

Are Writing Centers Ethical?

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The ethics of writing center assistance have always been subject to question. Even at the present time, when more writing centers exist than ever before, colleagues from a variety of academic departments continue to express concern that the sort of assistance students receive may be inappropriate, perhaps even verging on plagiarism. "The problem is my dean," someone in the process of establishing a new writing center recently confided. "He worries that tutoring students in a writing center will result in plagiarized papers, so he thinks that we should stick to grammar instruction."

The writing center's response to such suspicions has been to embrace a pedagogy of noninterventionism that precludes both the appropriation of student texts and any challenge to teachers' authority occasioned by questioning their judgment of a writer's work. Writing center personnel are cautioned against writing on clients' texts or suggesting specific wording or performing primarily as proofreaders, and with instructors, the writing center has generally accepted Stephen North's dictum: "[W]e never play student-advocates in teacher-student relationships. . . . [W]e never evaluate or second-guess any teacher's syllabus, assignments, comments, or grades" ("Idea," 441). Precepts of noninterventionism have thus become what Shmoon and Burns refer to as a writing center "bible," an orthodoxy that has attained the force of an ethical or moral code.

However, although these precepts arose out of ethical concerns, a noninterventionist policy as an absolute must ultimately be judged ethically suspect, increasing the center's marginality, diminishing its influence, and compromising its ability to serve writers. Writing centers thus need a new ethic that acknowledges the theoretical, pedagogical, and political facts of life.

Origins of Established Writing Center Policies

Current writing center policies—whether referred to as a "bible" (Shmoon and Burns), "mantras" (Blau), or "dogma" (Clark)—began to be articulated in a public forum in the seventies and early eighties, when open admissions policies precipitated the growth of writing centers as separate university entities and when the *Writing Lab Newsletter* in 1977 and *The Writing Center Journal* in 1980 provided a medium for publication. Before that time, as Peter Carino notes, many writing centers consisted of "labs," located within writing classrooms, that utilized an individualized instructional approach designed to help students master a specific content; frequently that content focused on grammar and surface correctness. Carino's purpose is to redeem the

bleak picture of early writing centers as “current-traditional dungeons where students were banished to do grammar drills” (113), and he therefore stresses that not all early centers were the same. In many of them, heuristic and global concerns of writing were recognized as important pedagogical goals. Nevertheless, he also acknowledges that “drills were part of the methods of early centers” (113), certainly more so than they are today, and that whatever instruction actually took place, most writing centers were conceived of within the university as centers of remediation where less proficient students labored to master surface correctness. The writing clinic at Stephens College, for example, was set up for “[t]he student who finds it very difficult to spell correctly or who makes gross errors in English usage. Here causes are determined, exercises under supervision are given, and practical applications to everyday writing are made” (Wiksell 145).

This emphasis on remedial education and on the mastery of a specific grammar-based content was a “safe” function for writing centers to assume because it was deemed by the academy an unfortunate but necessary supplement to the more important scholarly instruction that occurred in the classroom. When other departments on campus conceived of a writing lab as a center for remediation, they could easily understand and accept what presumably occurred there—skill and drill did not generate either suspicion or controversy. However, as writing centers developed into autonomous entities, and as interest in composition as a discipline led to a rejection of the current-traditional paradigm in favor of a process/collaborative, student-centered approach, skill and drill in the writing center was supplemented. In many instances, it was replaced by a greater emphasis on helping students figure out what they wanted to say in response to a writing assignment, or on providing assistance with the shape and content of an actual text. Many writing centers took to heart James Moffet’s conviction that teachers must shift their gaze “from the subject to the learner, for the subject is the learner” (67). As a result, instruction in the writing center became what Steve North calls

a pedagogy of direct intervention. Whereas in the “old” center instruction tends to take place after or apart from writing, and tends to focus on the correction of textual problems, in the “new” center the teaching takes place as much as possible during writing, during the activity being learned, and tends to focus on the activity itself. (North, “Idea” 439)

This shift in approach, however, was not greeted with unqualified enthusiasm by faculty members in other departments on campus, who were concerned about the “ethics” of this type of writing center instruction and alarmed that it represented a form of plagiarism.

