

Sites of Possibility: Bringing Creative Writing Pedagogy into the Writing Center

*Presented at the National Conference for Peer Tutoring in Writing*

Both writing centers and creative writing programs occupy strange spaces—both physical and theoretical—within English and Writing departments. Writing centers live in basements or cubicles, while advanced workshops often happen in the homes of students, coffee shops or bars. Both writing centers and creative writing theory treat a piece of writing as a work in progress, and, more importantly, consider any text as part of a writer’s larger body of work. There are other, curious overlaps as well: the removal of the instructor from a position of absolute power, a focus on revision, an interest in collaborative peer-based learning, and an emphasis on writers’ agency to develop texts according to their interests rather than solely to an assignment. While traditionally there’s very little interaction between these two disciplines, the theory and practice of creative writing can offer writing centers strategies, forms of feedback, and the concept of productive silence in which the text, not the author, speaks. Although this isn’t a replacement for the traditional writing center tutorial, small group workshops can offer writing center clients a chance to further develop themselves as writers, rather than simply perfecting a single piece of writing.

At first glance, it’s easy for a creative writer to see the overlap between the goals of the writing center and the goals of the workshop. Stephen North, in his seminal “The Idea of a Writing Center,” outlines several key elements that make up a writing center. Its focus on “writing curricula that is student-centered” insists that the writing center is not there merely to ensure a paper fulfills the instructor’s criteria of good grammar (North 438). Unlike composition courses or general English courses, the writing center has a

holistic goal to produce better writers rather than perfect a particular paper. Both North and Thom Hawkins argue that the writing center is uniquely poised to work with “the *process* the student uses to achieve that product [the paper]” (Hawkins 67). Writing centers exist to help students to understand their own processes, to teach them skills of organization and proofreading, and to be able to grasp what’s necessary to reach their audience.

Of course, these goals don’t always match the reality—often students come to the writing center looking for the “fix-it shop” mentality that North deplors (435). Students are motivated to come because they want better grades, and to be better able to predict the (sometimes arbitrary and unclear) desires of their instructors. In spite of the writing center’s best attempts, writers frequently arrive and sit unresponsive to any attempts to address higher-order concerns. “Yes, yes,” a client told me impatiently a few weeks ago after twenty minutes of discussing her organization, “but can you look at the grammar? That’s what’s really wrong with it.” Sometimes in spite of the tutor’s best attempts, the prescriptive concerns (of instructors or, more generally, the institution of academic writing) loom over a tutorial.

At the heart of the writing center is the relationship between the tutor and client. Both the center and the workshop require peer engagement, and a key aspect of that is the equality of all parties involved. Hawkins argues “the tutoring contract is productive because there is a reciprocal relationship between equals, a sharing in the work of the system . . . between two friends who trust one another” (66). Of course, in practice this too can quickly become problematic. Multilingual writers, writers in science and mathematics fields, or writers who simply dislike or feel inadequate at writing, are quick to relinquish any kind of authority. This is the central paradox of peer tutoring, which

Muriel Harris aptly describes. “The more skilled tutors are, the further they are from being peers in a collaborative relationship” (379). Multilingual mining engineering students may feel completely in control of their content, but the moment the writing is addressed, they frequently and immediately relinquish control of their texts. As a tutor, I will ask the traditional open-ended questions designed to produce dialogue. “*Why* did you decide to use this word here?” will lead to a five-minute explanation of the porosity of shale—an explanation that is beyond my expertise, and leaves neither the writer or I any closer to being able to explain what’s happening in the writing. In cases like these, the pedagogy of dialogue fails, and it would have been better for the writer to listen to an explanation of the effect of that word choice, and then leave him to contemplate whether or not that’s what he really wants.

