of conversation like turn-taking, repair, action, and sequencing, and thus represent conversation in a way complex enough to account for writing center practitioners’ rich and varied responsibilities.

Take turn-taking for example. Within a conversation, all parties typically know how to both “take a turn” and how to select and signal to another participant that said participant should be the next in line to take a turn. In that sense, conversation is theoretically an egalitarian endeavor. Conceptualizing “taking a turn” as an analogy for completing some element of writing center work reveals that writing center work is far less egalitarian. For example, particular individuals may be more empowered to “take turns” than others, as when the writing center’s administrator decides to review or change



the writing center's rules and policies—an action that typically, only an administrator can take. Similarly, students who use a writing center may have more power to determine who “takes a turn” than the staff does, because they can choose with whom they wish to make an appointment, while the staff is not empowered to refuse to work with particular writers.

Repair is another element of conversation that may be compared to writing center work to reveal the complexity of that work that is hidden by the simple analogy of “tutoring” to “conversation.” In conversation analysis, repair is any attempt to solve difficulties in hearing or understanding. As with turn-taking, all parties to a conversation may engage in repair activities during a conversation, such as asking the turn-taker to repeat his or her message, paraphrasing the message received to check understanding, or asking questions to elicit clarifying information. Attempts at conversational repair might also involve the use of technology, such as a screen reader, a TTY device, or a hearing aid.

Unlike prior articulations and extensions of tropes, my above extension of the “conversation” trope and articulation of that trope to specific elements of writing center work reveals that the “conversation” trope does not always accurately represent writing center work. While some may see the lack of *coherence* my articulation uncovers as a disappointment, I see such a discovery as illustrating another advantage of articulating and extending tropes: The dissonance between actual writing center work and the articulated trope itself provides information about writing center work that might have previously been hidden from the person articulating the trope. In addition, extending and articulating tropes can reveal the ways in which preferred tropes do not accurately

represent writing center work—and thus reveal an opportunity to select and articulate a new, more accurate trope.

Along with Bruffee, Wendy Bishop writes extensively about the importance of talk in writers' articulation of the process of writing, for themselves and others (40). And she finds immediate application in professional writers' tendency to discuss process over product, arguing that “[F]inding opportunities to discuss work in progress, gives our students who are writing the ability to analyze and improve their work” (40). Like Bruffee, Bishop does not explicitly refer to the result of talking about writing as “metacognition.” But like Bruffee, Bishop links writing to thinking when she observes that discussing one's own work leads to analysis of that work.

In fact, Bishop's discussion of “talk” suggests that metacognitive strategies may help writers to adapt to the difficult circumstances of academia. She asserts that talk serves as an antidote to the “otherwise discouraging climate of testing, tracking, and sometimes misguided remediation” because it “results in encouragement” (33) that keeps writers from giving up. In other words, the writing center environment helps writers engage in pursuit of “a goal when the path of that goal is uncertain” (Martinez 696) by encouraging them to persist. Bishop further argues that “Student writers value talk in the center because discussion, along with their writing, helps them sort out their feelings, options, and positions” (34). As Martinez might put it, the work of the writing center helps writers to understand their own knowledge state, as well as to evaluate whether their ideas make sense.

Similarly, Blau, Hall, and Strauss use talk to focus attention away from product and toward process, contending that “[t]he heart of what we do in our writing centers is in

the conversation, the talk about writing, rather than the writing itself” (20 - 21).

Tellingly, by using “talk” as a metaphor for “talk about writing” rather than for writing itself, Blau, Hall, and Strauss highlight a very specific part of the writing process: the way writers describe their own writing. Like Bishop and Bruffee, Blau, Hall, and Strauss do not use “metacognition” to name what they are writing about. However, their focus on the way writers represent their own writing makes it clear that how writers think is an important part of the writing process.

But as I indicated at the start of this chapter, the tropes that name activity in writing center studies don’t account for all the kinds of activities undertaken by the field’s practitioners. This is true for tropes like “talk” and “conversation” despite the fact that “talk” and “conversation” seem like excellent tropes to represent research. I would assert that writing center scholars like Nancy Bishop and Kenneth Bruffee don’t explicitly use the tropes of “conversation” or “talk” to represent writing center practitioners doing research in part because of the systemic coherence of the tropic system they are participating in. To put it another way, because “tutors” and “consultants” aren’t expected to do research, when “talk” and “conversation” are used to represent their work, such tropes do not represent research.

There are several simple actions that might resolve this quandary: Names like “tutor” and “consultant” could be explicitly articulated as roles that involve research, or more broad names like “specialist” could be introduced and articulated as involving research. Person names that more explicitly invoke the action of research—like “researcher” or “analyst”—could be added to those already often used to name those who do writing center work. Or writing centers could adopt several specialized names for

those who work there, with “tutors” performing one set of roles, while “consultants” perform another, and “researchers” perform a third, distinct set of roles.

But scholars of writing center studies could also follow the example I have in borrowing a complex, multipart analytical frame for the concept of “metacognition” (an analog of “reflective thought”), and using that frame to articulate how the complexity of a particular concept, like “research,” reflects the complexity inherent to writing center work.

Research is often broken into a framework involving steps, including “asking a research question,” “determining a method for gathering and analyzing data,” “gathering data,” “analyzing data,” and “writing up findings.” Writing center work, too, is often broken down into a framework involving steps, including “welcoming the writer,” “establishing *ethos*,” “setting the agenda,” “accomplishing the task at hand,” and “planning for the future.” It seems to me that many of the activities considered part of the process of research “map” productively onto steps typical of a writing consultation. Below, I explore that potential mapping.

At first glance, “Asking a research question” and “welcoming the writer” may not seem like similar steps. But to ask a research question is to determine the boundaries of one’s research—in essence, asking a good research question helps to focus the remainder of the process, lessening the amount of time and energy wasted. Welcoming the writer can function in much the same way—a writer who feels comfortable and welcome is much more likely to accept suggestions from a tutor about what to focus on or how to solve a particular problem. “Establishing *ethos*” in a writing consultation essentially means earning the writer’s trust, and can be seen in some ways as part of “welcoming the

writer.” Activities involved in establishing *ethos* can range from sharing stories of similar fears and frustrations with the writer to volunteering credential information. In fact, if tutors see “researching” as metaphorically to structure the concept of “tutoring writing,” then the goal of “focusing the tutoring session to avoid wasted time and energy” could become a valuable way to structure the first few minutes of writing consultations.

“Determining a method for gathering and analyzing data” and “setting the agenda” can be seen as very similar ways of describing the same thing: Determining how to accomplish the task at hand. But conceptualizing “setting the agenda” as both determining how to gather information and what to do with that information can helpfully focus a writing tutor on connecting the strategies he or she selects to assist a writer with the kind of information available to him or her. In fact, seeing data as information that must be analyzed after it is collected can help a writing tutor to better conceptualize the an agenda as something that may also change in response to information that is gathered. In other words, seeing writing tutoring through the lens of research may assist tutors to better enact writing tutoring as a recursive process.

The writing tutoring step of “accomplishing the task at hand” “maps” well onto the researching steps of “gathering and analyzing data.” The reminder that “accomplishing the task at hand” may involve not just using information, but also collecting it, can be a helpful reminder to the tutor to seek out sources of information to guide his or her suggestions for revision. Such a reminder might prompt the tutor to ask about an assignment sheet or syllabus, or to listen to the writer, who may clue the tutor in as to the kinds of strategies he or she might be most receptive to or excited about using.

At first glance, “writing up findings” may seem quite different from “planning for the future.” But drafting research findings does, in fact, usually include considering avenues for future research uncovered by the present project. And the subtle reminder that planning for the future means connecting it to the present could productively remind the tutor to connect his or her suggestions for the future to the information about the writer’s strengths, weaknesses, and preferences gathered during the current session.

The above constitutes only a bare outline of what it might mean to consider writing center work from the perspective of research. Many more dimensions of writing center work could and should be explored and “mapped” onto research, including especially the ways in which non-tutoring activities that tutors accomplish are also like research. In the above section, however, I hope I have shown the potential research has as a trope that might productively represent writing center work—and given an example of how other tropes might be selected, articulated, and extended in a similar manner.

### **Writing Center Work as “Counseling”**

In the 1990s, writing center scholars published several articles articulating similarities between the practices of counseling and writing center work. In addition, writing center work began to be described as “counseling” that occurred, like counseling work in psychology, in “sessions.” I contend that practitioners and scholars of writing center work asserted these similarities and encouraged the adoption of the “counseling” metaphor to describe writing center work to emphasize the writing center’s focus on the person, rather than on the product of the person’s labor. In that sense, the “counseling” trope functioned to represent writing center work more *accurately* in the eyes of those

who used it. But this focus on the person also turned scholarship and practice in writing center work toward thinking about thinking, or metacognition.

In her application of family systems theory to writing tutoring, Smith argues that “Conferencing is not really teaching one-to-one” (65). In many respects, Smith’s argument echoes Thonus’ focus on role metaphors and assertions that context is an important influence on conference sessions. But like Bruffee, Bishop, and others who conceptualize tutoring as “talk,” Smith uses family systems theory to underscore the importance of the people involved in a writing conference (cf. 70 – 71). As a result, Smith’s appropriation of conferencing theory focuses attention away from the thing being written and toward the process of writing. Her conviction that the writer must solve his or her own problems, and that the tutor can only assist in this regard (cf. 71) channels counseling’s focus on behavior modification toward North’s original vision for writing center practice: a writing center focused on process rather than on paper.

But Smith also implicitly foregrounds the value of metacognitive moves in shifting tutoring practice toward product. In suggesting that tutor and writer “broaden their conversational rules beyond politeness” (70), for example, Smith is arguing that it’s more productive for the writer to talk directly about topics like her true reasons for taking a course or what she most wants out of a session, and for the tutor or teacher to spell out the reasoning behind a student’s choices, or to actively pursue learning more about that reasoning from the student. As Martinez might put it, Smith is interested in how tutors and writers come to a better understanding of the state of their own knowledge, along with how they evaluate the quality and sense of ideas—especially the reasons behind

their own actions. Thus, by expressing what writing center work *should* accomplish, the counseling trope serves an *aspirational* role in describing writing center work.

Michael Marx begins “Bringing Tutorials to a Close: Counseling’s Termination Process and the Writing Tutorial” by acknowledging the importance of metaphors in helping humans to understand the world. He asserts that “[t]he metaphors we use to describe tutoring reveal our understanding of the tutoring process as well as our view of tutorial relationships” (51). Marx continues by comparing the closing of writing consultations to the “termination process” that ends counseling sessions, arguing that the closure of both counseling sessions and writing consultations involves assessing progress toward shared goals, resolving affective and relationship issues, and fostering independence in the client or writer through the transfer of learning (cf. 53 – 55). Yet, Marx observes, unlike therapists and counselors, writing consultants may not perceive their consultations as sites of loss in need of careful closure, which necessitates deliberate attention on the part of writing center professionals to how writers and consultants should approach the ending of a consultant-writer relationship (cf. 57 – 59).

In arguing for the value of seeing writing consultations in terms of counseling sessions, Marx selects elements of counseling that focus writers’ attention on metacognition. For example, Marx cites psychologist Donald Ward, who cautions that the client, not the psychologist, should evaluate and articulate her own progress during prior sessions, since “the counselor will not be present to remind the client of significant gains after the counseling ends” (23, cited in Marx 53). The process described by Ward clearly asks the client to understand her own knowledge state, a function of metacomprehension. Additionally, Marx suggests that writing consultations involve “a



discussion of additional work the writer must do and further tutorial assistance the writer may seek” (54), again foregrounding the importance of a writer’s continually developing her metacomprehensive knowledge.