Plagiarism, Intellectual Property Rights, and the Rise of Writing Center Orthodoxy

Writing centers’ concern with defending themselves against charges of inadvertent or even deliberate plagiarism reflects western culture’s emphasis on

intellectual property rights, an emphasis manifested in the number of lawsuits concerned with issues of copyright and authorship. Although postmodern theorists have problematized the conception of authors and authorship, the teaching of literature and composition, as Woodmansee and Jaszi point out, "continues to enforce the Romantic paradigm" (9) of the solitary author whose work is absolutely original. In a presentation concerned with writing centers and ethics given at the Conference of College Composition and Communication several years ago, Karen Hodges discussed the wide diversity in attitudes toward collaborative effort among various disciplines. She concluded that English Departments, in particular, were concerned about the shaping of the text and were thus least likely to favor collaborative writing or writing assistance. Hodges's perspective is supported by Bruffee, Trimbur, and Lunsford and Ede, who trace the concept of the solitary author to the eighteenth-century concept of individualism and a nineteenth-century romantic notion of the solitary creative genius that eventually manifested itself in a twentieth-century emphasis "on writing as an individually creative act, and on 'objective' testing as a means of evaluating the intellectual property of solitary writers" (Lunsford and Ede 418).

Departments of literature are particularly concerned with the issue of plagiarism in terms of style and text structure, in contrast to departments of science and social science, who tend to focus primarily on the originality of an idea. One particularly amusing but unfortunately apt portrait of English departments' attitude toward plagiarism is depicted in Bernard Malamud's novel *A New Life*, whose hero, an English teacher named Levin, has to deal with a suspected plagiarist, Albert O. Birdless, a "D" student who has turned in an "A" paper. Warned by his colleagues that his duty is to locate the original source in order to trap the culprit, Levin spends many evenings in the library, reading "with murderous intent, to ensnare and expunge Albert O. Birdless" (164). But he never finds the source and is compared unfavorably with another instructor, Avis Fliss, who has earned a reputation for her unflinching ability to detect suspected student plagiarists:

[Avis] has a knack of going straight to the *Reader's Guide*, looking over the titles of articles on the cribbed subject for a couple of years past or so, and just about right away putting her finger on the one she needs. Her last incident she had this student nailed dead to rights an hour and a half after she read his theme. We had him suspended by his dean and off the campus before five o'clock of the same day. (161)

Although this portrait is humorous, a concern with avoiding plagiarism, coupled with the second-class and frequently precarious status of writing centers within the university hierarchy, generated a set of defensive strategies aimed at warding off the suspicions of those in traditional humanities departments, who feared that students were receiving assistance that strained the boundaries of ethics.¹ As a result, precepts associated with noninterventionist tutoring became not only the preferred, but often, in fact, the only writing center approach.

Reflecting what may be viewed as a pedagogy of self-defense, articles appearing in early issues of the *Writing Lab Newsletter* delineated strategies aimed

at ensuring that tutors did not provide excessive help, thereby averting suspicion of plagiarism. For example, in 1981, Larry Rochelle warned: "We must keep in mind that some 'enemies' of the Center are overwrought English professors, our own colleagues, who really do not like students or teaching, who are very demanding in their classrooms for all the wrong reasons, and who really think that Writing Centers are helping students too much" (7). A 1984 article by Patrick Sullivan contains the similarly suspicious observation that the close relationships which develop between tutors and students sometimes generate their own "special set of problems. The instructor may not be aware that a student has received help with a writing assignment. In this case, instructors may feel that matters related to the policy on plagiarism obtain" (2). The following year, in a subsequent article for the *Newsletter*, Sullivan discussed the results of a survey asking faculty whether or not they "object to tutors assisting your students," admittedly a loaded question. Although many were pleased, even enthusiastic, about this sort of assistance, a significant number regarded it with great mistrust. "I don't approve of them editing final drafts," one respondent observed. Another indicated his strong disapproval, particularly for non-native speakers:

My Vietnamese student who came in to see you received much too much help with his composition—even suggestions for ideas to be incorporated into the paper. In cases where a student has serious grammatical and organizational problems, I would even prefer he or she not take a draft of the paper to the center at all, but rather get help through the use of verb exercises. (6)