The silence of the author is a key aspect of the creative writing workshop. In most any workshop, the author (after a brief introduction similar to the tutorial’s well-known “first five minutes”) sits and listens while her classmates discuss elements of the text at hand. The purpose of this is not, contrary to expectations, to critique the text for the author. Grammar errors, if they must be addressed, are done so fleetingly—sentence-level concerns, if raised, are not spoken with the intent to correct. They come accompanied with descriptive commentary—something like “using passive voice here creates a sense of the narrator’s depersonalization.” These descriptions are (ideally) judgment-free so that the author doesn’t feel the need to defend or protect the text. Chris Green argues in his work on the radical possibilities of the workshop, that the silence of the writer allows them “to listen to the heart of their writing is critical to discerning and generating its integrity, rather than forcing it narrowly into their desired goals and purposes” (165).

Silence allows a writer to meditate on the purposes of writing, the effects and uses of language, and how a work connects with an audience.

Silence is possible only because the workshop is, at its core, a system lacking a central authority figure. Green's description of the workshop could just as easily been taken from a piece of writing center theory. "Most creative writing workshops," he says, "practice a radical pedagogy utilizing recursive, opportunistic instruction via decentralized authority (i.e. students teach and learn from each other) based on student-directed, hands-on involvement" (158). This decentralization cannot be reproduced even in the most student-friendly composition course. Where it can be found, however, is in the writing center, where writers come "because, more often than not, they are deeply, genuinely engaged with the material, anxious to wrestle it into the best form they can: they are motivated to write" (North 443). Both disciplines share the advantage of being generally populated with self-motivated writers invested in writing.<sup>1</sup>

But, one might protest, creative writing classes share a common interest in the production of poetry and prose, while the writing center's clientele is drawn from the entire university. I would argue that creative writing theory actually is an asset here, since workshops necessarily trade in a variety of subjects, goals, forms, and cultural contexts. Although pieces will be loosely grouped by their genre, the content, language, and structure will be so entirely different that the texts may bear very little resemblance to each other. Green aptly uses the metaphor of constructing three different buildings with entirely different uses, remarking, "although all three builders would have to know the basics of construction, how we render questions and evaluations about effectiveness and

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<sup>1</sup> Both writing centers and creative writing classes encounter their fair share of students who are there for an easy A, but they tend not to linger once it's clear how both places work.

beauty . . . depend upon the situation” (155). Writers in workshop must quickly learn that there is no ideal text, and, in fact, much of “craft” is a set of rules so arbitrary that any given text could break them. What remains is an examination of the author’s goals and how to best connect to the audience.

If, as Thom Hawkins claims, writing centers provide “a link between writer and audience which is often missing when students write only for teachers” (64), the workshop acknowledges that there are “multiple interpretive communities with differing rhetorics” (Green 166). One poet may choose to work in as part of the discourse on radical queer acceptance, while another writes from the perspective of a mother. Both are, of course, writing ostensibly for the purpose of publication in literary journals and presses (the literary world’s equivalent of a grade), but underlying each is an understanding that this writing springs from a community’s unique discourse.

Furthermore, in creative writing writers establish their own criteria for a successful text. Green outlines a common practice in which teachers “ask students to read about the poetics from their tradition; they then discover and write about what terms and approaches seem most relevant to them” (164). Writers in this case serve as “translators,” who establish key ideas and vocabulary for an audience unfamiliar with the content. This is a subtle but important distinction for academic writers. Rather than forcing their ideas to conform to the homogenous standard of academic writing, they come to see the form as a medium. The thesis becomes a means of communicating a central idea, and the support as a means of acknowledging the conversation within which they are operating. And what better way to explain this idea to writers than to use some of the most familiar terms of writing?

When creative writing is brought into the writing center, tutors can use the basic concepts of narrativity—story, plot, characters, description—to unlock ideas that are often stifled by academic forms. Beverly Conner, in her essay on bringing creative writing into the writing center, details a tutorial where a student was blocked by the formal requirements of her essay. Conner “asked her to forget her essay for the moment and to pretend I was an intelligent eighth-grader to whom she was telling the story” (205). By allowing the essay’s narrative to come to the surface, the student was able to transcend the paralyzing and unfamiliar terms of thesis statements, topic sentences, transitions, and instead return to what was likely the first kind of writing she encountered.