In some sense, Marx’s borrowing and articulating of Donald E. Ward’s three-part analysis of counseling’s “termination” process echoes what I ask writing center scholars to do, as he borrows a complex framework to more fully articulate his aspirations for writing center work. Marx uses Ward’s framework of assessing progress, closing relationship issues, and transferring learning to guide his articulation of how the counseling termination process “maps” onto the process of ending a writing tutoring relationship. Doing so forces him to engage with the complexity of writing tutoring, and to carefully explain how elements of his “map” of the termination process in counseling both echo and diverge from similar elements within writing tutoring. What Marx and other scholars who compare writing tutoring to psychological counseling have yet to do is articulate a complex, multipart framework for writing tutoring, and use it to assess how their conception of writing tutoring “maps” onto counseling as a whole. Doing so might reveal not only ways in which counseling compares well to the work those in writing centers do, but also how writing center work might transcend the boundaries of a comparison to counseling—much in the same way my articulation of the “conversation” trope revealed ways in which writing center work transcended the boundaries of that trope.

The title of “Freud in the Writing Center: The Psychoanalytics of Tutoring Well” suggests that Christina Murphy wants to compare writing tutoring to counseling. Instead, however, Murphy appears invested in contrasting tutoring with teaching, intoning that

“[t]he fact that students come to the writing center wanting help and assuming they will receive it places those students in a different type of relationship with the tutor than with the instructor in a traditional classroom setting” (13). Thus, though Murphy’s assertions that “[l]earning is not simply a cognitive process” (14), that empathy is a crucial element of tutoring writers (16), and that “[m]ost of what goes on in a writing center is talking and the range of interpersonal interactions available through words” (15) all seem as though they could belong in an article about psychoanalysis, Murphy’s focus on the kind of relationship that exists between writer and tutor turns the reader’s attention toward context.

In advancing the theory that a kind of psychoanalysis called “information-processing psychology” can help writers learn to write, Murphy seems to assert that metacognition and empathy are linked. Murphy argues that any “client-centered theory...requires an empathetic bond between tutor and student in the interventive process” (15). She draws from C.H. Patterson’s outline of “information-processing psychology,” which appears implicitly concerned with metacognitive knowledge. According to Patterson, information-processing psychology

views the individual as actively attending to, selecting, operating on, organizing, and transforming the information provided by the environment and by internal sources. Thus, the individual defines stimuli and events and constructs his or her own world (668, qtd. in Murphy 15).

While it might be easy to reduce the above passage to a description of social-constructionist epistemology, Patterson’s use of “actively” to preface her summary indicates that she is focused on not just the nature of knowledge as a socially-constructed

entity, but also on the individual's actions within the social construction of knowledge. In other words, Patterson is concerned with the person as agent within the social system--as someone who is not just shaped by knowledge, but who can use that knowledge to accomplish her own goals. Being able to use knowledge, however, requires the ability to think about one's own thinking. For example, "attending to" the information available means in part being aware of one's own knowledge state. Likewise, "selecting" and "organizing" information requires evaluating the quality of ideas. And "operating on" and "transforming" information can be seen as a natural operation of problem-solving--of finding a path to a goal when that path is not obvious or clear.

Like Marx, Murphy calls on C.H. Patterson's analytical framework for "information processing psychology" to explain how writing tutoring is similar to psychology. One thing that strikes me is how closely Patterson's analytical framework, with categories like "selecting," "categorizing," and "transforming" information, echoes elements of scholarly research. I have argued that those who practice writing center work also do research, and that the tropes used to represent writing center work do not provide adequately for the complexity of that work in part because they hide or minimize this fact. Murphy's use of Patterson's framework encourages me to ask: What if "research" were articulated as a trope to represent writing center work?

Such a question presents intriguing possibilities, not least because analytical frameworks that articulate research might include elements that Patterson's framework does not. To take one such example, consider the element of "publication:" while writing centers publicize themselves in a myriad number of ways that map literally onto writing center work—by using social media, email, flyers, and posters, for example--it

would be interesting to explore the ways that typical writing tutoring actions “map” tropically onto the act of “publication” in research. In the following paragraphs, I articulate the ways in which “establishing ethos” in the writing tutoring process “maps” onto the “peer review” element of academic publishing. In doing so, I demonstrate that the concept of “peeriness” is more complex than the simple idea of equal status or authority.

Typically, academic publications are called “peer reviewed” specifically because other individuals with similar backgrounds review the research to ensure that it is relevant and accurate. Yet, while writing tutors and writers are often conceptualized as “peers” because of the assumed equality of power relations between them, that assumption does not hold for the “peers” involved in reviewing work for a particular journal. In fact, long-standing expertise and a reputation developed over several years is considered an advantage for peer reviewers. In addition, those who write and submit articles for publication are not required to hold the same rank or level of prestige as those who review their work.

On the surface, that would appear to suggest that the concept of “peer” in academic publication differs greatly from the concept of “peer” in writing tutoring. But consider the process of establishing *ethos*. Most writing center scholars would argue that writing tutors must work early to establish ethos when working with writers, and then must expend time and effort maintaining that *ethos*. But few writing center scholars would argue that such ethos is solely or mostly made up of evidence that the tutor possesses only as much authority as the writer. Instead, writers expect—and tutors deliver—expressions of ethos that mirror those in academic publication: Demonstrations

of familiarity with a task the writer may find intimidating, credentials that suggest expertise in areas the writer lacks, testimonials of experience with the situation the writer is struggling to navigate.

These things combine to suggest that, in both academic publishing and writing center work, “peers” are less marked by their shared level of status or authority, and more likely merit the name “peer” because they share similar goals or have congruent understandings about what constitutes success. Such a realization has profound implications for writing center work. For one, it suggests that preparation to enter work as a “peer tutor” does not mean learning how to hide or negate asymmetrical relations of power, but instead means directing that power toward the adoption of mutually shared goals. For another, seeing writing center “peers” as analogous to “peers” in academic publishing suggests that “establishing ethos” does not begin and end when a tutoring session begins and ends. Instead, just as academic writers seek advanced degrees, attend conferences, and do research to bolster their *ethos*, writing center tutors do—and should continue to do—such things as well. In other words, since academic *ethos* comes from more than publications, writing tutors’ *ethos* necessarily comes from more than just their tutoring experience.

Of course, not every element of a selected trope may correspond to every element of the work writing centers do. But as I have previously explained, that, too, can be a valuable source of information. Understanding the ways in which writing center work is not like research, for example, can only help underscore how varied and complex writing center work really is. The key is to tackle such contradictions and differences explicitly-- something that Burkean humble irony can help us to do.

## **Tutoring vs. Teaching: Using Perspective to Reconcile**

### **Oppositional Writing Center Tropes**

In their explicit focus on conversation and collaboration, and their implicit focus on metacognition, scholars and practitioners in writing center studies show their concern with agency—an individual’s freedom to act within a larger system. This concern with agency also informs writing center studies’ consideration of the terms “tutoring” and “teaching,” both of which have been adopted to describe writing center work at one time or another.

In 1994, at the same time scholars and practitioners of rhetoric and composition and writing center studies were touting the rise of social constructionist thinking and collaborative learning in education, Helon Howell Raines took up the terms “tutoring” and “teaching.” In Raines’ estimation, other typical writing center perception problems like the tendency to see writing centers as sites of remediation are rooted in a misunderstanding of the relationship between “tutoring” and “teaching”:

Even today some campus faculty continue to see our center as a place for writing remediation through tutoring and to see tutoring as a version of “teaching” on a lower rung of the academic hierarchy. In addition, we always have students apply for entry to the writing assistant training program who want to “teach” others about writing (152).

At first glance, Raines appears to argue against the widespread conception at the time that “tutoring” and “teaching” were opposites, asserting that the terms neither outline a dichotomy, nor do they serve as opposing endpoints on a continuum. As an alternative,

Raines argues that “tutoring” and “teaching” be merged using the Hegelian notion of dialectic (150). Raines describes Hegelian dialectic as a process during which “opposing forces conflict but in their meeting they also mix, each altering the other until ultimately both transcend the interaction to become something new” (153). Like Burke’s articulation of humble irony, Raines’ articulation of dialectic touts it as a way to reconcile erstwhile opposing ideas into a coherent whole.

Initially, Raines’ concerns appear to incorporate several of the elements that make up the “whole” of a writing center. She argues that “In the words we use to define writing centers as well as in the language others use to define our work, we continue to construct or reconstruct the relationship of teaching to tutoring and the classroom to the writing center” (152). But Raines limits her analysis to the tutoring/teaching dyad, leaving in place a host of tropes that remain poorly articulated. Raines outlines her situation this way:

Therefore, it wasn't enough to talk about the CC Writing Center as support for writing in all disciplines or as a complement to the classroom or even as a totally different experience from the writing course. We needed to articulate differences and similarities between teaching and tutoring and to educate both our peer and faculty assistants to do the same. We were thinking about these issues of language when we decided to call our program a “center” and not a “lab,” our tutors “respondents” and “writing assistants,” and those who seek writing center help “writers” or “clients.” Nonetheless, because we did not have a clear image or adequate language to discuss precisely the relationships of teaching to tutoring,

misunderstandings and meaningless conflicts occurred within the English department where the CC/UW Writing Center initially was housed (Raines 152) Despite her initial focus on the way terms like “teaching,” “tutoring,” “classroom” and “center” work systematically with and against one another, Raines leaves “center,” along with similar terms like “writer,” “client,” “respondent,” and “assistant” unexamined. While the reader is assured that “We were thinking about these issues of language [i.e., the way terms construct and reconstruct the relationships among elements of writing center work] when we decided to call our program a ‘center’ and not a ‘lab,’ our tutors ‘respondents’ and ‘writing assistants,’ and those who seek writing center help ‘writers’ or ‘clients,’” the choice not to analyze most of the aforementioned terms seems unwise, to say the least.

After all, writing center work is not just about the relationship of teaching to tutoring; it’s also about the relationship among the people in the writing center. Clients, who are called such because they have purchased a service, will expect very different things from a writing assistant than a writer might. And a respondent is a very different thing from an assistant--the latter may anticipate needs, but the former simply reacts to events. Raines even anticipates the argument that such distinctions—between client and writer, assistant and respondent—are semantics by asserting clearly that the labels selected to name elements of writing center work do, in fact, matter (cf. 152).

I’d go so far as to argue, building on the work of LeBlanc and Marron, that within a session, writing center roles are kairotic—that is, they respond in real time to the needs of the moment. In one moment, a tutor may function as a respondent, giving the writer she works with reader-based feedback about a document’s coherence or clarity. In the



next, the same tutor may shed the respondent's role in favor of a teacher's role, finding and explaining examples of signal phrases to the same writer, and then encouraging that writer to try a signal phrase herself. The same principle applies to writers who visit writing centers--one moment, a writer may identify as a client, expecting a service and advocating for the prompt and complete delivery of that service, while in the next moment, the same writer may identify as a student, sharing information and expecting a response very different from the one a client would expect of a retailer or vendor.

In other words, the work of the writing center is exigent—and thus, care must be taken in describing that work to ensure that such descriptions reflect material conditions. One assumption operating in Raines' argument has to do with who chooses the roles to play. It may be true that a writing center's website and promotional material mentions "writing assistants" who work with "clients." But during an actual session, it is the writing center practitioner who must determine the best course of action to take. In addition, those who visit writing centers also adopt particular roles, whether those roles are officially sanctioned or not. While writing center administrators may not have much control over the moment-to-moment interplay of writing consultations, they can encourage practitioners to recognize the exigent-dependent nature of writing center roles and open discussion about such roles.

While Raines appears to argue that tutoring and teaching can be dialectically reconciled, her true concerns actually center around the reconciliation of two concepts that, by the time of her article, have already become key players in writing center practice: collaborative theories of learning and one-on-one tutoring. "[T]he dialectical process," she writes "encourages the richness of paradox where two apparently

contradictory elements can both be true. Thus, we can posit individualization of one-to-one conferencing within a theory of the social construction of knowledge as practiced in collaborative learning” (157).

Though Raines posits a kinship between one-on-one conferencing and collaborative learning, by the end of her article, she appears strongly in favor of seeing tutoring and teaching as terms in opposition to one another. “Words are not the things themselves,” she asserts; “they are the symbols which we infuse with meaning(s) that radiate and resonate” (159). Raines finally concludes that “[i]f the words *respondent* or *assistant* best express the emphasis in writing center work, then let us use that language as oppositional to *teaching* in order to change the classroom that is controlled by the monologic teacher” (Raines 159, italics in original).

