2005

Working for the Clampdown? Being Crafty at Managed Universities

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Words of caution, explanation, advice, and celebration are offered in this month’s WLN. Joe Essid warns us to think now about preparing our writing centers for the future state of academia in which corporate mentalities prevail. Also looking forward, Erica Marsh asks us to consider the role of cyberspeech in tutoring and the use of cyber-shorthand symbols and phrases in synchronous tutoring. For those of us not familiar with emoticons such as [:)] or ^5 or phrases such as TTFN or YBS, Marsh’s appendices offer translations.

Dorothy Treichler and Emilie Steffan advise tutors to draw on their academic knowledge in their fields of study to tutor students with papers from other fields, and Jennifer Beattie writes about the importance of helping ESL students become immersed in English rather than giving them rules of grammar. And Katie Theriault reviews a new collection of essays on in-class tutoring.

Finally, Clint Gardner calls on all of us to contribute ideas for the inaugural year’s celebration of International Writing Centers Week, February 12-18, and explains how and where to post suggestions. So, find a quiet corner in your center to congregate and begin planning for your festivities!

Muriel Harris, editor
stop there? What do we do, as colleges and universities increasingly become mere extensions of the corporate world, instead of alternatives to it? A number of scholars are charting the ways in which the structures and governance of higher education, even the software we use to teach, ever more closely resemble those in business. That metamorphosis may help cash-strapped institutions generate revenue, but the opportunity costs can include the independence and long-standing mission of writing centers. We have, however, a window of opportunity to protect our mission in what the authors of a recent anthology call “the managed university.” I recently tested this when, as a new WPA, I leveraged the influence and prestige of our writing center and WAC program to challenge aspects of a curricular reform effort antithetical to students’ needs and fundamental principles of writing pedagogy. This local success has implications for all of us as the institutional power of English declines. Three decades ago, punk rock gained energy from a sense that England was on the skids; I suggest that as English goes down that dark road, we can all use “punk pedagogy” to maintain and expand the status of writing centers and remain crafty outsiders.

A grim scenario unfolds as we struggle with tight budgets and a fetish for assessment. Bruce Horner, in a review of the anthology Tenured Bosses and Disposable Teachers, summarizes how corporate thinking now shapes writing instruction:

1. the “professionalization” of rhetoric and composition as an academic discipline. . . . has had no improving effect on the working conditions of the vast majority of composition teachers;
2. the exploitative working conditions of college composition teachers have deleterious effects on the teaching of composition;
3. this exploitation is but one manifestation of the privatization of education, which is itself a manifestation of the increasing commodification of all realms of life;
4. a “managerial” discourse that accepts the basic premises of such privatization . . . dominates the field of rhetoric and composition. (Horner 351-52)

Managerial discourse now employed in higher education, one of optimizing resources and minimizing costs, influences our work at every turn. It can lead to less flexibility in our budgets, staffing, and use of campus facilities. It can even provoke mergers with other units that do not share our pedagogy or mission. Managerial discourse reaches online to shape our courseware, like barbed wire strung across the supposedly “wild frontier” online. Course management systems, for instance, employ assessment and monitoring reminiscent of Taylorist ideals of worker efficiency, and they privilege materials antithetical to writing pedagogy carefully developed over decades (Payne 496-99).

Those invested in literary studies will be of little help in the coming struggle to redefine academic work and curricula. It is time we stopped kidding ourselves: one does not have to hear horror stories at the MLA convention’s cash bar or watch allocation of institutions’ resources to realize that the academic study of literature is in decline. As writing-center professionals, we must find, even highjack, our own lifeboats, as many of our colleagues in composition have done. Here I want to concur with Blitz and Hulbert’s radical challenge:

[O]ne different teacher, one different course may not change a curriculum, a department. . . . but two, three, four, joining together?, . . . Why not make the university a place for “centers” of all kinds? Seriously, let’s chuck departments and divisions and set up large open spaces full of tables and chairs where people talk and listen and learn about things. (91)

Not so fast; that good idea sounds either like a perfect learning space or Dilbert’s hellish workplace, an office
Writing center professionals who engage in curricular change must channel it, when possible, toward solid pedagogy and away from centralized control and decisions based on profit motives or turf warfare. I had this sort of opportunity earlier in the year, when a Task Force on Undergraduate General Education issued a long-awaited proposal. This reform to our curriculum would replace the first-year writing requirement with a series of new classes taught by full-time term faculty from many departments. The models were laudable, seminar programs at schools such as Harvard and Princeton. I became WPA amid this, to oversee a demoralized, and likely doomed, program staffed almost completely by adjunct faculty.