To forestall suspicion, then, the concept of tutor restraint became a moral imperative, dictating a set of absolute guidelines for writing center instruction. For Suzanne Edwards that means training her staff "not to write any portion of the paper—not even one phrase" nor to "edit the paper for mechanical errors. This includes finding or labeling the spelling, punctuation, or grammar mistakes in a paper or dictating corrections" (8). Evelyn Ashton-Jones argues that tutors must engage in a version of "Socratic dialogue" and not "lapse into a 'directive' mode of tutoring." Quoting Thom Hawkins, she labels the directive tutor as "shaman, guru, or mentor," and Socratic tutors as "architects and partners" (31), labels that leave no doubt as to which group is on the side of the angels. More recently, Jeff Brooks, in arguing for "minimalist tutoring," warns: "When you 'improve' a student's paper, you haven't been a tutor at all; you've been an editor. You may have been an exceedingly good editor, but you've been of little service to your student. . . . The student, not the tutor, should 'own' the paper and take full responsibility for it" (2). Finally, Thomas Thompson describes how tutors at The Citadel's Writing Center easily work within the constraints of a military honor code:

[T]utors try to avoid taking pen in hand when discussing a student paper. They may discuss content, and they may use the Socratic method to lead students to discover their own conclusions, but tutors are instructed not to tell students what a passage means or give students a particular word to complete a particular thought. (13)

An encapsulation of what eventually developed into the writing center credo is an oft-quoted statement from Stephen North: "[I]n a writing center the object is to make sure that writers, and not necessarily their texts, are what get changed by instruction" (438). In that article, North was reacting against the "fix-it shop" concept of writing centers prevalent at that time, and his intention was to enlighten a non-writing center readership about what writing centers really do—that is, help students become writers, not simply clean up their papers. However, another, perhaps less obvious intention was to assure colleagues in the English department that the help students receive in writing centers does not constitute a form of plagiarism. After all, if it is the writer and not the text that improves as a result of a writing center visit, then surely no textual property has been unfairly appropriated.

Theoretical Limitations of Writing Center Orthodoxy: The Complexity of "Owning" Texts

Despite the salutary influence of North's "The Idea of a Writing Center," both inside and outside writing centers, its philosophy of textual noninterventionism has not served writing centers well. As we have noted, such a philosophy perpetuates a limited and limiting understanding of authorship in the academy. By privileging individual responsibility and accountability and by valorizing the individual writer's authentic "voice," the writing center has left unchallenged notions of intellectual property that are suspect at best. Furthermore, as Lisa Ede, Andrea Lunsford, Marilyn Cooper, and others have argued, the idea that writing is fundamentally a solitary activity and that individual writers can and should "own" their texts relegates the writing center to a limited bystander's role, even as it limits writers' understanding of their options and of their relationship to others.

Ede notes that some collaborative learning theorists, such as Bruffee, seem to view collaboration as a compensatory strategy for inexperienced writers. The implication is that accomplished writers won't need to "interrupt" their essentially solitary writing process with dialogue. If writing centers adopt such a view, says Ede, they implicitly limit their clientele and their mission: "[A]s long as thinking and writing are regarded as inherently individual, solitary activities, writing centers can never be viewed as anything more than pedagogical fix-it shops to help those who, for whatever reason, are unable to think and write on their own" (7).

Lunsford labels those writing centers that view knowledge as individual either "storehouses" or "garrets." The former locate knowledge outside the knower, "stored" in texts or other repositories, while garret centers "see knowledge as interior, as inside the student, and the writing center's job as helping students get in touch with this knowledge, as a way to find their unique voices, their individual and unique powers" (5). Storehouse and Garret centers are limited, says Lunsford, by their epistemologies—positivistic, Platonic, and

absolutist. To “enable a student body and citizenry to meet the demands of the twenty-first century . . . we need to embrace the idea of writing centers as Burkean Parlors, as centers for collaboration” (9).