Here, Raines’ choice to position “respondent” and “assistant” as oppositional to “teaching,” and by extension, “teacher,” flies in the face of her earlier assertion about the dialectical process: that it “encourages the richness of paradox where two apparently contradictory elements can both be true” (157). If collaboration and one-on-one tutoring can “both be true” in writing center practice, then why must the ostensibly dialogic writing tutor change the “monologic teacher”? I would assert that seeing learning as kairotic, as responding to the exigency of the moment, suggests a more complex and valuable relationship between monologue and dialogue than opposition does.

One way to reconcile opposites is to assert that one opposite can stand in for another—what Burke would call using one concept as “perspective” on the other. In the following paragraphs, I demonstrate how “conversation” and “remediation” can be reconceptualized as from opposing to complementary concepts in this way. In

advocating for “talk” as a way to conceptualize writing center work, Bishop argues that “all university students have voices, discourses, and stories to tell” (32), but that testing and remediation, so often done in service to the cause of “standardizing” English use, obscures the facility with language those students already have. And because the classroom is so often the site of testing and remediation, Bishop argues, “the community of writing talk which often takes place best in a writing center” (32) provides students a valuable and unique opportunity to discover their facility with language.

In Bishop’s analysis, it is the classroom’s status as a site of negative activities--testing and remediation--that allows the writing center to become a site for the more desirable activity of “conversation.” In other words, just as Raines conceptualizes “teaching” and “tutoring” as opposing each other, Bishop sees “testing and remediation” and “conversation” as opposites. Inspired by Burke’s articulation of metaphor as adopting one thing as perspective on another, I ask: What if we saw “conversation” as a kind of remediation? In other words, what if we used “metaphor” as a way to perform Burkean humble irony or Hegelian dialectic?

“Remediation” means “the correction of something bad or defective” (“remediation” definition, Dictionary.com, sense 1), and academia tends to use it under the assumption that it is the student that is “bad or defective.” But given that “conversation” is a communicative and relational concept, seeing conversation as a kind of remediation suggests that it is not the person who is defective, but the relationship between the person and the institution that is in need of repair. Thus, seeing “remediation” in terms of “conversation” transforms elements of conversation, including

listening, turn-taking, and pragmatic intent, into tools with which people repair the defective relations between students and their educational institutions.

I would argue, in fact, that writing center workers use conversation as remediation all the time. The coordinator of the first writing center I worked in often spoke of herself as a translator, meaning she would help visitors to the center to better understand what teachers expected of them. I would assert that by “translating expectations” for the students she worked with, this writing center scholar was functioning as an agent of remediation--not by fixing student deficiencies, but by repairing the communicative confusion hindering the relationships between students and teachers.

“Tutoring” and “teaching,” I’d assert, are related in much the same way “remediation” and “conversation” are. Just as “conversation” is a kind of “remediation,” “tutoring” is a kind of “teaching.” And just as seeing conversation as a kind of remediation shifts the nature of the problem from the “defective” person to the malfunctioning relationship between person and institution, seeing tutoring as a kind of teaching shifts the nature of the problem away from the student. Instead, I theorize that tutoring remakes the context of instruction, exchanging the classroom for a new setting. In the classroom, a relatively large group of students with variable strengths, weaknesses, and learning preferences gather for a limited amount of time to attempt to master a body of knowledge or set of skills. Conversely, a tutoring session involves a single student working with a single tutor, as frequently or as infrequently as necessary to learn the material needed, spending as much or as little time as necessary during each session. And because the context is one-on-one, both student and tutor can focus on the strengths, weaknesses, and preferences that best suit the student. Thus, “tutoring” is a tool to

accomplish “teaching”—one that shifts the context, but not necessarily the methods or the goals.

The shift I suggest here—from seeing concepts like “conversation” and “remediation” or “teaching and tutoring” as opposites to seeing one as a tool to accomplish the other—is the kind of shift in perspective that scholars of writing center studies need to undertake to select and articulate tropes that will carry writing center work into the future. Gardner and Ramsey came close to realizing this when, in 2005, they argued that writing center discourse needed to move away from its oppositional tenor. Their work fails, I think, because it remains oppositional. They rejected Lunsford’s Burkean parlor trope without even considering how that trope might work with others in writing center studies to structure understanding. They joined Harvey Kail and John Trimbur in rejecting the “power plant” metaphor even after their own half-hearted attempts to rescue the same metaphor. And their metaphor of university as mosaic itself presumed a hierarchy, with every department and unit in the university—every tile in the mosaic—dependent on the writing center as mortar to hold it together.

For writing center studies to find new tropes and fresh rearticulations for those currently in use, we must resist the urge to couch that search in oppositional terms. That means working as hard to find new links among the tropes we use, like tutoring and teaching, as we do to find new tropes altogether. It also means working to more explicitly articulate the relationship between pervasive writing center tropes like conversation and important educational concepts like metacognition, so we can better understand how such concepts are related—and how the work of writing center studies is

itself a mosaic of such related concepts--a picture created by a collection of things that are neither opposites, nor independent entities, but that nonetheless constitute a whole.

CHAPTER V  
THE NATURE OF CHANGE: NAMES FOR WRITING CENTER  
WORKER PREPARATION

**Introduction**

Chapter 5 will analyze how the preparation of writing center practitioners is named. In particular, it will focus on the labels of “training, “orientation,” “learning,” and “professional development,” exploring why writing center workers have chosen to name their preparation in such ways, and how such names shape the kinds of knowledge and activity offered as preparation to writing center practitioners. By interrogating the way writing center practitioner preparation is named, this chapter will uncover how concepts like “teaching” and “preparedness” are constructed by such naming. Thus, this chapter will begin the work of rethinking how writing center practitioners participate in the work of the academy, and how such practitioners should be supported in their efforts to join that work.

Lakoff and Johnson extensively describe the way in which general sets of metaphorical concepts, or *gestalts*, encourage us to see concepts in particular ways. They write that “we classify particular experiences in terms of experiential *gestalts* in our conceptual system,” and that *gestalts* specify “certain natural dimensions . . . and how these dimensions are related” (83). Lakoff and Johnson also assert that we determine what is and is not important about a particular concept by using metaphorical *gestalts*, and add that “by picking out what is ‘important’ in the experience, we can categorize the experience, understand it, and remember it” (83). I argue that the activity tropes used by

scholars and practitioners of writing center work function like Lakoff and Johnson's concept of the metaphorical gestalt. Thus, the terms chosen to describe tutor education influence what practitioners remember about, and how they understand, such education.

In the case of writing tutor preparation, two sets of tropes dominate the discussion: tropes based on spatial terms, like "training" and "orientation," and tropes based on temporal terms, like "development" and "learning." While scholars and practitioners of writing center work usually do not consciously select a trope because of its spatial or temporal focus, such selection nonetheless guides thinking and writing about how writing center workers are prepared to do that work. I argue that scholars and practitioners of writing center work should select and articulate tropes naming the preparation for that work that account for both the spatial and temporal aspects of writing center worker preparation. In this chapter, I will select the new tropes of "habit," "course," and "odyssey," *articulating* and *extending* those tropes to demonstrate how they represent writing center work *accurately, aspirationally, with complexity, and coherence.*

### **Spatial vs. Temporal Labels for Writing Tutor Preparation**

The primary terms used to name the preparation of writing center workers can be organized into two referential camps: spatial labels and temporal labels. Spatial labels focus on location, orientation, and movement in space, while temporal labels, by contrast, focus on movement through time--specifically, movement that results in a change in the nature or essential qualities of the object being moved. Thus, while spatial labels like "training" and "orientation" can be used to describe change, process labels like



“learning” and “development” connote a more deep and permanent change. In other words, to help someone to “learn” or “develop” describes a much more profound change than to “train” or “orient” them.

A simple survey of dictionary definitions of “orient” will demonstrate that the term “orientation” is concerned primarily with position or direction. Dictionary.com lists 14 senses of the word “orient.” The first three senses have to do with “orient” as a noun describing Eastern parts of the world, and the final two are adjectival senses of the word that also refer to Eastern parts of the world. Every verbal sense of the word has to do with positioning in space. Senses 4 and 5 reference “surroundings,” indicating that “to orient” a person is to “bring them into relation to” or “familiarize” them with those surroundings. Senses 6 through 10 reference the points of the compass (senses 6 and 8), position relative to a specific object (sense 7), to face east (9), and to set “the horizontal circle” of a surveying instrument so that the instrument’s measurements are accurate (10). Sense 11 is mathematical, and refers to assigning a “constant outward direction” to the points of a surface. Finally, sense 12 defines “orient” as causing something to face east, or in any specific direction.

While at first glance, “training” may not seem to be quite so focused on position in or direction through space, the origin of the verb “train” appears firmly rooted in spatial perception. Of the 29 senses of the word “train” on Dictionary.com, only three appear to focus on position, with sense 22 defining “to train” as “to bring to some desired form, position, direction, etc.,” while sense 23 focuses on changing the shape or position of a plant, and sense 24 refers to “training” as pointing, aiming, or directing. Several senses of the word are defined as imparting discipline to, or changing the habits of,

people, which would appear to highlight the developmental aspects of the verb “to train.” However, as derived from Latin, late Middle English, and Old French, “train” has consistently meant to drag, draw, or pull, or something dragged, drawn, or pulled behind something else, regardless of its language of derivation. Thus, position in space and movement through it are core components of the action of “training,” even if more recent denotative definitions include a developmental component.

Conversely, “learning” and “development” focus on much more profound changes, and often suggest the passage of time during that change. For example, there are sixteen definitions of the verb “develop”; all but one mentions growth, expansion, or evolution. While expansion could be reduced to a spatial sense, growth and evolution name concepts that are particularly complex, and that usually take place over an extended period of time. Furthermore, of the eight senses of the verb “learn,” two specifically mention experience, suggesting that learning occurs over time.

In 1986’s “Peer Tutoring: A Contradiction in Terms?” John Trimbur explicitly argued that writing center studies should conceptualize tutor education in developmental terms rather than spatially. He writes that

the contradictory nature of the terms “peer” and “tutor” will make more sense if we stop talking about them in spatial terms, as roles to balance, and talk about them instead as a temporal sequence to be played out...[w]hat I have in mind is a sequence of tutor training that treats tutors differently depending on their tutoring experience--in short, that treats tutors developmentally (26, emphasis added).

It would be difficult today to find a scholar or practitioner of writing center work that does not think tutors should be treated “differently depending on their tutoring

experience.” But I contend that writing center scholarship that uses terms like “training” and “orientation” conceptualizes tutor preparation spatially in subtle ways—ways that said scholars should make explicit and more closely examine. In the following pages, I will analyze the “training” and “orientation” tropes as they are used in writing center scholarship to describe the preparation of writing center workers. I will furthermore show how the terms “habit” and “course” can function as tropes that are complex enough to allow for the articulation of writing center practitioner preparation in both temporal and spatial terms. I will also select and extend the “odyssey” trope, and show how its complexity can help writing center scholars to accurately depict writing center worker preparation as both temporally and spatially situated.

### **Professionalization as Profound Temporal Change**

Many early contributors to writing center scholarship consistently argued that those who work in writing centers required comprehensive preparation to succeed at their work. In 1986’s “What Lies Ahead for Writing Centers,” Jeanine Simpson argued that “presenting writing center workers as professional is, in fact, one of the most important tasks facing the movement” (36). By 2001, in “Writing Centers as Sites of Academic Culture,” Molly Wingate had extended the argument for professionalization beyond writing center administrators, asserting that “a writing center is full of talented, bright, and academically serious people,” and explaining that those who work in writing centers “do solid academic work at the center, learn how to carry that work into the rest of the institution, and . . . come back to the center to do more work that is serious” (8). By 2005, Judy Gill was extolling the benefits of the professionalization of writing center

practice, observing that “professionalization accounts in large part for the similarities among tutor training programs, a situation augmented by technological advances that enable tutor training teachers to share experiences on a national and international level, and enable tutors-in-training to engage in behaviors in a manner similar to professionals in the field” (2).