I suspect that many composition instructors would argue that they have already adopted the techniques of workshop in their peer-response groups. But workshop, much like the writing center, is a special case of peer-response. Muriel Harris outlines the difference between the tutorial and peer review, remarking that a study of response groups found that “peer responses proceeds primarily by directive comments” (376). Every student is presumably working on a similar assignment, and while the content may vary substantially, the form remains the same. “This keeps the discussion focused on specific drafts that all members of the group are working on” (Harris 372). Harris acknowledges that while peer response groups can teach students to be better readers and responders, the primary focus is on correction, and the comments likewise reflect that goal. “There is an underlying assumption here that helping someone name or locate an error is sufficient” (372). Workshop is unlike other peer response groups because its goal is to produce stronger, more confident writers. The emphasis in workshop is on reshaping

the discourse around writing. There, writers learn from each other. They hone their skills of description, and work to unlock how language can produce or obscure meaning.

Some workshops, admittedly, are less than ideal. Whether due to competition, a misunderstanding of the pedagogy of response, or personal conflicts, the workshop has the potential for vicious and mean-spirited discussion. Rather than allowing for productive listening, the silence of the writer can refuse to let him redirect the conversation productively. Furthermore, sometimes outspoken members of the workshop can draw excessive authority to themselves. This is especially the case when workshopping minority writers, where the dominant hegemony can misread and worse, insist on “correcting” a text to conform to cultural expectations. This too can happen in the writing center, although tutors are specifically trained to avoid imposing their opinions and beliefs upon writers. Muriel Harris identifies the edge line that tutors must navigate. “The tutor, then, is a hybrid, somewhere between a peer and teacher” (380). Tutors must be teacherly enough to avoid imposing their own knowledge on the writer, but enough a peer to be able to relate to and empathize with the student. While these dynamics might appear within a workshop, without specific training there is no guarantee that this will happen.

Small group workshops could be a possible means of joining creative writing and the writing center together. Trained peer tutors would act as facilitators whose job would be to moderate and guide the conversation, and to prevent any one ideology from taking precedence. Ideally, these small group workshops, in order to avoid the problems of peer response groups, would be made up of students from a variety of departments. This population would spark conversations across disciplines, and allow writers to see how

language can work regardless of content. I would also encourage these tutor-facilitators to use techniques of creative writing pedagogy: framing writing in terms of narrative, asking students to read within their field and seek out ways of describing their writing. Remedial writers and multilingual students could especially benefit from this process, since the goal of the workshop would be to invest them with the authority to speak about their own writing. If students were willing to dedicate themselves to a semester of consistent meetings, they might find themselves transformed as writers. The intimacy that Thom Hawkins describes as essential would arise naturally. Participants in these workshops would also provide an ideal pool of possible new tutors. By the time a participant would have completed the workshop, she would have hours of practice and already be at least partially trained in writing center theory.

I don't mean to propose that these workshops supplant the traditional shape of a tutorial. Especially in the early stages of a project, writers can benefit from the one-on-one dialogue that the writing center offers. The silence of the writer, which might be so productive and illuminating at later stages of drafting, could be constraining when brainstorming and outlining papers. But "the essence of the writing center method . . . this talking," as North defines it, would remain untouched (443). In small group workshops, the dialogue would simply shift to other members. Ultimately, the goal would not be to take turns polishing each other's papers, but to create productive discussions about what good writing is and how revision takes place.

The fields of literature, critical theory, and (frequently) composition treat texts as, as Francois Camoin describes, "frozen with traces of a process already completed" (qtd. in Green 156). Both creative writing and the writing center ask writers to see their texts



as sites of possibility. However subtly, they offer the potential for resistance against hegemonic discourse by looking at writing within particular cultural contexts. Both the workshop and the tutorial are places where students can transform and progress into stronger writers who understand why they write the way they do, and who are ready to speak about their own work with confidence.

Works Cited

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