myth was well established in our minds and embedded in our job descriptions. Then, with typical irony, we punched our own ticket by using hard won, added on research to validate our service role. Let me put it another (only slightly exaggerated) way: as Writing Center Director my priorities are teaching, service, service, service, and then research—on our service.

One step to develop the potential for systematic research in writing centers, as distinct from occasional research about writing centers, is to attempt to renegotiate the writing center statement of purpose, rewrite its myth of origins, so that research is a featured character, not a walk-on part. That might make for an interesting situation. It might mean, for instance, that research output, not the number of students served, would be the primary justification for writing center viability. It might mean that writing center directors would carry research appointments, and research budgets to go along with them, and job descriptions that have high expectations for publication in exchange for job security and promotion. It might mean that writing center training and procedures and environment would all change to meet the needs of research and publication. Is such a “renegotiation” desirable or even possible? Another way to get at this same issue is to ask, are we, the readers of The Writing Center Journal and The Writing Lab Newsletter, the research community to which we want to remain a viable contributor? Or is the research community that we seek to influence larger, more diverse, and less interested?

Can you target any issues that writing centers need to open up or begin to address that have to do with our future place in the academy and the larger community?

Writing centers have been surprisingly successful over time, and success means continuity, and continuity is an issue all in itself. Problems for writing centers in the future are just as likely to grow out of the demands of their complex, if mundane, routine as they are from the more focused dilemma of changes in technology or student populations. Maintaining and renewing powerful innovations like peer tutoring and collaborative learning, when they are no longer innovative yet remain powerful, is an ongoing challenge: recruiting, training, supervising, and developing tutors every year; promoting the writing center among students and faculty and the community every year; dealing with the paper work and budgetary begging every year; doing everything else you do every year (don’t forget research!). We must take care lest we be burned out by the insistent and repetitive demands of our own success.

---

Multiliteracies, Social Futures, and Writing Centers

John Trimbur

You can tell quite a bit from the names writing centers give themselves—“lab,” “clinic,” “center,” “place,” “studio,” “workshop.” Of course, there’s the old debate WCJ readers are likely to remember (and perhaps have taken part in) about whether the names “lab” and “clinic” carry pathologizing overtones. For as important as that debate was to the formation of writing center identities, I’m interested here in something else: namely, that the term “writing” seems to be taken for granted in all the names we’ve been using. At any rate, this came to mind recently when at Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI) we renamed the Writing Center (itself a renaming of the original Writing Resource Center—whatever a writing “resource” might be) the Center for Communication Across the Curriculum. The new name we came up with, after considerable and sometimes heated discussion, is meant to signify the Center’s commitment not just to writing but to multiliteracies, as an umbrella term under which appear three “workshops”—the Writing Workshop, the Oral Presentation Workshop, and (in planning) a Visual Design Workshop.

I mention our own experience at WPI because I think it’s fairly indicative of recent trends in writing center theory and practice to see literacy as a multimodal activity in which oral, written, and visual communication intertwine and interact. This notion of multiliteracies has to do in part with new text forms and new means of communication associated with the information age and knowledge economies of the globalized markets and societies of late capitalism. Now I’m not one who wanted to follow Bill Clinton across the bridge to the 21st century, but I am aware that these changes in how we read and write, do business, and participate in civic life have some pretty serious implications for our work in writing centers. Just as important, the notion of multiliteracies also
signals that writing itself has always amounted to the production of visible 
language and isn’t just the invisible composing process we sometimes 
include it to be. For these reasons, at least for our purposes at WPI, where 
there’s no required first-year course and we tutor lots of project work, the 
notion of multiliteracies offers a way to think about working on everything 
from essays and project reports to Powerpoint™ presentations to web 
page and poster design.