Enter writing center director as funeral director. Or, just maybe, as punk agitating for a new order? The proposal caused hardly a stir among my colleagues, who never teach the comp courses that are technically a part of English. I had expected that, but their lack of involvement in the larger debate about general education made me wonder if many of our colleagues are genetically incapable of seeing larger, long-term issues driven by a private-sector ethos to downsize units not matching the mission statement, attracting grants, or recruiting the brightest prospective students. Kathleen Blake Yancey describes the dangers of English being “anachronistic” as currently practiced (302).

Buggy-whip makers would provide too insulting a metaphor for these workers unable to adapt to change. Think instead of hub-and-spoke, “legacy” airlines blinded by past success and stumbling before competitors with better business models.

Writing center directors have the advantage of a long history of privation and entrepreneurial spirit leading to hard-earned recognition and better fortunes. That history leaves us well equipped to compete in a managed university. We should not be too sanguine, however; our independence as academic units may not be safe simply because fulfilling our mission retains students and satisfies employers. Mere survival does not mean influence. As Foucault—there’s the reference one would need at MLA—showed me, power, and the Nietzschean will to it, cannot be denied. How we use power may corrupt our values, but we either have power and influence in some measure, or we do not. Edward White’s most salient advice for WPAs, certainly worthwhile for writing center directors as well, is to stop pretending that power in administrative settings does not matter. A canny director will size up a program’s enemies, identify allies and recruit more, and make effective arguments to the right decision-makers (108-9).

So how do acquire and retain some of this power? We can begin by getting out of our battered chairs in our legendary leaky basements and stifling attics. Or, as increasingly seems likely, we can get up from our ergonomically perfect chairs and desks in well-appointed learning center spaces full of matching office furniture. We then could stride, metaphorically, into the daylight, as I did by mixing it up in the faculty e-list whenever curriculum discussions touch upon the role of writing. I found, and quickly, that instead of being treated like a second-class citizen, I was asked for advice by those overseeing curricular reform and looking for allies of their own. Two committees closely associated with WAC and Writing Center, whose members include adjunct faculty, met jointly. We unanimously agreed to support the new curriculum at a floor vote if it were revised to include intensive, mandatory tutorials for our least-prepared incoming students and a seminar to train faculty across the curriculum in writing pedagogy. Those two ideas entered a revised curriculum proposal.

It is wise, when engaged in this sort of administrative process, to keep a clear eye on how other units thrive by appropriating strategies and rhetoric of the corporate world. Across the quad, and without a ripple of concern in English, our “Speech Department” first became “Rhetoric and Communications Studies” and then, less formally, “Communications Studies.” One wonders if, fifteen years from now, this department, gaining majors quickly while English struggles for them, will be where students learn about Ahab or Lear, not as foils for a theory du jour, but how both characters use language well while making fatally bad decisions.

I admire such savvy, adaptable colleagues, partly because the gamesmanship of re-invention in a managed university is never lost on them. They, not English, hired our campus’ first tenureable techno-rhetorician. Like writing center professionals in the 70s, they have seen the future.

We might again need that sort of chutzpah, that brashness to re-invent that is so lost on many English departments. Yancey advises us that the time available is brief; she contends that ongoing changes in literacy are “seismic” and we only have a “moment” to adapt our practices to them. This new demographic, coming to us at the same time as creeping corporatism, spells trouble not only for literary studies but also for everyone invested in traditional notions of academic literacy: so-called “Millennial” students both more conservative in their epistemology and with less allegiance than any in recent memory to the printed word (Reading at Risk). This public writes constantly and with less allegiance than any in recent memory to the printed word (Reading at Risk). This public writes constantly and
nize, and to act within these forums—largely without instruction and, more to the point here, largely without our instruction. They need neither self-assessment nor our assessment. (Yancey 301)

Cold comfort for writing centers in this; whether a paper discusses Buffy, Baudrillard, or both, how will we “tutor” multimedia projects that are going to replace the essay? For the reasons Horner and Yancey outline, writing centers face ever greater pressures from writers who think they already have the skills they need and from administrators and colleagues who wonder why our students cannot write for academic audiences, even though they have technological literacy and “write” all the time.

Horner’s and Yancey’s observations now influence my work as “manager” for adjunct faculty and tutors. And therein lies a danger, one shouted in the Clash’s song “Working for the Clampdown”: one day you are a rebel, the next a suit. With a foot currently in both camps, I wonder if both roles can co-exist. When I presented some of these ideas at a regional conference, another writing center director pointed out that it would be too easy to become a distant administrator behind a closed door, instead of an affable coach to peer tutors.