Cooper, too, critiques epistemologies that are based on “a preexisting coherent and rational self,” that see writing as “a matter of subduing the text to the self by achieving personal control over it” and “achieving an authentic voice” (101). Writing centers founded on such epistemologies, says Cooper, will tend to focus on helping students “fix” papers rather than concentrating on “what students know and need to know about writing” (99). Writing centers will be more effective and their clients better served by a different view of textual ownership:

[T]utors can best help students become agents of their own writing by helping them understand how and the extent to which they are *not* owners of their texts and *not* responsible for the shape of their texts, by helping them understand, in short, how various institutional forces impinge on how and what they write and how they can negotiate a place for their own goals and needs when faced with these forces. (101)

Ironically, the same fix-it mentality that these theorists see as the legacy of a limiting epistemology prompted Stephen North’s apology for writing centers in a recent article that itself helped perpetuate that very epistemology. In fairness to North, it should be observed that in “Revisiting ‘The Idea of a Writing Center,’” the passage about not second-guessing teachers is one of four that he singles out to revisit. He acknowledges that in the writing center we see “what we at least construe as the seamier side of things,” which “in cumulative form puts a lot of pressure on the sort of tutor-teacher *détente* proposed by the [original] passage” (“Revisiting,” 13). However, North’s second article provides no suggestion that writing center personnel should directly challenge the pedagogical status quo. Instead, it argues for a new curricular state of affairs wherein the writing center would work primarily with students enrolled in a “Writing Sequence,” a “program—a four-year sequence of study—that values writing” (16). Such a program presumably minimizes conflicts between the writing center and instructors “because the classroom teachers are directly involved with, and therefore invested in the functioning of, that center” (16).

Pedagogical Limitations of Writing Center Orthodoxy

Textual noninterventionism is suspect not only on theoretical grounds, as we have been arguing; it also overlooks the possibility that for some students, an interventionist, directive, and appropriative pedagogy might be more effective—as well as ethically defensible. Deborah Burns, for example, points out that her thesis director, who supervised the writing of her master’s thesis using directive intervention, was the person most helpful to her in her graduate studies. Yet everything he did violated entrenched writing center policy. He “was directive, he substituted his own words for hers, and he stated with disciplinary appropri-

ateness the ideas with which she had been working " (Shamoon and Burns 138). As a compositionist, Burns puzzled over the effectiveness of her director's interventions. Moreover, she observed, he was equally effective with other graduate students:

[H]e took their papers and rewrote them while they watched. They left feeling better able to complete their papers, and they tackled other papers with greater ease and success. . . . His practices seem authoritative, intrusive, directive, and product-oriented. Yet these practices created major turning points for a variety of writers. (138)

Shamoon and Burns cite other similar examples from faculty workshops in which professors, acting like tutors, were equally directive:

Over and over in the informal reports of our colleagues we find that crucial information about a discipline and about writing is transmitted in ways that are intrusive, directive, and product-oriented, yet these behaviors are not perceived as an appropriation of power or voice but instead as an opening up of those aspects of practice which had remained unspoken and opaque. (139)

This type of directive tutoring is consistent with Vygotsky's concept of "the zone of proximal development," which is defined as "the distance between the actual development level as determined by the independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (86). In terms of writing center pedagogy, Vygotsky's view of learning suggests that tutors should work on "functions that have not yet matured, but are in the process of maturation, functions that will mature tomorrow, but are currently in an embryonic state" (86). Such functions might require the tutor to assume a more directive role until the student can assume the function alone. As Vygotsky points out, "what children can do with the assistance of others might be in some sense even more indicative of their mental development than what they can do alone" (85). However, inflexible precepts against directive tutoring preclude this sort of assistance and overlook variation in student need and tutorial context. In an essay concerned with tutoring strategies for learning disabled students, for example, Julie Neff points out that orthodox tutoring practices are often not very effective because such students require a great deal more specific and directive assistance. For students from nonwestern cultures as well, non-directive tutoring may be insufficient, particularly since many of them are unfamiliar with the western conceptions of academic discourse and have little understanding of the purpose or components of the essays they are expected to produce. Harris and Silva refer to the "sometimes bewilderingly different rhetorical patterns and conventions of other languages" (525) sometimes manifested in a "seemingly meandering introduction or digressions that appear irrelevant" (526). In dealing with these students, Harris and Silva point out that

[i]n terms of the tutor's role, there may have to be adjustments in their pedagogical orientation. Tutors who work with ESL students may have to be "tellers" to some extent because they will probably need to provide

cultural, rhetorical, and/or linguistic information which native speakers intuitively possess and which ESL students do not have, but need to have to complete their writing assignments effectively. (533)

In terms of fostering the best environment for assisting student writing, then, it is important to recognize the virtues of flexibility since "one tutoring approach does not fit all" (Shamoon and Burns 139).

Illegitimate Collaboration and Imitation

Of course, deciding just how much and what kind of assistance to provide is not an easy task, often requiring tutors to walk a fine line between legitimate and illegitimate collaboration. Tutoring is "a balancing act that asks tutors to juggle roles, to shift identity, to know when to act like an expert and when to act like a co-learner" (Trimbur 25), and when we say that writing centers foster the spirit of "collaborative learning," it is sometimes difficult to define exactly what we mean. True collaboration occurs between colleagues who are both members of the same discourse community. True colleagues collaborate without fear of text appropriation; in its ideal form, collaboration between colleagues involves mutual assistance and mutual learning.

Collaboration in writing centers, however, often involves a writer who is not a full-fledged member of the academic discourse community. In fact, the purpose of the tutoring is often to help the author attain that status. Moreover, although practitioners frequently use the term "peer tutor" to refer to undergraduate tutors in the writing center, many tutors are not peers in any sense of the word. Some of them may be graduate students or composition teachers who are considerably older than the students seeking their assistance, and all of them, young or old, even those who are, indeed, undergraduates, were selected to be tutors because they have demonstrated an ability to write. By definition, then, writing center tutoring takes place in a hierarchical context in which there is danger that a tutor might assume an unethically dominant role in creating and developing a text. Hence the rationale for a nondirective pedagogy.

Blind adherence to any absolute principles of tutoring, however, can be counterproductive to student learning because it precludes other instructional possibilities, in particular the role of imitation. In his discussion of the history of plagiarism, St. Onge points out that "in the vast arrays of animal behaviors, mimicry is a fine art. The mocking bird plagiarizes the calls of any one of its peers and has been known to tease human whistlers" (17). Vygotsky similarly implies a key relationship between imitation and learning. Yet, as Anne Gere has pointed out, our culture, in its privileging of original creation, is predisposed to distrust imitation as a learning tool, even though imitation was once considered a method of choice. In her discussion of the development of oratory, Gere cites Isocrates' concept of the teacher who "must in himself set such an example that the students who are molded by him and are able to imitate him will, from the outset, show in their speaking a degree of grace and charm greater than that of

others" (8). Gere also refers to Cicero and Quintilian, who recommend "paraphrase because of its challenge to achieve expression independent of the original" (8).

Muriel Harris advocates modeling, even for novice writers, pointing out that imitation can be useful for teaching composing skills and writing behaviors such as invention and editing. Harris cites a case study in which she used modeling to help a student improve his composing process, working through the process herself as the student observed, helping the student decide what topics to choose, what information to gather, and what writing behaviors to engage in. "And what better way is there," Harris asks, "to convince students that writing is a process that requires effort, thought, time, and persistence than to go through all that writing, scratching out, rewriting, and revising with and for our students?" (81).

Concern With Plagiarism

Let us suppose, however, that as a result of Harris's use of imitation and modeling, her student had appropriated a few of her "ideas" or phrases for his own paper. Should Harris's approach then be regarded as unethical? Would the results be considered "plagiarism"? Would the student need to acknowledge Harris in a full citation or else be guilty of a moral offense? Some faculty members would probably answer "yes" to all of these questions. But one might also argue that few of us can know with any certainty how or where we obtained our own ideas in the first place, a view expressed by many writers. Accused of plagiarism at a young age, Helen Keller, for example, characterizes her writing as a mixture of assimilation and imitation: "It is certain that I cannot always distinguish my own thoughts from those I read, because what I read becomes the very substance and text of my mind. Consequently, in nearly all that I write, I produce something which very much resembles the crazy patchwork I used to make when I first learned to sew" (67-68). Similarly, Virginia Woolf writes in her diary that "reading Yeats turns my sentences one way: reading Sterne turns them another" (119). A poststructuralist perspective "does away with origins. . . . Thus, writing can be nothing more than a tissue of quotations, a pastiche of passages possessing no authorial affiliation and therefore belonging to no one" (De Grazia 301).

Moreover, as Woodmansee and Jaszi point out, "studies of writing practices from the Renaissance to the present suggest that the modern regime of authorship, far from being timeless and universal, is a relatively recent formation" (2-3). In fact, "quotation marks were not used on a regular basis until the end of the eighteenth century" (De Grazia 288). Before this time, they were used for the antithetical purpose of highlighting a commonplace or statement of truth that could be appropriated by all readers, "facilitating the 'lifting' of the passages they marked. . . . In brief, rather than cordoning off a passage as property of another, quotation marks flagged the passage as property belonging to all—

'common places' to be freely appropriated (and not necessarily verbatim and with correct authorial ascription)" (289). Our conception of plagiarism as a reprehensible moral offense, then, is a relatively recent notion.

In the context of writing center pedagogy, however, that notion suggests that because nondirective tutoring has the smallest risk of becoming a form of plagiarism, it is, by definition, the most effective and hence "ethical" approach. Yet, as Barry Kroll suggests, it is not necessarily true that plagiarism is counter-productive to student learning. What would happen, Kroll asks,

if one comes to suspect that plagiarism (particularly the familiar case of copying a paragraph or so from a source) does not inevitably damage learning—at least, no more seriously than quoting the same passage would damage learning[?] In fact, from the view of consequences to oneself, there would seem to be no morally significant difference between quoting and copying without acknowledgment; neither is more or less likely to lead to creativity, to learning, or to independent thought. And what if one could show that copying a passage from a source sometimes leads to learning or improved writing? (5)

This is not to say, of course, that writing centers should write students' papers for them or relinquish their insistence that students take responsibility for their own work. However, as the Internet becomes an increasingly common means of communication and facilitates easy access to texts of various sorts, it is important that the writing center begin to question the absolutism of its noninterventionist policies in favor of a more flexible "rhetorically situated view of plagiarism, one that acknowledges that all writing is in an important sense collaborative and that 'common knowledge' varies from community to community and is collaboratively shared" (Lunsford and Ede 437).

Political Limitations of Writing Center Orthodoxy

Writing center practitioners who let ethical concerns drive a noninterventionist, nonappropriative praxis suffer not only pedagogically; they suffer politically as well. An ethics based on defensiveness is ill-suited to challenge the prevailing order. If writing centers limit themselves merely to fixing what comes in the door, they run two risks. First, as Nancy Grimm has observed, in the interest of conforming to a perhaps flawed standard of academic writing, they may end up trying to fix what isn't broken. Second, by accepting what comes in the door as given—including the assignments, pedagogies, assumptions, and epistemologies that lie behind clients' texts—writing centers abandon the ground from which they are in a position to contest the larger political reality of which all of us—teachers, students, and tutors—are a part.

For the fact is that writing centers are well positioned to question the status quo. Writing centers occupy what Harvey Kail and John Trimbur have called "semiautonomous" institutional space located "outside the normal channels of teaching and learning." By providing a place where students can

experience some distance from "official strictures," the center can help them "reengage the forms of authority in their lives by demystifying the authority of knowledge and its institutions" (11). Writing centers can be sites of what Nancy Welch calls "critical exile," from where we can encourage students to "reconsider the kinds of conversation we value in academia" and to "resist the pressure of perfection" (7). "Writing centers," argues Marilyn Cooper,

are in a good position to serve as a site of critique of the institutionalized structure of writing instruction in college, and . . . as a consequence of this, the role of the tutor should be to create useful knowledge about writing in college and to empower students as writers who also understand what writing involves and who act as agents in their writing. (98)

Too often, though, the writing center's "service ethic" silences its potentially revolutionary voice.