My guess is that writing centers will more and more define 
themselves as multiliteracy centers. Many are already doing so—tutoring 
oral presentations, adding online tutorials, offering workshops in evaluating 
web sources, being more conscious of document design. To my 
mind, the new digital literacies will increasingly be incorporated into 
writing centers not just as sources of information or delivery systems for 
tutoring but as productive arts in their own right, and writing center work 
will, if anything, become more rhetorical in paying attention to the 
practices and effects of design in written and visual communication— 
more product oriented and perhaps less like the composing conferences of 
the process movement.

Linked to the notion of multiliteracies is the challenge to develop 
more equitable social futures by redistributing the means of communica-
tion. In a sense, of course, social justice and the democratization of higher 
education have always been parts of the mission of writing centers, from 
the GI Bill of the postwar period to open admissions in the 1970s to the 
latest struggles to defend access in the CUNY schools and elsewhere. At 
present, there are important initiatives going on to keep education avail-
able and to extend the writing center’s reach into the community. As work 
at Michigan State University shows, the notion of community service is an 
important legacy of the land-grant universities that imagines a continuity 
between the academy and civic life (Stock)—and implicitly raises ques-
tions for many writing centers whose primary constituency is students in 
a required first-year course. My feeling is that writing centers have a lot 
to gain by expanding their work beyond campus but, at the same time, need 
to expand it on campus as well, so that centers are not just support services 
to one required English course. In my view, one of the most glaring 
oversights in writing center practice—and more generally in writing 
program design—is the neglect of writing in languages other than English. 
There is important work to be done correcting this First Worldist deviation 
by making alliances with modern language teachers, promoting bilingual-
ism in writing, and transforming writing centers from English Only to 
multilingual ones.

Finally, I want to mention, at least briefly, the issue of profes-
sional status and writing center administration. I worry that at too many 
colleges and universities, WPI included, the person who directs the 
writing center is still non-tenure track staff (and that writing center work 
is thereby regarded as akin to other types of “support services”), or a recent 
tenure track hire who directs the writing center for a few years (before, 
presumably, getting on with the “real” work). Two recent counterexamples, 
which I point to based on anecdotal evidence, suggest that things could be 
otherwise—that we could regard writing center work as more than an 
entry level position and early stage in a professional career. At the 
University of Maine, after two terms as English department chair, Harvey 
Kail returned to his former position as writing center director, and at the 
University of New Hampshire, Robert J. Connors, award-winning histo-
rian of composition and rhetoric (and former writing center director at 
LSU), became the first director of a new writing center. These moves 
indicate, I think, how writing center work can figure not as a peripheral, 
passing involvement but a professional activity central to the study and 
teaching of writing.
When most writing centers in the United States were being founded and developed, colleges and universities had very few entities they labeled “centers.” Today, however, centers are cropping up with increasing regularity. At our own institutions, we have (between us) Centers for Humanities, Centers for Advanced Materials Research, Centers for Cognitive Studies, Centers for the Study of First Americans—even a Center for Epigraphy. It seems worth pausing to consider this phenomenon: Where are all these centers coming from, and why are they proliferating so rapidly?

One strong possibility: Centers create spaces for the kind of work that needs to be done in higher education, work that is difficult or impossible to do within traditional disciplinary frameworks. In almost every case, for example, the previously mentioned centers allow for intracor cross-disciplinary research and scholarship, and at their best they encourage highly productive forms of collaboration. Furthermore, they often initiate projects designed to bring college and community closer together. In short, these new centers seem to us one of the major signs of stress on old ways of taxonomizing and creating knowledge. Their growing popularity signals, we think, one institutional response to changing educational demands, populations, budgets, and technologies.

We are well aware that these are difficult times at most community colleges, colleges, and universities, and that faculty and staff in many writing centers must spend an inordinate amount of time struggling to provide basic services. Nevertheless we wish to emphasize those opportunities that we believe are available to writing centers, even those that are in various ways marginalized on their campuses. The opportunities that we will discuss involve four potentials that we see for institutional refiguration: the refiguration of institutional space, of concepts of knowledge, of the role of pedagogy in the classroom, and of the relationship between the public and the academy.

Some Millennial Thoughts about the Future of Writing Centers

Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford