

2005

Working for the Clampdown? Being Crafty at Managed Universities

Joe Essid

University of Richmond, jessid@richmond.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/english-faculty-publications>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Essid, Joe. "Working for the Clampdown? Being Crafty at Managed Universities." *The Writing Lab Newsletter* 30, no. 2 (October 2005): 1-5.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E T T E R

Volume 30, Number 2

Promoting the exchange of voices and ideas in one-to-one teaching of writing

October, 2005

...FROM THE EDITOR...

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

...INSIDE...

Working for the Clampdown? Being Crafty at Managed Universities

• Joe Essid 1

From Language to Lingo: A look at Cyberspeech in Synchronous Electronic Tutoring

• Erica Marsh 6

Tutors' Columns: "Academic Diversity and the Generalist Tutor: How to Survive and Thrive Tutoring Outside Your Discipline"

• Dorothy Treichler and Emilie Steffan 10

"ESL in the Writing Center: Providing Krashen's 'Comprehensible Input'"

• Jennifer Beattie 11

Review of On Location. By Candace Spigelman and Laurie Grobman

• Katie Theriault 13

International Writing Centers Week 2006

• Clint Gardner 15

Conference Calendar 16

Working for the clampdown? Being crafty at managed universities

Last fall I found myself not only our school's Writing Center Director but also its Writing Program Administrator. At the same time, a reminder of my wastrel youth appeared: the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of the Clash's *London Calling*.

The two events are connected. On the one hand, it is delightful to hear people again discuss the anthems of the punk-rock era. More than at any time since the 1970s, we need a little more defiance against authority, including the transformation of everything into a saleable commodity. On the other hand, the very way in which *London Calling* appeared, slickly packaged at a premium price, reinforces my creeping suspicion that everything, from punk rock to writing centers, is being assimilated by corporate values.

Writing centers have always placed writers' needs ahead of those of our universities. Like punks, we provide alternatives to an often alienating system of power. Now that I have bowdlerized North's famous dictum, why

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

The *Writing Lab Newsletter*, published in ten monthly issues from September to June by the Department of English, Purdue University, is a publication of the International Writing Centers Association, an NCTE Assembly, and is a member of the NCTE Information Exchange Agreement. ISSN 1040-3779. All Rights and Title reserved unless permission is granted by Purdue University. Material will not be reproduced in any form without express written permission. However, up to 50 copies of an article may be reproduced under fair use policy for educational, non-commercial use in classes or course packets. As always, proper acknowledgment of title, author, and original publication date in the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, Purdue University, should be included for each article.

Editor: Muriel Harris

Managing Editor: Charlotte Hartlep, English Dept., Purdue University, 500 Oval Drive, West Lafayette, IN 47907-2038; 765-494-7268.

e-mail: harrism@purdue.edu (or) wln@purdue.edu

web site: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/lab/newsletter/index.html>

Subscriptions: The newsletter has no billing procedures. Yearly payments of \$15 (U.S. \$20 in Canada) are requested, and checks must be received four weeks prior to the month of expiration to ensure that subscribers do not miss an issue. Please make checks payable to Purdue University and send to the Managing Editor. Prepayment is requested for all subscriptions.

Manuscripts: Recommended length for articles is approximately 2500-3000 words, 1500 words for reviews and Tutors' Column essays, in MLA format. If possible, please send as attached files in an e-mail to wln@purdue.edu. Otherwise, send hard copy and a computer disk or CD-ROM, and please enclose a self-addressed envelope with return postage not pasted to the envelope. The deadline for announcements is 45 days prior to the month of issue (e.g. August 15 for an October issue).

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

environment supposedly set up by The Man to encourage collaboration and non-hierarchical workflow. So we must be very careful as old walls come down and new institutional structures replace them.

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 literary studies 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 close 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 ofchutzpah, 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 as opportunities for informal expression proliferate online:

[M]embers of the writing public have learned—in this case, to write, to think together, to orga-

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 longer 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.

Joe Essid
University of Richmond
Richmond, VA

Works Cited:

Blitz, Michael and C. Mark Hurlbert. “If You Have Ghosts.” *Stories*

from the Center: Connecting Narrative and Theory in the Writing Center. Ed. Lynn Craigie Briggs and Meg Woodbright. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2000: 84-93.

Essid, Joe and Dona J. Hickey. “Creating a Community of Teachers and Tutors.” *Electronic Communication Across the Curriculum*. Ed. Donna Reiss, Richard Selfe, and Art Young. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1998: 73-85.

Horner, Bruce. Rev. of *Tenured Bosses and Disposable Teachers: Writing Instruction in the Managed University*, Ed. Marc Bousquet, Tony Scott, and Leo Parascondola. *CCC* 56.2 (Dec. 2004): 351-57.

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

8 July 2004. <<http://www.nea.gov/news/news04/ReadingAtRisk.html>. 7 Feb. 2005>.

Payne, Darin. “English Studies in Levittown: Rhetorics of Space and Technology in Course-Management Software.” *College English* 67.5 (May 2005): 483-507.

Walvoord, Barbara. “The Future of WAC.” *College English* 58.1 (Jan. 1996): 58-79.

White, Edward. “Use it or Lose it: Power and the WPA.” *The Allyn & Bacon Sourcebook for Writing Program Administrators*. Ed. Irene Ward and William J. Carpenter. New York: Longman, 2002: 106-113.

Yancey, Kathleen Blake. “Made Not Only in Words: Composition in a New Key.” *CCC* 56.2 (Dec. 2004): 297-328.

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).

Go to <<http://coldfusion.louisville.edu/webs/a-s/wcrp/>> and click on the left-hand column link labeled Searchable Annotated Bibliography of *WCJ* Articles; you'll also see that many of these articles are FULL TEXT and available for free download from the WCRP site, and many more will be coming online over the next few months. So search for your favorite authors, topics, or titles and pass along a word of thanks to Kate Brown and the WCRP.