[B]ecause writing centers are represented in positions of uncritical service, writing center practice often focuses on fixing students who have nothing wrong with them, supporting a literacy curriculum that is often out of sync with the needs of today's students, and talking about assignments with students as though these assignments were not implicitly loaded with one culture's values. Even more troubling is that the close contact writing centers have with students provides a special kind of knowledge, a knowledge that challenges the wisdom of mainstream practices, a knowledge that forms the stories we tell each other. Yet as writing centers are currently theorized, faculty are protected from this knowledge. (Grimm 11)

Because of its location in "semiautonomous space," its status as "critical exile," and its access to "a special kind of knowledge," the writing center is uniquely positioned to challenge business as usual in the academy. Centers may resist making that challenge for a variety of reasons, including their sometimes tenuous institutional standing and the typically untenured status of writing center directors. But political timidity may also result from ethical naiveté, from a conviction that the center's proper role is narrowly responsive rather than initiatory. By being so careful not to infringe on other's turf—the writer's, the teacher's, the department's, the institution's—the writing center has been party to its own marginality and silencing.

Another political danger confronting the orthodox writing center is a kind of classism or elitism. By holding clients to a standard that writing center practitioners and educators in general do not observe, the center may relegate them to an inferior role. In refusing to write on a student's paper or supply occasional phrasing or suggest specific lines of inquiry, writing center personnel are withholding from clients precisely the kind of directive, appropriative intervention that is routinely offered to publishing academics by colleagues and editors. The authors of this article frequently show their writing to others who have suggested and sometimes actually made specific, detailed changes in their texts. Do students deserve less than what we expect for ourselves?

Of course, one must qualify that the kind of mentoring performed by a thesis advisor or among colleagues is different from what typically goes on in a writing center. Nevertheless, the difference, we would argue, is one of degree rather than kind. Writing center consultants—whether they are undergraduates, graduate students, or professional staff—have knowledge and expertise that many writing center clients lack. A failure to share that knowledge and expertise inhibits the acquisition of academic literacy by writing center clients. It is ironic indeed if that failure stems from ethical concerns about the appropriateness of directive, interventionist conferencing strategies.

It would be simplistic to demand that writing center personnel practice everything they preach and preach only what they practice. Any of us who teach or tutor writing regularly recommend strategies we ourselves do not use. Teachers or tutors may suggest that a writer try freewriting or looping or outlining even if they never employ those techniques themselves, because they realize that everyone writes differently and that others may benefit from practices they personally have not found especially helpful. Similarly, they may choose not to suggest some method they themselves utilize—out of a conviction that a given writer would not benefit from that particular approach. But it is worse than simplistic to require that writing centers withhold helpful information and refrain from helpful practices out of a misguided sense of what is ethical.

A New Ethics for the Writing Center

So what would an ethical writing center look like? Let us suggest three components:

1. The ethical writing center will be proactive. Though writing centers must, by their nature, be responsive to other people's writing, assignments, and goals, centers must not let responsiveness and a misguided sense of ethics give way to knee-jerk acquiescence and accommodation. The people who work in writing centers should be confident of their own expertise and insight and should be willing to use their unique position in the academy to challenge the status quo by critiquing institutional ideology and practice.

2. The ethical writing center will exercise a broad, encompassing vision. The center will look past individual texts and writers to consider the whole range of literate practices in the academy. Writing centers need to move beyond Stephen North's oft-quoted dictum that "[o]ur job is to produce better writers, not better writing" ("Idea" 438). The center's job encompasses not only individual writers, but also the larger discourse communities of which they are a part. The college and university classroom has few windows. Because of its one-to-one work with students, the writing center is a window into the classroom, and it ought to show some concern for that realm, just as it does for the individual writers it serves.

3. The ethical writing center will take full advantage of its hallmark: individualized writing instruction. As Roger Garrison has said, "A group, a class, has no writing problems; there are only individuals who have difficulty saying what they mean" (1). Writing centers need to maximize what they do best by consistently treating writers as individuals. Leveling its clientele through rigid policy statements—e.g., "Refuse to proofread," or "Don't even hold a pencil when you're tutoring"—denies the diversity found in any center and stifles the creativity of writing center consultants. Writing centers need to be creative in opening up the world of discourse to their clients and their clients to that world.

Dangers of the New Ethics

This new conception of writing center ethics is not without its dangers. We conclude by suggesting three ways that writing centers might go awry.