The fact that process labels focus on profound change in their subject is one reason why scholars in writing center studies have lately turned toward terms like “professional development” and “learning” to describe how they prepare their colleagues. In this sense, such labels function to *accurately* describe an important element of writing center practitioner preparation. However, as I will show in this chapter, those same scholars often use spatially-charged terms like “training” and “orientation” to name how writing center workers are prepared, even when such preparation is more process-oriented. This use of spatial terms to name process-based activities misrepresents the way practitioners of writing center work are prepared to join that work, primarily by eliding the importance of time in such preparation.

John Trimbur’s call to focus more on developmental training appears to warn against professionalization. However, Trimbur could be seen as one of the earliest calls in writing center scholarship to shift writing center preparation toward professional development. Trimbur’s argument on behalf of developmental training seems both aware of and guarded toward spatial conceptions of writing center worker preparation. He argues that the “apprentice model of tutor training invokes a kind of knowledge—the theory and practice of teaching writing—that pulls tutors toward the professional community that generates and authorizes such knowledge (27, emphasis mine). Note the

way Trimbur's characterization of the "apprentice model" of tutoring describes tutor change in spatial terms: Tutors either remain stationary or are "pulled toward" a particular community, depending on how they are educated. Trimbur's tutors also lack agency, becoming subject to a powerful force that acts on them, one to which Trimbur does not imagine they can respond.

Contrast Trimbur's spatial description of the "apprentice" model of tutor training with his ideal model, which is rooted in change through time:

I want to suggest a rather messy solution to tutor training that incorporates elements from both models but at different stages. What I have in mind is a sequence of tutor training that treats tutors differently depending on their tutoring experience--in short, that treats tutors developmentally (27).

Trimbur introduces this idea in a section called "Training and Timing," which clearly indicates his concern with time, and his conviction that effective tutor training takes time to complete. In addition, his use of words like "stages" and "sequence" roots his ideal, "messy" method of tutor preparation, in time, in contrast to the spatially-rooted "apprentice" model's tendency to "pull tutors toward" its goal. Finally, Trimbur sums up the method he proposes as a "developmental" one, suggesting that development is a time-bound process.

Scholars often cite Trimbur's article to problematize the notion of the "peer" tutor or as an argument against "professionalizing" the students who work in writing centers. But his careful articulation of the value of time in writing tutor preparation is, I think, of vital importance. Scholarship about the tutoring of writing, littered as it is with references to expertise and identification, and suffused with concern over hierarchy and

status, directs too little of its attention toward the way time functions, both to create a rhythm in academia and as a factor in the way people change and develop.

The scholarship of Simpson, Wingate, Gill, and others points to a clear advantage to adopting the “professional” label: A “professional” is clearly someone who should be taken seriously, whose knowledge and opinions should carry value within an institution. Members of a field constantly relegated to the margins in status and funding would obviously gravitate toward the “professional” half of the “professional development” label to help make their case that their field does, in fact, belong at the decision-making table, equal to other disciplinary units valued on campus. In this way, the “professional” element of the “professional development” trope functions *aspirationally* in much the same way the “center” trope does: by asserting a kind of status to which writing center workers aspire.

Despite this advantage, scholars in writing center studies have reacted in mixed ways toward the idea of professionalization. To take just one example, at roughly the same time Jeanne Simpson was arguing on behalf of professionalizing writing center workers, Daniel T. Lochman framed professionalization in opposition to the “spontaneity” previously exhibited by writing centers. In Lochman’s view, the professionalization of writing centers seems almost like a betrayal of writing centers’ original *ethos*, in which centers “moved ever closer to the highly structured modes of instruction which they had claimed to supersede” (12). The idea that writing centers were once pure and innocent before succumbing to the urge to professionalize is not a new one, and has been criticized before (cf. Carino, “Open Admissions”). Particularly dubious is the idea that writing centers ever “superseded” the “highly structured modes of

instruction” to which Lochman alludes. The rigid structure of early writing centers has been well-documented and roundly rebuked in writing center scholarship (Carino, “Open Admissions,” Boquet, “Secret,” Moore, “The Writing Clinic”).

Less remarked on is the way Lochman’s language roots his criticism of professional development in spatial, rather than temporal, thinking. “Moving ever closer,” for example, evokes a point in space for the “highly structured modes of instruction” of which Lochman writes, suggesting we can either be “close to” that point or “far away” from it. And throughout his article, Lochman conceptualizes the writing center as a site: as a “facility” and a “setting for rehearsal” (15), for example, or an “ideal site” and a “neutral area” (17). The idea that writing, or teaching writing, might take time is curiously absent from the terms guiding Lochman’s analysis.

Lochman doesn’t even go so far as to acknowledge that the rules or “institutional constraints” that he both nods to and criticizes might have to do with time, despite the omnipresent nature of time-based restrictions in academia. Academic terms are typically limited to ten or sixteen weeks, and courses within either structure must fill a minimum number of “clock hours” depending on the number of credits they fulfill. Graduation statistics do not simply count the number of graduates, but segregate those graduates into those who did so in four years, six years, or longer. And graduate students are limited in the amount of time they can pursue a degree, lest the knowledge gained in their studies become outdated. The structures of academia include an astonishing number of rules involving time; those structures, however, not only escape Lochman’s notice, but have rarely been the focus of writing center scholarship.

Yet, what strikes me is the clearly developmental character of the things Lochman criticizes. What is “development” if not “moving ever closer” to ways of thinking and doing that are “highly structured”? Such change occurs over time rather than in space, but it does occur. Scholars like Lochman and Trimbur who counsel writing center professionals to resist “professionalizing” the students with whom they work themselves resist the idea that “professionalization” itself is a kind of learning, a process that occurs over time, and not overnight. In other words, the “professional” element of “professional development” can also function *aspirationally* in another way: to suggest that writing center workers continually strive to learn.

In fact, writing center scholarship about tutor preparation routinely resists and criticizes the idea of professionalization while also tacitly embracing spatial over temporal thinking. In 2009’s “ ‘Tutorizing’ Certification Programs,” for example, Julie Simon places “tutor” and “professional” in opposition to one another, asserting that tutors’ work should “tutorize” programs against the “professionalizing” influence of, for example, national certification programs. When she first certified her tutor training program through the College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA), Simon was looking to incentivize tutor participation in training and professional development beyond offering an hourly wage to complete activities like observation of other tutors’ sessions and reflection on tutoring practice. As she went through the process, however, Simon began to see

how much the insertion of national certification standards into our center’s culture would push our center’s training philosophy towards what John Trimbur has identified as the “apprentice” model—a model that, by stressing professional



development, presents “peer tutoring as an arm of the writing program, a way to deliver state-of-the-art instruction in writing to tutees” (Trimbur 26, qtd in Simon 3). The trouble with this model, Trimbur explains, is that it worsens the writing assistants’ tendency to think and act like administrators and faculty, thus encouraging them to abandon their true authority as writers who are also students (Simon 3, emphasis mine).

Inspired by Trimbur, Simon decides “to customize the CRLA model to create a certification process that would encourage tutors to resist a “Mini-Me” identity.”

Furthermore, Simon elects “[t]o give certification a ‘co-learner flavor’ by “ask[ing] tutors to help [her] create an approach to certification that would allow them to move from the margins of academic life to the center of our center” (3, emphasis mine). All this results in Simon

augment[ing] the CRLA list of requirements with a set of tasks that would invite those working on certification to take the initiative in creating and conducting activities designed to support campus literacy in any way they wished to define that literacy. As a result, I ended up with a definition that characterized certification as a process through which tutors would insert themselves into the system not as a mere cog, but as something akin to a wrench (Simon 3).

Thus, rather than resist the system directly, Simon chooses to allow her tutors to engage it in a way that assumes flexibility—both on the part of the system and her tutors. The result is a training program that both acknowledges the structures within which it operates, and permits participants within those structures the agency to change them when they do not work.

Simon has selected the model of a machine or engine to describe her approach to tutor preparation, and has focused on articulating the engine's status as an entity that takes up and moves through space. Note Simon's characterizing of "the system" as mechanical, containing "cogs," one into which tutors can "insert" themselves—clearly conceiving of tutor education as encouraging movement through space. Her tutors, by contrast, are not simply "cogs," but "wrenches" who, unlike the tutors posited by Bruffee more than two decades earlier, possess the agency to change the system. Yet, as Simon's goal is to give her tutors agency within the program she designed to prepare them for tutoring, representing those tutors as wrenches rather than cogs doesn't seem to go far enough. A wrench, after all, is a tool that someone else uses, and doesn't itself have the agency to control how it is used. In this sense, Simon's machine trope fails to function sufficiently *aspirationally* to describe what Simon hopes her tutors achieve. It also fails to function *accurately* to describe what her tutor preparation program actually does. Part of the reason Simon chooses such an ineffective metaphor might be the way spatial thinking still guides her conceptualization. Both of Simon's metaphors for tutors--that they are wrenches rather than cogs—remain rooted in objects that interact primarily with space, or that move other objects through space, rather than time. Moreover, her tutors "insert themselves" into the certification process, a clearly spatial action--and one that suggests that tutors work outside of the training process, rather than being transformed by it. All of this is framed by Simon's assertion that her approach "would allow them [i.e., her tutors] to move from the margins of academic life to the center of our center" (3).

The trope Simon selects, along with the way she articulates it, ignores the ways in which her tutor preparation method both requires time to complete and might, in fact,

acknowledge and incorporate time in articulating a “developmental” training program that truly follows Trimbur’s preferred model. In essence, by focusing on a representation that interacts with space, but not with time, Simon’s trope *inaccurately* describes how her tutors are prepared to enter writing center work. To resolve that contradiction, Moore could take two approaches: Find a new metaphor to replace that of engine/machine, or extend her prior articulation of the engine/machine metaphor to account both for the ways machines and developmental education interact with time.

To extend her engine/machine metaphor, Simon might look to her own concern with time. Throughout her article, Simon indicates she is aware that her tutors’ learning takes time, and that the time she has available is limited. In resisting Trimbur’s time-intensive approach, Simon bemoans that “on my planet, there is not a lot of time to enact the two-part approach to training that Trimbur advocates—at least not if that approach is construed as a linear one” (4). In other words, Simon is aware that it is not how much time, but the kind of time, that matters. Yet, she does not apply that understanding of time to the way she conceptualizes her tutor preparation program. I theorize, however, that applying temporal logic to her own trope might allow Simon to create a much more full and complete articulation of that trope to the education and preparation of her tutors.

As I have mentioned before, research in writing center studies rarely focuses on time, even if writing center administrators are keenly aware of time as a limited resource. One exception is Anne Ellen Geller’s “Tick Tock Next: Finding Epochal Time in the Writing Center.” Geller’s defining of epochal time, which she borrows from Allen Bluedorn, echoes the way rhetoricians have defined *kairos*: “In epochal time ‘the event defines the time,’ and time is ‘linked to the individual’s internal rhythms (e.g., the onset

of hunger)' or "external social rhythms (e.g., the flow of work that day)" (Bluedorn 31, qtd. in Geller 8). Simon could apply Geller's ideas about epochal time to the engine/machine-based articulation of her tutor preparation program by asking questions like: When does someone "turn the key" to start or stop the program, and who does it? When should or does the program "rev up"? When and why does the program "idle"? How often does the program need a "tune-up"? When should someone take a "wrench" to the program's "cogs"? How often should parts of the program be "refurbished" or "replaced"? Asking and answering such questions would turn Simon away from the idea of time's scarcity, which has to this point only caused her to ignore the influence of time on her program. Instead, by articulating her engine/machine as something that operates in time, Simon and her tutors would be able to focus on important events that signal whether and how well her program is working. Doing all this would result in a conceptualization of tutor preparation that more *accurately* describes the tutor preparation program's effect on tutors, in part because it reveals heretofore hidden *complexity* in the way the program functions.