Despite that hazard, we must also consider the danger of not acting in the face of a seismic change in literacy. The writing center need not remain the central location for alternatives to the classroom, especially as writing morphs into something textual, visual, auditory, and for all I know, olfactory. Even in the money-drunk 90s, Walvoord predicted a “Darwinian” future during the coming decade for WAC programs and other initiatives, with “some programs disappearing as they no long draw funds or faculty” (69). I fear that as English and other inflexible units lose influence, writing centers may be absorbed by larger programs that employ pedagogical models we do not like. Case in point: with some assistance from a dean I successfully deflected not-so-subtle attempts to bring all of the tutoring programs under one umbrella; I then argued successfully that an academic-skills program with which the Writing Center has a good working relationship should move with us to a new building. Arguing that we possess a unique knowledge of writing may not be enough to prevent a “hostile takeover,” but there is strength in numbers. Without proximity and shared resources, the other director and I both feared division, then conquest, by another administrative unit.

Fortunately, one outcome of our long-running WAC program has been to give the director some administrative clout. We established a pedagogical model that partners carefully trained undergraduate Writing Fellows with faculty; this compliments and promotes the peer tutorials at our center (Essid and Hickey). In fact, most students work as both tutors and Writing Fellows before graduating. Faculty remark that the work of both Fellows and tutors has altered their own responses to written work. That put our camel’s nose under the curricular tent-flap.

I have been relentless in leveraging the success of WAC and our center into more courses, more articles, more technology, more training for tutors and Writing Fellows. We send a well produced newsletter not just to faculty and students but also, by hand and with a smile, to all of our senior administrators. Thus we accrue one bit of currency that “counts” as academic success (White 112). That’s important on a campus small enough to bump into the President and Provost at lunch and have a real chat. The growth of our Center and WAC program, using a relatively small budget, had not gone unnoticed. Our camel is now officially in the tent.

Not becoming part of a clampdown has allowed me to retain the same humanity as WPA so essential to being a good writing center professional. I got a shock when a long-time adjunct thanked me for providing written feedback about her teaching. It was the first time in years that a supervisor had provided an evaluation at either university where she teaches. Could we imagine being that distant from our tutors?

The empowerment of adjunct faculty through regular meetings and feedback was just the beginning of punk-style acting up about our curriculum. With my encouragement, adjuncts used their academic freedom to attend the curricular task force’s meetings, where they voiced their concerns. Their voices will lead, in our new gen-ed curriculum, to a consistent approach to writing well informed by writing center praxis.

One battle done, another coming: I suspect that despite academia’s distaste for military metaphors in these new-imperial times, life in the managed university is simply going to feel that way. Sometimes that battle will be over what our centers will even look like. When I was invited to sit down with architects and librarians planning new construction to include our offices, I soon was campaigning to keep private tutorial spaces in the floor plan as well as larger common spaces. One senior administrator, on fire with an hot new idea acquired from a corporate trade show, only wanted modular spaces shared between several administrative units. Can you say “merger and acquisition”? I wore a neck tie, covered my tattoo, but kept in my earrings as I fought to prevent this idea from getting sketched in.

After all of my justification, you may agree with the Clash that “Every cheap
hood strikes a bargain with the world.” Alternately, I’d claim that a will to power and influence need not become tools of oppression and self-aggrandizement: the most talented punk rockers were consummate tricksters, not merely anarchist louts or sell-out artists. Godfathers of Punk like Brian Eno, Iggy Pop, and particularly David Bowie, are masters of re-invention, yet they never lost their edge and talent as musicians. Faced with the changes ahead of us, both in campus polity and student literacy, we would do well to listen to a few old tunes again.

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Works Cited:
National Endowment for the Arts. “Literary Reading in Dramatic Decline, According to National Endowment for the Arts Survey.”

The Writing Center Journal

The Writing Center Journal is an official publication of the International Writing Centers Association, which is an Affiliate of the National Council of Teachers of English. WCJ is published twice a year, in the fall/winter and spring/summer.

The Writing Center Journal’s primary purpose is to publish articles, reviews, and announcements of interest to writing center personnel. We therefore invite manuscripts that explore issues or theories related to writing center dynamics or administration. We are especially interested in theoretical articles and in reports of research related to or conducted in writing centers. In addition to administrators and practitioners from college and university writing centers, we encourage directors of high school and middle school writing centers to submit manuscripts.

The Writing Center Journal also has a few new online developments you might want to check out:
1) A Web site. Go to <www.writing.ku.edu/wcj> for information on guidelines for submissions, subscriptions, and more.

2) A blog. Go to <writingcenterjournal.blogspot.com> to see authors from our current issue blogging like mad. Let them, and us, know what you’re thinking too!

3) A database of back issues. Thanks to Kate Brown and the Writing Centers Research Project (WCRP) at the University of Louisville, we’re delighted to announce the rollout of an annotated, searchable and complete database to articles that have appeared in Writing Center Journal from vol. 1, no. 1 (1980) to the current vol. 25, no. 1 (2005).

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