1. Although we believe that unfounded fears of appropriation and uncritical notions of textual ownership have limited the writing center's effectiveness, it's clear that writers can and do misrepresent their work and that unwary tutors could be party to such misrepresentation. Writing centers are not likely to become replicas of "Tailormade," the paper-writing business described in a recent Harper's article (Witherspoon), but they can be drawn into questionable practices. However (to risk a shop-worn bromide), their focus should not be on the products their clients produce but rather on the process they undergo in the center. The question "Is this the writer's work?" should be interpreted as "What work has this writer done to produce this result?" We have suggested that writing centers can relax a bit about the question of ownership, but they should not relax about the question of agency. One obvious way that agency manifests itself is in simple volume. If a writer comes to the writing center with nothing written and a consultant writes something, that something is likely to overshadow or unduly influence anything the client might subsequently produce. Interventionist strategies with existing text, on the other hand, run less risk of appropriating agency.

2. Although social-constructionist and collaborative-learning theories are central to the ethical writing center as we have described it, an uncritical acceptance of those theories could lead, as Christina Murphy has warned regarding social constructionism, to an overvaluation of consensus and to "illusory views of peership" (27) and could blind writing centers to the importance of the individual's emotions in intellectual development. Alice Gillam, in a critique of collaborative learning theory, notes that collaborative learning's critics have suggested that "its emphasis on group process and consensus-building enforces conformity, lowers standards, and denies the importance of the individual mind" (40). Gillam also observes that some versions of collaborative learning theory emphasize social and political goals to the neglect of educational goals. Writing, she suggests, can sometimes get lost in the shuffle.

3. Although we have called for the people who work in writing centers to be less timid in their encounters with writers, teachers, texts, assignments, syllabi, and curricula, they must not let a sense of ethical liberation lead to arrogance or tactlessness. North's maxim of curricular nonintervention cited above ("we never evaluate or second-guess any teacher's syllabus, assignments, comments, or grades") follows a previous observation that writing centers "do a fair amount of trade in people working on ambiguous or poorly designed assignments, and far too much work with writers whose writing has received caustic, hostile, or otherwise unconstructive commentary" ("Idea," 440). We have argued that writing centers do themselves and the larger institutions of which they are a part a disservice by maintaining a complicity of silence about the academy's shortcomings, but how should they go about addressing the sins North enumerates? His observation about bad assignments and teacher commentary, as long as it is generalized and abstract, will offend no one because teachers will recognize only others, not themselves, in his indictment. But what happens when a specific writer brings to the writing center a specific paper based on a specific instructor's poorly designed assignment and already subject to that specific instructor's obviously unconstructive commentary? The ethical writing center must always be characterized by tact and sensitivity, recognizing that although our writing may be initiated by someone else's assignment (and in school it almost always is), for most of us our writing represents our selves and the words on the page seem to be our own words. Intervening in someone else's writing ought to feel perilous and ought to continue to be approached with humility and care.

The "goodness" or "badness" of current writing center policy cannot be judged as absolutes, but must ultimately be evaluated in terms of specific consequences to or behaviors of the clients and institutions it serves. In its current form, the writing center, out of a misguided sense of ethical responsibility, has catered to ill-founded fears and outdated epistemologies, and consequently has not ethically served its clientele. The ethical writing center can and should be a force for change—in writers and in writing and in the academy at large.

Note

1. For a discussion of the writing center's response to faculty suspicions of plagiarism, see Behm.

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Announcement

1997 WPA Summer Workshop and Conference

"The Profession of the WPA: Preparation, Credentials, and Intellectual Work"

The annual WPA meetings will be held next summer at Michigan Tech University, near the waters of Lake Superior in Michigan's beautiful Upper Peninsula.

The Workshop, designed for relatively new WPAs or veterans wishing to re-energize themselves, will be held July 14-16. Leading this intensive discussion of a range of writing program situations, issues and strategies will be David Jolliffe and Sheryl Fontaine.

The Conference, consisting of plenary and concurrent sessions, will be held July 17-20. Speakers tentatively planned are:

James Slevin
Ira Shor
Chris Anson
Robert Connors
David Schwalm

Program Chair Theresa Enos will mail a call for proposals and further conference information to all WPA members in the early spring.