In 2011 and 2013, R. Mark Hall described the value of an "inquiry stance," arguing that preparation for writing center work is "a process of research and knowledge creation" rather than "merely as a set of instrumental strategies or tasks" ("Problems of Practice" 2). At first glance, Hall's adoption of the "stance" metaphor is a spatial one; though Hall is likely using the word "stance" to mean "[t]he attitude of a person or organization toward something; a standpoint," the word carries with it the clearly positional and space-oriented definition of "[t]he way in which someone stands, especially when deliberately adopted (as in baseball, golf, and other sports); a person's

posture” (Oxford English Dictionary). In addition, when describing “the purpose of inquiry,” Hall writes that it is used “not merely to solve problems or to correct practice. Rather, its aim is to examine both what we do and the rules and reasoning—the habits of mind—that determine what we do” (“Theory In/To Practice” 84 - 85, emphasis mine). Hall’s use of “aim” here clearly references positioning in space.

But when he describes how an inquiry stance is adopted, Hall clearly references the elements of a process, one that “involves relentless questioning, asking why, wondering, researching, generating alternatives, testing, reviewing, and revising options” (“Theory” 84). Hall’s use of the gerundive case here serves to underline the ongoing and contingent nature of actions like “wondering,” “questioning,” and “researching,” forcing the reader to consider that such actions require time to complete. Hall even calls up the “development” label directly when he asserts that “double-loop learning,” a key cognitive skill for his writing assistants, “is developed, in part, through dialogic reflection” (“Theory” 85, emphasis mine).

Whereas Simon’s conscious adoption of a “machine” or “engine” trope to guide her description of her tutor preparation method leads her to focus too much on spatial concerns and not enough on temporality, Hall is more ambivalent in his description. While the name he chooses for the skill he describes seems clearly spatial, Hall’s description waffles between both spatial and temporal descriptors. While it is most certainly true that writing tutor preparation is both spatial and temporal, the mixing of spatial and temporal traits in Hall’s description of the “inquiry stance” appears more accidental than intentional. Perhaps because Hall borrows the term “inquiry stance” from Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle, the less than intentional quality of Hall’s

naming trope robs Hall's description of some of its persuasive power—power that intentionally adopting and articulating a single trope might restore. In other words, intentionally adopting a trope that allows for explicit framing of an “inquiry stance” as both spatial and temporal would increase the *accuracy* of Hall's description.

Heather Camp's 2007 article “Context Matters: Incorporating Tutor Development into the Writing Center” serves as another example in which the spatial label of “orientation” is used to name writing center worker preparation, while the more process-oriented “development” label is used to describe what “orientation” means. Camp's “orientation” is an event that accomplishes a variety of purposes, from encouraging group formation to introducing new employees to the routines of the job to “exposing” those new employees to the wider literature of the field. Some of the activities Camp describes involve surface-level learning, such as learning day-to-day job routines. Others, like group formation and encountering the literature of the field, require a greater investment, a more fundamental change on the part of the participant, in order to be valuable. Throughout her analysis, Camp seems caught between seeing tutor education as a process rooted in temporal change, or as a spatial movement. Though initially describing an orientation as an “event,” which suggests temporal change, later, Camp calls an orientation “a key site in which a climate of inquiry and learning could be promoted,” suggesting that place--and thus, position in space--does figure strongly in her underlying conceptualization of an “orientation.”

Thus, while Camp uses a spatial label to describe her tutor education program, her description of course-based tutor education reveals her desire for a process-oriented, developmental conception of tutor preparation, as does her assertion that “while tutors in

both contexts [i.e., institutions that offer tutor training as a class and those that do not] need creative and engaging opportunities for growth, disparate contexts need individualized, site-specific approaches to tutor development” (Camp 3, emphasis mine). Describing a spring semester orientation in which she worked to improve her tutor education practices, Camp sketches a picture of a profoundly process-oriented experience:

[T]he revised questions helped tutors articulate the assumptions and beliefs they held about teaching, learning, and tutoring, assumptions that could then be set next to and viewed in light of the philosophy and mission of the Writing Center. Bringing these spoken and unspoken principles together helped alert tutors to the differences between their beliefs and the ideas that informed the context in which they were about to work. This knowledge, in turn, helped them better understand the tensions they experienced as they tutored in the Center (Camp 4).

Throughout her description, time-oriented markers like “then” and “in turn” further indicate the way Camp’s thinking about tutor preparation is rooted in change over time. Yet, Camp’s description also suggests the importance of space: her tutors’ assumptions and beliefs are “set next to” the philosophy and mission of the Writing Center, as answering questions results in “[b]ringing these spoken and unspoken principles together” (4). Given this evidence, assumptions and beliefs appear immutable, changing only in how they relate to the beliefs and mission statements of other organizations and people. In other words, Camp’s articulation of her tutor preparation program is not entirely *coherent*—and thus, it loses some of its rhetorical and explanatory power.

Writers like Hall and Camp who choose a spatial label for the concepts they are writing about but whose descriptions evoke temporal tropes can create more rhetorically powerful and useful descriptions of those concepts by intentionally embracing a trope that includes both spatial and temporal aspects and extending that trope as fully as possible. This is visible in the case of Julie Simon, who creates a vivid and powerful description of her tutor development program by comparing it to a machine or engine. But just as Simon's description could be improved by selecting a trope that either allows or obliges her to attend to the temporal dynamics of her training program, both Hall and Camp can best benefit by either extending the tropes they use to the fullest extent possible to determine if the trope can accommodate both temporal and spatial aspects of tutor preparation, or selecting a trope that allows or forces them to attend both to spatial and temporal elements of tutor preparation.

One example of a trope that both Hall and Camp might benefit from adopting is that of a "habit," which has the advantage of being understood as both an action and a thing. In Camp's case, the title of a subsection of her article, "Cultivating Habits of Mind," suggests the utility of the "habit" trope for her purposes. In Hall's case, the "habit" trope appears in the definition of an "inquiry stance" that he borrows from Cochran-Smith and Lytle, again contained in the phrase "habits of mind." In the following paragraphs, I demonstrate how *selecting* the "habit" trope and *articulating* it to reveal the trope's *complexity* can help Camp and Hall to represent the way they prepare writing tutors more *accurately*.

For Camp, the "habit" trope can more accurately simultaneously represent the spatial nature of a "site" and the active nature of an "event," since the term can be defined



as both “a settled tendency or usual manner of behavior” (i.e., an action, like an event) and “a costume characteristic of calling, rank, or function” (i.e., a thing, like a site) (Merriam-Webster.com, “habit” definition). Explicitly articulating these disparate definitions would allow Camp the opportunity to more consciously articulate to her tutors how a belief might function both as a thing that can be donned, removed, and set next to other things, and a set of repeated actions that can be anticipated, and perhaps changed. For example, a person whose job requires that every visitor be greeted with a smile and a handshake may at first only engage in that behavior while on the job while choosing to “take off” the behavior and “put it away” at other sites, treating the action simultaneously like “a costume characteristic of calling, rank or function.” Over time, however, the same person may realize the value of greeting everyone with a smile and handshake, and thus, transform the “costume” nature of the action into “a settled tendency or usual manner of behavior.” Using the dual nature of the “habit” trope like this may help Camp when she encourages her tutors to treat their assumptions as “costumes” they can remove and “set next to” other ideas, like the mission of the writing center in which they work.

The dual nature of the “habit” trope is already visible in Hall’s articulation of the value of an inquiry stance, which helps writing center workers “to see writing center work not merely as a set of instrumental strategies or tasks [i.e., things that can be put on or taken off as needed], but as a process of research and knowledge creation” [i.e., a set of actions that create “a settled tendency or usual manner of behavior”] (2). For Hall, choosing the “habit” trope and making its dual nature explicit, and then applying that dual nature to analysis of his own description, can help the colleagues with whom he works to better understand what an inquiry stance does, and how it might be valuable.

## **Undertaking an Odyssey: Preparing Graduate Student WPAs for Writing Center Work**

In the February 2001 issue of *Writing Lab Newsletter*, Julie Eckerle, Karen Rowan, and Shevaun Watson published an article that explored the increasingly common practice of placing graduate students into writing program administration (WPA) roles. The recommendations in their article became what is now known as the International Writing Center Association's Position Statement on Graduate Student Administrators, and includes the following recommendations about how to prepare graduate students for administrative work in writing centers:

Graduate assistant directors should receive adequate training and preparation for the position. This could involve holding writing center roles that lead to the assistant directorship; ongoing training during the assistant directorship; development and use of resource material for graduate administrators; and/or appropriate coursework prior to the assistant directorship. Training is best done with a strong mentorship program. Whenever possible, connections between teaching and writing center work should be discussed (Eckerle et al, "Concerns," 5).

The above is echoed as point 6 in the official IWCA Position Statement on Graduate Student Administrators (Eckerle, et al, "Statement" 61). The statement is noteworthy in the way it hedges "training" by appending "preparation" to it, suggesting that what constitutes effective readiness for a writing center administrator involves more than just "training." Later mentions of training are similarly modified: "ongoing" is added to the second instance of "training," suggesting that the authors explicitly wish to acknowledge

the importance of and need for time in preparing graduate students to administer writing programs, and that “training” alone does not communicate time’s role in such preparation. The third instance of “training” is appended with “mentoring program,” again suggesting that the authors see “training” as only part of the preparation of a writing center administrator.

That the authors chose “mentoring” as one way to modify “training” is particularly interesting. Most dictionaries define a “mentor” as a wiser, older person who provides a younger individual with counsel, and “mentoring” is usually represented as the provision of advice or counsel by a more experienced person to someone younger. While definitions of the word itself don’t often focus explicitly on the temporal nature of mentoring, the word’s origins strongly suggest that mentoring is a long-term relationship: Mentor was Odysseus’s own trusted friend and advisor, who raised Odysseus’s son Telemachus during the 20 years Odysseus spent away from home (Dictionary.com, “mentor” definition). Today, Odysseus’s name is itself a trope, having become synonymous with a long journey involving multiple reversals of fortune (cf. Merriam-Webster dictionary online, “odyssey” definition).

In fact, I would argue that Eckerle, Rowan, and Watson’s recommendations for the preparation of writing center administrators are guided by the trope of the “odyssey” and its attendant context, at least implicitly. And I cannot help but wonder how their articulation of the needs of developing writing center administrators might have changed had they explicitly embraced the trope, and used it to structure their thinking and writing about graduate writing program administrators. The central conceit of the trope—that an “odyssey” must be long, meandering, and involve many hardships or obstacles—lends it

great power to represent the winding and eventful road that many writing center practitioners, be they administrators, tutors, or otherwise, take to enter the field. And the cast of characters—from Odysseus and Telemachus to Nestor and the Sirens—presents those who engage explicitly with the trope ample opportunities to articulate the allies and obstacles a writing center practitioner might encounter while developing his or her knowledge and skills. In other words, the “odyssey” trope is *complex* enough to *accurately* portray the preparation of future writing program administrators, especially because it allows for representing how such preparation occurs both in space and in time.

My point here is not to call for the adoption or abandonment of particular tropes, but to demonstrate the way that tropes already guide and shape our thinking. I also hope to show the value that a sufficiently complex trope has as a tool for articulating complicated, abstract concepts such as the way writing center practitioners are or should be prepared to enter writing center work. Ultimately, I argue, what is most important is not which tropes are selected to represent writing center work, but that the examination and use of such tropes is careful and conscientious.

In 2002, Catherine Latterell explored the contributions made by graduate students serving as writing program administrators (WPAs). Part of her exploration engaged with how graduate students should be prepared to occupy administrative roles:

And, it has also become an acknowledged article of faith that WPAs have a duty to help prepare the next generation of program administrators. Accordingly, graduate students gain not only financial support and/or by courseload reductions but also by earning experience operating on the boundary marking faculty subject positions from student subject positions—making an impact on an administrative

level in their programs as well as preparing for future working relationships in which they are defined not by their student status but by their status as administrators and teacher/scholars (30).

Lattrell's discussion of the responsibilities of current writing program administrators suggests the value of experience. Although experience takes time to accrue, her articulation of the value of said experience couches experience in spatial terms: it exists in a physical location "on the boundary marking faculty subject positions from student subject positions" (30). The influence that writing program administrators exert is felt on a "level," suggesting location and arrangement in space, as well. Though Lattrell gestures toward articulating a "mentoring" situation, in which experienced WPAs help new WPAs who are "preparing for future working relationships" (30), that articulation is tinged with concerns over "status," a hierarchical concept often described as having "levels." Lattrell even conceptualizes the role of WPA itself spatially, referring to those who "occupy" it.

How would Lattrell's articulation of WPA preparation change if she were to embrace the "odyssey" trope and articulate preparing WPAs as a "journey"? Lattrell would still be able to use location, as journeys often traverse "boundaries" and those who embark on them can "climb" or "descend" to various "levels." But because journeys also take time, Lattrell could also draw on the "odyssey" trope to foreground the role of time in preparing to become a WPA.

## Tutor Education Courses and the “Course” Trope

While describing her tutor preparation program, Heather Camp notes that her situation is unlike that enjoyed by many scholars who publish work on tutor training and professional development:

Unfortunately, many of the rich depictions of tutor development that are showcased in writing center scholarship don’t reflect the conditions under which we work, emerging, as they so often do, from semester-long courses centered on tutor pedagogy. Such courses provide tutors with ongoing, structured opportunities to read, write, reflect, explore and discuss the work of tutoring—curricular opportunities that aren’t available for my tutors (Camp 2).

Note here Camp’s focus on time, and the way tutor training courses “provide tutors with ongoing, structured opportunities to read, write, reflect, explore, and discuss the work of tutoring” (2). Clearly, Camp is aware of the fact that preparing individuals for writing center work takes time, and she values the fact that a course dedicated to “tutor pedagogy” creates a structure that reserves such time.

Other writing center scholars see such courses as accomplishing different functions. Howard Tinberg, for instance, values the course as a persuasive measure designed to assert the writing center’s place as part of the university’s intellectual project:

*As writing center directors move to craft curriculum of their own—in the usual form of tutor training courses—they are sending a clear and significant message: that the business of managing a writing center must now involve the intellectual work of helping to craft a curriculum* (1, italics in original).

In the very next year, D'ann George's "Lobbying for New Courses in Writing Center Theory/Pedagogy" engaged writing tutor course creation from a practical perspective, advising writing center workers wishing to propose such a course to cultivate allies, link the course to wider institutional goals, and carefully select the name for such a course, among other things. Like Tinberg, however, George is cognizant of, and excited by, the professional implications of proposing a tutor training course. Five years before Wingate's impassioned argument on behalf of the seriousness of writing center work, George writes that "[w]hen we argue that a course in writing center theory and pedagogy should exist on our campuses, we argue for the intellectual and academic nature of our work and that of writing consultants" (5). George asserts that for writing center directors, talking about such a course "isn't a waste of time. Rather, it is central to what we do" (5).

Like Tinberg, George frames the creation of a course as a move to gain and preserve status for writing centers. And like scholars both before and after her, George employs the "center" metaphor as a trope to argue for the importance of writing center work. George's argument also invokes time, suggesting that even those who create coursework on writing center theory must fight dearly to defend the "ongoing, structured opportunities to read, write, reflect, explore and discuss the work of tutoring" (Camp 2) that Camp so desires.

But the primary trope that guides George's argument is spatial: she invokes the "center" trope to argue on behalf of the importance of the creation of coursework when she asserts that creating a writing center course "is central to what we [i.e., writing center workers] do" (5, emphasis mine). This in spite of the fact that George explicitly argues against such work being "a waste of time," rather than strictly "unimportant" or

“marginal.” It is telling that the spatial trope on which George relies is the one that has come to structure the field. In this case, the trope diverts attention from the temporal nature of her argument, sapping that argument of necessary persuasive force in two ways: First, because the trope George uses is oft-used, its lack of novelty makes it easier for readers to ignore or pass over it. Second, by diverting attention from the temporality of writing center work, George’s use of the “center” trope thwarts a very real opportunity to articulate the ways in which time, too, is an important measure of importance.

Ben Crosby’s 2006 article “The Benefits of a For-Credit Training Course in Starting and Running a University Writing Center” focuses explicitly on the ways time factors into writing tutor preparation. In particular, Crosby’s analysis seems to focus on *kairos*, or the opportune moments that occur as a result of delivering tutor training via a course. For example, Crosby appears to value the structure and certainty afforded by the existence of a course, arguing that the course’s regular meetings helped to ensure regular communication among tutors and administrators (3), that the course allowed for structured reading of writing center scholarship (2 – 3), and that it provided a forum that allowed him and his colleagues to invite other stakeholders to speak to the tutors when particular expertise was needed (3).

Kurt Schick and his colleagues at James Madison University also created a course to guide tutor education as a response to changing circumstances. In 2010’s “The Idea of a Writing Center Course,” Schick, et al framed the creation of their course both as an attempt to adapt, and explicitly as an alternative to training (1). Yet, the “course” they created responds to the exigencies created by their particular context, rather than adhering to a specific norm:



Every newcomer to our writing center now begins by taking Tutoring Writing. “Taking” the course differs somewhat for each participant. Technically, one or two of our more experienced professional consultants serve as instructors of record, but everyone bears some responsibility for teaching. For the “instructors,” the course fulfills their classroom teaching obligation. New professional consultants and graduate assistants both audit and help lead the seminar; their time in class counts as professional development, which we’ve made part of everyone’s weekly routine. Undergraduates take the course for credit, but we’ve designed assignments and activities that quickly build and then employ their expertise as apprentice tutors. Anyone not currently “taking” the class (teaching, auditing, or earning course credit) participates by mentoring—and often learning from—the classroom participants via an extensive internship process (2).

Schick and his colleagues have adopted a “both-and” approach to preparing writing tutors, naming what they have created a “course,” but enacting that course in terms far broader and more flexible than a traditional course might allow. Their articulation of the course is admirable in the way it presents unique methods of participation for tutors of varying experience—a trait John Trimbur would likely approve of.

Descriptions of writing center courses like those by Schick, Camp, Tinberg, George, and others, could benefit from the application of a unifying trope that articulates writing tutor preparation as an entity that exists both in space and time. One way to establish that both time and space are important to the preparation of writing center work lies in the name of the very thing Camp, Tinberg, and George are advocating: the “course.” Merriam-Webster defines a “course” as “progression through a development or

period or a series of acts or events” (“Course” definition, Merriam-Webster online, sense 3c(1)), “an ordered process or succession” (sense 4), and “the path over which something moves or extends” (sense 2). In academia, terms like “course” and “coursework” elicit both of these senses—a class or set of classes that functions both as “an ordered process or succession” through a specific body of knowledge, and “the path over which [a student] moves” to learn that particular body of knowledge.

Recall the “lab” trope, the cultural resonances of which led to conceptualizing of “writing labs” as ancillary or secondary to the classroom. In my view, “course” also functions as a trope—one that presents the opportunity to articulate tutor education in both spatial and temporal terms—and thus, more *accurately*. To this point, scholars in writing center studies have yet to explicitly acknowledge the way the tropic elements of the “course” label might help them to structure and rhetorically frame writing tutor preparation as an activity that occurs both in space and in time. I would argue that not only is it time to explicitly analyze such largely invisible tropes in our discourse, but that writing center studies might benefit from the rhetorical power of connecting more widely-used tropes like “course” to synonyms like “odyssey,” which add useful depth and nuance to a journey through time and space. Where a “course” presents a simple pathway that a person may travel over time between points in space, an “odyssey” fills that path with allies and obstacles, lending it explanatory power when related to a learning experience. Furthermore, the idea that an odyssey is specifically a journey that wanders can reinforce the idea that not all progress is linear, and that important processes like research and writing are often recursive in nature.

## Conclusion

The tension between acknowledging the need to remain adaptable and the desire for structure and predictability noted by recent researchers like Crosby and Schick has suffused the debate among writing center scholars regarding the field's professionalization—and that tension has also led writing center scholars to describe the field simultaneously in spatial terms and in developmental, process-oriented terms. In 1990's "Maintaining Chaos in the Writing Center," Irene Lurkis Clark quotes Gary Olson, whose thoughts about writing center work suggest that writing centers are undergoing a process of growth and maturation. While Olson's ideas about "commonality" among goals objectives, methodologies, and form in writing centers are echoed by Lochman in his discussion of the writing center's efforts to professionalize, Olson's take on this development is markedly more positive.

Yet, Clark joins Lochman, Simon, and other writers skeptical about the homogenizing effects of professionalization. Drawing from Judith Summerfield, Clark describes the increasing tendency of writing centers to resemble one another as "complacency and stillness, which, by definition, denotes a lack of movement, a hardening of thought" (82). Working against Olson's ideas that writing centers have completed an "adolescence," Clark alternates between the spatial domain and the process domain while arguing on behalf of the value of "chaos," what she defines as "a willingness to entertain multiple perspectives on critical issues, an ability to tolerate contradictions and contraries, in short, not to become so dogmatic, so set in our ways, so fossilized, so sure that we know how to do it "right" that we stop growing and developing" (82). It is telling how easily and completely such arguments

anthropomorphize writing center studies, narrating the field's birth, growth, adolescence, maturation, and adulthood. The continued presence of such figures in writing center discourse speaks to how deeply ingrained the discipline-as-human metaphor has become, not just to our discourse as a field, but to our language as a whole.

It is also telling how common spatial tropes are to discussion in English Studies as a whole, and writing center studies in particular. Location lends structure, sense, and power to the language of our discourse, whether we are choosing a topic (from the Greek *topos*, for “place”), deciding in which forum to discuss that topic (from the Latin *foris* for “outside” or “public space”), taking a position on that topic (from the Latin *ponere*, “to lay down, put, place”) or making an appeal (from the Latin *appellere*, “to drive to” [i.e., towards]) in support of that position.

What I have tried to do in this chapter is demonstrate the ways in which hidden tropes in the discourse of writing center studies can rearticulate the relationship between place and time in writing tutor preparation. I don't mean to suggest that writing centers necessarily adopt terms like “journey” or “odyssey” to replace “training” and “orientation.” I do, however, mean to point out that tutor preparation, whatever we call it, involves action—an accomplishment observable through time. Because of that, the tropes we use to represent that work should be *complex* enough to *accurately* represent both the spatial and temporal dimensions of preparing to enter it.

CHAPTER VI  
OFF-CENTER: TAKING WRITING CENTER TROPES  
IN NEW DIRECTIONS

**Introduction: The “Center” as Controlling Trope**

I wrote in Chapter 2 that the “center” metaphor has become a new kind of synecdoche, one that reduces the field of writing center studies to the question: Do writing centers even matter? Far from a stale or settled issue, this concern remains a staple of writing center scholarship. From Harry Denny’s 2013 concerns that writing center administrators “may become agents in our own intellectual/disciplinary marginalization if we are not disseminating scholarly knowledge through publication and are instead mired only in everyday intellectual labor of the type described by our participants” (120, qtd. in Wynn Perdue and Driscoll 191, emphasis mine), to Matthew Schultz’s proud assertion in the same year that his writing center’s “mission is central— not supplementary—to the task of discovering, creating, and sharing knowledge” (2, emphasis mine), to Sherry Wynn Perdue and Dana Lynn Driscoll’s 2017 declaration that “The field of writing center studies continues its movement from the margins to the center of academic inquiry” (186, emphasis mine), writing center scholars continue to deploy the “center” trope ironically. In the eyes of these and other scholars, writing center studies is the star of a coming-of-age story that reboots itself every few years.

But this narrative, and the “center” metaphor’s place in it, actually obscures what’s really happening in the field. For example, in his 2013 article “Recalibrating an Established Writing Center: from Supplementary Service to Academic Discipline,” we

can see how the center metaphor tacitly structures Vassar College Writing Center Director Matthew Schultz's thinking about the purpose of writing center work. "Over the course of the past year," Schultz writes, "the Vassar College Writing Center staff has set out to redefine and represent the Center as an academic department that houses a reflective and innovative discipline whose mission is central—not supplementary—to the task of discovering, creating, and sharing knowledge" (2, emphasis mine). As many writers before him have done, Schultz adopts the "center" metaphor in order to assert the importance of his writing center, specifically contrasting its "central" mission with the "supplementary" mission he fears others might assign to it.

Paradoxically, in reflecting upon the successes of the Vassar Writing Center, Schultz paints a picture of a writing center working to decentralize itself: "[I]n the past, when a faculty member has approached the Writing Center about offering a workshop," writes Schultz, "my staff would research, design, promote, and lead the workshop. We've moved away from this service model by asking faculty to take ownership of their development ideas: now, when a professor has an idea for a workshop, we help them realize their vision without taking it on ourselves" (3, my emphasis). Schultz's use of the center metaphor to establish his center's ethos stands in direct contrast to the ways in which he and his staff have begun to reconceptualize writing center work. In fact, though Schultz sees himself as moving away from a "service" model, his language here suggests that he is in fact moving away from a "center" model.

In the history of writing center work, deployment of the "center" trope has played a vital purpose, helping stakeholders assert the importance of such work in the face of outside political pressures that conceptualize that work as secondary and service-

oriented. The work of asserting writing centers' importance is not done, and may well never be. But the persistence of conceptual frames like the "center" trope can work to obscure and even undercut the clear articulation of other important goals. Leahy's warnings leave to implication something that should be addressed more explicitly: that writing centers are not the only element of the academy with an interest in or opinions about writing or how writers learn. While Brannon and North's contention that writing centers are "marginal" rather than "central" is now nearly two decades old, even in its present time, writing centers were a ubiquitous part of college campuses. Their assertion that, as writing center administrators, they must come "hat in hand" to beg for budget money seems to me a succinct summary of the plight of the humanities, or even of postsecondary education in general. In Schultz's case, his adoption of the "center" metaphor leads him to construct his understanding of his own accomplishments as moving away from a peripheral, or "service" role, when in fact he and his colleagues have laudably stepped away from a "central" role, choosing instead to support and enhance the agency of faculty with whom they continue to work.

To put it another way, in their quest to defend and articulate their own status, members of the field of writing center studies have selected a trope that highlights that status at the expense of the collaborative *ethos* that has animated much of its scholarship and practice. And while continuing to maintain status within the university is an important goal, seeking status loses its importance if it comes at the expense of collaboration.

The tropes that describe who we are, what we do, where we work, and how we prepare to enter that work, have often emerged as a reaction to social and political forces.

As scholars like Peter Carino and Beth Boquet have demonstrated, such forces can counteract each other; for example, through the adoption of the “lab” metaphor as an expression of the objective and scientific character of post-World War II education, and the metaphor’s subsequent transformation by academia into a space ancillary to the classroom.

The “center” trope is not immune to such forces. Though Carino, Pemberton, and others acknowledge the metaphor’s dual sense as a gathering place for like-minded individuals and a locus of power and prestige, it is the second sense of “center” that has taken hold. Even now, as writing centers increasingly find themselves parts of larger “academic support centers” or library-located “learning commons,” scholars in the field scramble to “take back” the “center’s” mantle as the single, independent place to go to learn about writing.

Some writing center scholars have tried to shift the conversation away from the “center” metaphor, examining how other tropes shape the field’s goals and priorities. For example, in 1990, John Trimbur called attention to the way the term “writing” remained entrenched in names for writing center work, even when the “center” was in fact called a “lab,” “clinic,” or “studio.” Trimbur argued that as new technologies gave rise to multiliteracies that stretch beyond the printed page, writing centers would adapt to include those new forms of literacy in their conception of composing. The editors of the *Writing Center Journal* deemed Trimbur’s article so important that they reprinted it in 2000 as part of their 20-year anniversary retrospective on scholarship in the *Journal*. And Trimbur’s work joined earlier scholarship that called into question the ubiquity of the term “writing” in the names of such spaces. In a 1988 *Writing Lab*



*Newsletter* article, Jim Upton expressed his frustration and disappointment “that we can not and do not have more content area instructors utilizing the services by referring students to us for assistance, by involving us in writing activities in their classrooms, and in exploring writing-for-learning activities” (4). By consistently including “writing” in the names they choose for themselves, Upton argued, writing centers “have unintentionally, at least in the eyes of many non-language arts instructors and of many students, tacitly excluded them from seeking the services that learning/writing centers should offer” (8).

Aspirationally, the field has caught up, making centers for “communication” and “literacy” nearly as ubiquitous as “writing centers.” Yet, such centers rarely, if ever, employ full-time staff or administrators with degrees in communications, or with a specialization in literacy derived from study in education, where many literacy specialists do their academic work. It is true that many centers, including my own, employ students from a variety of disciplines; in that sense, a writing center might indeed in part fulfill the vision of “center” as a home for a community of scholars from varied disciplines seeking to study a shared subject. Given, however, that such students are themselves marginalized by their contingent status, it seems like too easy a solution to assert that the diversity of majors in a writing center makes it a true home of interdisciplinary work on writing. The hiring practices currently prevalent in writing centers--in which tutors may represent a diverse array of fields, disciplines, and viewpoints about literacy, communication, composing, and, yes, writing, but full-time staff and administrators hail overwhelmingly from departments of English and Writing Studies--are just one way in which writing centers remain focused on centralizing power, and less on accurately

representing how writing works—and how the field we currently know as writing center studies can and does contribute to that work.

### **Satellites and Branches: Venturing Beyond the Center**

In 1945, Vannevar Bush, the Director of the Office of Scientific Research and Development for the United States during World War II, framed the greatest challenge to peacetime scientists, not as one of discovery, but one of access: “A record if it is to be useful to science,” Bush mused, “must be continuously extended, it must be stored, and above all it must be consulted” (“As We May Think”). At the time Bush was writing, however, solving the problem of access was no easy task: “The prime action of use is selection, and here we are halting indeed. There may be millions of fine thoughts...but if the scholar can get at only one a week by diligent search, his syntheses are not likely to keep up with the current scene (“As We May Think”). In an age that saw the exponential growth of information, Bush and his colleagues confronted the challenge of how to consult a record that was forever expanding in scope and complexity. The problem, Bush theorized, was with the way information was organized.

To solve this problem, Bush describes a fantastic new invention, the “Memex.” By today’s standards, the Memex is no technical feat, employing a desk with screens and levers, and depending on the use of microfilm for its storage capacity. But the Memex organizes information by association, mimicking the way the human mind arranges knowledge. In this, Bush prefigured the network, the animating principle of new media, and the core of today’s desktop, laptop, and smartphone computers.

Describing English Studies as a field, Jeff Rice sees a discipline that has outgrown its central metaphor:

English studies maintains a fixed point of view through a singular notion of writing as static, fixed, and individually composed (typically via the essay or the exam), taking place in a unified realm of thought deemed “English.” The definitions of “writing” produced in this economy of thought (response essay, analytical paper, personal essay) no longer serve the media society of networks and connections contemporary culture generates as these definitions of writing are now performed. The time has come to rethink the metaphor of writing because its image is too structured around fixity. ‘The age of writing has passed,’ McLuhan writes, ‘we must invent a new metaphor, restructure our thoughts and feelings’ (17)” (Rice 129).

To replace the static metaphor of “writing,” Rice proposes the metaphor of the network, which he describes as “spaces--literal or figurative--of connectivity” (128). These spaces, Rice asserts, “allow information, people, places, and other items to establish a variety of relationships that previous spaces or ideologies of space (print being the dominant model) did not allow” (Rice 128). Connectivity is the central concept of the network; according to Rice, Jean-Francois Lyotard argues that “whereas ‘established knowledge’ situated learning in predictable and fixed ways, networks of ever-different data mean that knowledge will always be in flux” (Rice 131 [cf. Lyotard 53]). In other words, the relationships between data will always change, resulting in a conception of “knowledge” that is also ever-changing.

Already, colleges have begun to reconfigure themselves as networks. Large four-year schools like Boston University and Northeastern University have long maintained “branch” or “satellite” campuses to reach underserved populations in the metropolitan area surrounding the main campus, while public land-grant colleges that had originally been opened in more rural locations often establish “branch” campuses positioned more closely to urban and suburban areas to aid in recruiting students. Community colleges, tasked with bringing educational opportunity to ever-larger regions, have also transformed from education centers to networks, becoming “systems” of campuses, rather than sole entities.

Today’s writing center has also become a network of locations and services, rather than a single site. Sometimes, this means that several units on campus are each operating their own “center.” Other times, it means that the writing center operates at several locations on a single campus, or that each “branch” or “satellite” campus of a college has its own “writing center.” Rebecca Taylor Fremo, who directs the writing center at Gustavus Adolphus College in Saint Peter, MN, provides an admirable example of the way that seeing a writing center as a network forces her to re-think the assumptions about location and space inherent to writing center scholarship. Drawing from Nedra Reynolds’ articulation of “ethos as location,” Fremo determined that her writing center “needed to literally shift our ethos by changing our habits, customs, and character (3).” Yet, Fremo realized, doing so “would mean revising one of our field’s assumptions: that writing centers should encourage diverse students—nearly always imagined in our literature as linguistically and culturally different from tutors, and often ELL—to come to us (implication: white, native English speaking tutors) for help” (3).

Much the same way Vannevar Bush framed the limitations of data, Fremo saw the problem of writing center work as one of access. And like Bush, Fremo's remedies rely on the network metaphor to reconceptualize her work. Among the changes Fremo made as a result of her discovery was to hold office hours in her university's Diversity Center, which eventually led to creation of a "satellite" of the writing center at the Diversity Center. She also stepped up efforts to recruit writing tutors that more accurately reflected the diversity of her campus, and worked with other stakeholders--such as the Director of the Diversity Center--to develop tutor training that encouraged writing tutors to interrogate their identities and examine their privilege.

The kind of work Fremo engaged in is now as commonplace as "writing studios" and "centers for communication" are on college campuses: writing centers often employ "satellite" or "branch" locations, and just as many exist as part of centers of "academic support" or "student success" as are located in departments of English or at standalone locations. More than one volume has recounted the value of "learning commons" partnerships between writing centers and libraries (cf. Elmborg and Hook).

Seeing writing center studies as a network has many advantages: its focus on the contingent and changing relationship between bodies of information, for example, dovetails well with writing center studies' focus on the social construction of knowledge. And the connective connotations of the word "network" also align well with the collaborative *ethos* favored by those who work and study in writing centers. But then, the "learning commons" trope also suggests collaboration and social constructivist thought in its employment of the term "commons." Likewise, seeing writing center studies as a tree, with various branches that connect to a central trunk but grow out ever

farther into the world, and roots in history that keep the field nourished and grounded, has its own enticing set of advantages.

### **(Re)Mediating our Tropes**

To say that a single trope must represent all of writing center studies seems a daunting task—one made ever more difficult by the collection of intriguing and useful tropes available. Thus, in this dissertation, I have argued not in favor of a single, overarching trope to replace the “center,” but a set of operations for discovering useful tropes, along with a set of principles or qualities those operations should reveal, that is more careful, measured, and ultimately, more rhetorically effective. In the following section, I will revisit those qualities or principles, and show how Rice’s “network” metaphor fulfills the four qualities or principles of *accuracy*, *aspiration*, *complexity*, and *coherence*.

#### Principle 1: Accuracy

As I pointed out in Chapter 1, a trope that is accurate accounts for the way something actually functions according to observation. I have further argued that, given that writing center work can be misunderstood (cf. Runciman, “Tutor”; Pemberton, “Madhouse”; Harris, “Sticky”), the accurate articulation of writing center work remains important. As I have previously asserted, the “center” trope does not accurately describe writing center work as it currently exists. When, for example, scholars in writing center studies assert the “center” metaphor in arguing that writing centers should be considered important (cf. Carino, Schultz, Brannon and North), they gloss over the fact that writing

centers demonstrate their importance by virtue of their very ubiquity. Few if any college campuses exist without a space dedicated, in full or in part, to working one-on-one with writers. This is not to say that writing centers do not struggle to attain and maintain an appropriate level of status within the academy; many do. But the “center” trope is employed and articulated so often in connection to status that evoking it can minimize or even render invisible other important elements of writing center work—such as a focus on collaboration and cooperation.

Individual writing centers—such as the University of Kentucky’s Noel Studio and the Write Site at Athabasca University in Canada—have chosen names that diverge from the “center” trope, taking advantage of the way some names privilege study and the pursuit of creative ends or present a more neutral face to their audience. Writing Center Studies can and should examine its own name to determine whether “centrality” really is the controlling idea in its work—and if not, what names might more accurately capture those ideas.

The discipline of writing center studies is very accurately framed as a network, since, as Laszlo Barabasi asserts, “[n]etworks are present everywhere...[a]ll we need is an eye for them” (7, qtd. in Rice 128). To *articulate* just one way in which the network trope “maps” productively to writing center work, many of the elements of writing center studies that make it a discipline function, just as a network does, to enhance, redistribute, and share power. These include its regional and national professional organizations, which allow individual writing centers to share knowledge across institutional boundaries, and its publications, which serve as both outlets for research and gathering sites of community.

When properly articulated, the “nodes” that make up a network also “map” well onto writing center work. Because networks are composed of nodes that must act independently of one another at times, the network trope preserves the independent character of individual writing centers. But nodes in a network are linked to expand the power and reach of the network; this quality not only accurately describes the collaborative nature of writing center work, but also preserves the sense of writing center studies as a powerful discipline--one that in its present state, enjoys status and a seat at the table.

#### Principle 2: Aspiration

At times in this work, I have criticized particular tropes for being *aspirational*—meaning they describe more about what writing center studies wishes it were than how it actually functions. While I see primarily aspirational tropes as limiting, there is an important place for aspiration in the way scholars and practitioners of writing center work think about and articulate that work. Thus, tropes used to name the elements of writing center work can and should be aspirational, in the sense that they should anticipate the ways the people, places, activity, and training of writing center work can grow and transform.

As Peter Carino has noted, the “center” metaphor has served an aspirational function for the field, envisioning writing centers as “bold and audacious... aspiring to powerful definitions as in ‘the center of a circle, of revolution, of centripetal attraction; and connected uses’” (OED 1035, qtd. in Carino 38). But the “center” trope also suggests both a fixed point and the apex of a hierarchy, and in those senses, it struggles to



function as encouragement for growth or transformation. Current writing center directors know this: In opening locations closer to the students who need her center's services, and in seeking out expertise that lies beyond the boundaries of her own, Rebecca Taylor Fremo acts in contravention to the trope that names her field, demonstrating the way the "center" trope's assumptions about space and hierarchy limit its value.

The network trope, on the other hand, can not only describe the aspirations of writing center studies, but can do so accurately. I have criticized scholars of writing center studies who consistently characterize the discipline as growing. Chiefly, I think, this is a problem of the trope most often selected to articulate that growth. Most often, the discipline of writing center studies is framed as a person moving from childhood through adolescence to adulthood. As I argued in Chapter 5, the "development" trope is valuable when considering how people are prepared to enter into writing center work, chiefly because it attends to the temporal aspects of that growth.

But the kind of growth that writing center studies is experiencing does not fit the trope of a human lifespan. The field is growing—founding more writing centers, more publications, more organizations and conferences, and expanding into geographical regions and intellectual domains it had heretofore not been a part of. The network is both an accurate trope to describe this growth, and one that allows the field ample room to articulate future aspirations. The network trope even has the advantage of articulating the way in which the collaborative nature of writing center work allows the discipline to extend and increase its influence, since the locus of that power is no longer a rooted "center," but is instead many nodes working in concert to create a greater whole.

### Principle 3: Complexity

A *complex* trope contains enough facets, dimensions, or qualities to account for all of the facets, dimensions, or qualities of the item or concept that it represents. Thus, tropes sufficiently complex enough to represent elements of writing center work will contain many facets, dimensions, or qualities. To ensure that a trope is sufficiently complex, it should be carefully articulated to determine how elements of the trope match up with elements of the represented concept. Tropes should also be extended as fully as possible to ensure that the full range of their complexity has been discovered and used.

The “network” trope is sufficiently complex to represent the complexity of writing center work. For one, the concept of a “network” can be represented using a variety of concomitant terms, including “net,” “web,” “lattice” or “sieve.” In addition, networks are made up of a wide variety of elements, including “nodes,” “servers,” “operating systems,” “administrators,” “hubs,” “routers,” “switches” and “interfaces,” among others. It seems simultaneously easy and obvious to represent writing center work as occurring within a *web* of interconnected *nodes*, led by *administrators*, who design appropriate *operating systems* for their staff. This articulation can be extended to the international level, as we speak of publication venues, conferences, and associations both as *hubs* that connect writing center scholars to one another, and as *servers* that collect, categorize, and distribute information on demand among professionals in the field.

### Principle 4: Coherence

A coherent trope is systematically consistent with the tropes used to name related elements and concepts. Writing center work often employs tropes that do not cohere with

those for related concepts. The “center” trope, with its commonly-articulated focus on status and power, for example, does not cohere with the more collaborative and egalitarian tropes used to name those who work in writing centers, like “consultant” and “peer tutor.” In fact, some definitions of “consultant” and “tutor” clearly suggest authority, meaning their use to name inhabitants of a “center” would work coherently to convey authority and expertise, and against the collaborative, negotiating *ethos* described so often in writing center scholarship.

By contrast, as I articulated in Chapter 2, the “commons” label carries with it connotations that strongly favor collaboration and power-sharing. Pairing the “commons” label with similarly hierarchy-flattening person labels like “peer” or “facilitator” would create a coherence among the labels used, leading the labels involved to present a more consistent, rhetorically effective message of power sharing.

Like networks, writing centers function—both within and across campuses—as independent nodes woven together through common purposes and goals. But as a group, the scholars and practitioners of writing center studies also function like networks, working as independent nodes at times, and connecting with one another to accomplish more complex tasks the next. Considering writing center activities like “teaching,” “tutoring,” and “research” as nodes in a network can also help those who do the work of writing centers conceptualize and articulate the complexity and collaborative character of that work. Even identity can productively be thought of as a network of subject positions intertwined with other such positions through imagination and experience.

One especially important character of the network trope is the way that it both describes and defies unity. Networks can be thought of, in other words, both as single

entities and as multitudes. Many of the circumstances and ideas inherent to writing center work function similarly: Writing centers can describe a single department that operates in a multitude of locations, or as several locations operated by a multitude of different departments, but working toward a unified goal. The people who participate in writing center work each have a unified identity, but that identity is composed of a multitude of subject positions. And writing center work itself is a single thing, but encompasses a wide variety of related activities: teaching, tutoring, research, scholarship, leadership, marketing, and others.

In arguing that the “network” trope replace “English” to describe the discipline of English Studies, Jeff Rice asserts that “English studies maintains a fixed point of view through a singular notion of writing as static, fixed, and individually composed (typically via the essay or the exam), taking place in a unified realm of thought deemed ‘English’ (129). The “center” trope performs a similar function in writing center studies, rooting the discipline in a conception of writing and tutoring that is similarly static, fixed, and concerned with a unitary conception of the individual that is itself outdated.

While Rice is cognizant of criticisms that networks can also function as instruments of hegemony and control, such concerns seem to me to be the result of how networks are deployed, and not necessarily inherent to the trope itself. Rice sees this too: Theorizing that socialization is the dominant effect of a network, he argues that socialization “is inherently neither a good nor a bad act; it is, instead, a process of working with information” (131). In fact, perhaps the most frightening thing about adopting the network trope to articulate writing center studies is that truly enacting writing center studies as a network will force scholars and practitioners in the field to

discard the notion that power comes from a single, unitary force exerting influence. That, I think, is a worthy, if daunting, aspiration for the discipline to undertake.

### **Coda: Cautious Optimism**

Finding tropes for the field of writing center studies that are accurate, that convey reasonable but challenging aspirations for growth, and that cohere with one another will be a challenge. But it is a worthwhile one--one that can help writing center scholars and practitioners represent their field consciously, ethically, and with purpose.

Regarding educational choice, Lori Salem writes that

In the end, educational decisions are a “both-and” phenomenon. They are shaped both by our own personal preferences and by broader social factors, and it is important to hold both dimensions in mind. But doing that—holding both dimensions in mind—really requires that we work insistently to see the broader social dimensions of decision making. The personal dimensions of educational decisions are only too present in our minds, and only too easy to recognize. The social dimensions, by contrast, have to be excavated. They become visible only if we look for them. If an educational pathway is like a tree, then the social forces that shape the pathway are like roots. If you see a beautiful and flourishing tree - or a small and spindly one - you have to remind yourself that what is above the surface is just part of the picture (Salem 149).

It is important, I think, that Salem, a scholar in writing center studies herself, focuses on the need to “see the broader social dimensions” of decision making. Essentially, Salem is admitting that understanding why people do what they do is difficult. It requires effort;

we can't just "look" at what she describes, but have to "excavate" it in order to perceive it at all. It also involves understanding our limitations, and learning to perceive what lies outside of our immediate perception, the same way that someone who sees a tree must understand that an important and complex part of that tree, the roots, are not necessarily readily apparent. I would extend Salem's argument to the tropes we use and how they might both reflect and influence the thinking of others. Truly intentional use of tropes requires that we look beneath the surface, beyond the simple, rhetorical case that we want our tropes to make, and consider the messages they might be sending that we might not have intended.

Salem goes on to suggest that perhaps even careful consideration of messages, however, may not change how others think and act:

We have been enacting our vision of non-remedial writing centers for decades now, and flooding our campuses with "correct" messages about writing center work. At this point, there are very few writing centers left in the country that advertise their services in explicitly remedial terms. So, why do we still regularly encounter faculty, students, and administrators who have "incorrect" views about the writing center? Why hasn't the idea of a remedial writing center withered away already? The sociological research would argue that this is because we can shape what the writing center *does* much more easily than we can shape what visiting the writing center *means*. That meaning is not ours alone to define, and our ability to shape what other people believe is fundamentally limited. Trying to define the meaning of the writing center by flooding our environment with

"correct" messages is like trying to change the roots of a tree by pruning the small branches" (Salem 153, emphasis in original).

The crux of the above quote is Salem's assertion that "we can shape what the writing center *does* much more easily than we can shape what visiting the writing center *means*." Such a statement could be taken to mean that whatever tropes are chosen to name the field, they will have little effect on how people perceive the field. I would argue that Salem's use of metaphor (in this case, representing the motivations of others as a tree with roots and branches) demonstrates otherwise. Salem's metaphor suggests much without saying so explicitly: if people's motivations are like a tree, then not only are some motivations visible while others are not, but the motivations themselves are living, changing entities that can grow, expand, and transform, or wither and die. If motivations and trees are alike, then like trees, motivations become stronger because of both the parts we cannot see (the roots) and because of other parts that are visible (the leaves). While Salem's own use of the tree metaphor focuses only on two elements, the metaphor itself contains many parts that, if articulated well, could both support a beautiful and complex theory of motivation, and make that theory's beauty and complexity easier for others to understand.

It is that vision that I hope will animate future examination and selection of tropes to name and describe writing center work. In that sense, I am not necessarily arguing that the "center" trope or others I have identified as problematic necessarily be abandoned; only that such tropes be employed along with careful examination of how the trope functions in our current discourse, and consideration of how the trope is articulated to others. For those tropes that I have argued are problematic, like "center," "consultant"

and “training,” the primary reason they fail is because they are employed most often in a simple way, with insufficient regard for both the complexity buried within any trope, and the complexity of the ways in which people—consciously and unconsciously—analyze and interpret the tropes they encounter in living and working. As users, students, and scholars of language, we can—we must—do better.



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