Chapter 2. Methodology: Counterstorying, Testimony and Narrative as Research Work

Before we talk about the methods (i.e., what we did to collect the stories featured in Act II of this project), we want to talk about the guiding methodology that shaped the broader project. The stories featured in this collection rely on a number of storying traditions, most particularly counterstorying. Counterstorying is a "critical race methodology [that] offers space to conduct and present research grounded in the experiences and knowledge of people of color" (Solórzano & Yosso, p. 23, 2002). Counterstories "can be used as theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical tools to challenge racism, sexism, and classism and work toward social justice" (Solórzano & Yosso, p. 23, 2002). Although writing center studies have discussed anti-racism and inclusion work for decades (the first anti-racism special interest group dates back to the early 2000s), research featuring the lived experiences (and counterstories) of BIPOC writing center administrators and tutors has become much more prominent in the last half decade or so (Faison & Condon, 2022; Green, 2018; Haltiwanger Morrison & Nanton, 2019; Martinez, 2016). Furthermore, scholars have centered the lived experiences of queer directors and writing center workers (Denny, 2005; Denny et al., 2019; Webster, 2021). While researchers in education and critical race studies have talked about counterstories and counterstorying for several decades (Delgado, 1989), writing centers are relative newcomers to this methodology of meaning making, though it is quickly becoming a popular research methodology in the field.

Many earlier references to narrative, however, also seemed to predict the move towards counterstory as it is a powerful and more inclusive approach to writing center scholarship. With McKinney's (2005) research on "cozy homes" and the ongoing interrogation of "lore" in our field (Driscoll & Perdue, 2012; Greenfield & Rowan, 2011; Kjesrud, 2015; McKinney, 2013), researchers understood clearly that narrative and stories pervade how we talk about writing centers. Yet, these stories often assume white, middle-class, and female-identifying administrators, as well as monolingual white tutors. These stories leave little space for heterogeneity in writing center workers' identities, backgrounds, and experiences (to say nothing of race, class, sexuality, gender expression, etc.). The reliance on lore to drive writing center tutoring practices has also created orthodoxies that have been challenged in an ongoing manner for decades (Clark, 1993; Thompson et al., 2009). So, while exchanging stories about writing center practices and work was critical to the early scholarly development of the field, the turn towards narrative interrogation and challenging lore has now moved the field to the incorporation

of counterstory as a powerful and necessary methodology and praxis for our work. Unlike lore, narrative inquiry, or storying–as we see featured in Caswell et al.'s (2016) work–counterstories deconstruct the "givens" we have about writing centers and the experiences of workers in them. They also, as Faison and Condon (2022) and others note, constitute a critical research methodology that moves away from the obsession with data-driven methodologies meant to dispel that old lore-focused approach to writing center praxis.

Recent studies also aim to center storying outside of the Western epistemologies that drive both our field's scholarship and our administration processes. As Wang (2022) rightly notes, the work of writing center workers is often lonesome and nomadic; academics often work in places they are not originally from (p. 55). This kind of dislocation can cause all kinds of issues, such as under-serving or poorly serving community members (including ones outside the institution), and lacking cultural context for the center and its workers and writers. It also weakens labor activism, which so heavily relies on informal networks of community members. Storying, then, can help us to center our local contexts and do work outside of academic contexts while moving away from Westernized notions of what liberation looks like (p. 51). As Wang (2022) argues:

> To develop centers that are truly just, we must also work to decenter Western epistemologies and create definitions of justice which are rooted in local and Indigenous epistemologies. I believe that we can move towards these local definitions through storying our own positionality, receiving stories from others, and being deeply imbedded in communities outside the academic context of writing center work. (p. 55)

Wang (2022) thus broadens the scholarship and praxis of counterstorying to include non-Western, Indigenous, and place-based storying.

The existing research on writing center administration studies details profound levels of stress and lack of support (Caswell et al., 2016; Geller & Denny, 2013), which we know that writing center practitioners face broadly and often in addition to other challenges in their institutions. Anecdotally, we know of a lot more traumatic, disruptive, and toxic work experiences in our field that have not been shared publicly. These stories are often shared only informally–as we've often characterized it, over cocktails at conferences–because of fear of retaliation among other job-related concerns. This project provides insight into these and other work-related experiences, including what drew practitioners to writing center work and what joys/pleasures they have in doing such work. Without some form of instantiation, these stories become lost, and that loss contributes "to our fuzzy perspective" (Caswell et al., 2016, p. 8).

Featuring many different forms of stories about writing centers–personal and unofficial institutional histories, testimonies about the experience of laboring, stories of resistance and activism, stories of excitement and joy, and stories about

place (Wang, 2022)–contributors rely on the autobiographical and engage in counter-historical narrative work. And, as the important work of our colleagues (Faison & Condon, 2022; Martinez, 2020) demonstrates their need, we ask you to share counterstories, too, in your writing centers, in your staff training, in your own scholarship, and among colleagues. As Suze Berkhout (2013) explains, "As an epistemic activity, testimony is a kind of first-person evidence that has the potential, under certain circumstances, to disrupt dominant metaphors, figurations, and ways of understanding the world–the so-called 'common sense' that belongs primarily to the imaginings of privilege" (p. 29). Our book seeks to disrupt commonplaces, lore, and otherwise taken-for-granted discussions about writing center work. We also see so few stories that take up labor as their main focus, so this is a reclamation process, too. The absence of labor counterstories indicates to us a kind of common sense element: that our work need not be theorized, complicated, or upended. Writing center labor thus becomes largely invisible and left unexamined except in very specific circumstances such as research on new directors, research on under-represented directors, or research on specific types of work (like emotional labor).

From this literature review, and in our own research, we recognize the growing interest in how personal experience and challenging dominant stories have become critical elements of writing center scholarship. Yet, even in this turn towards more anti-racist and inclusive scholarship, gaps in our understanding of how practitioners in writing centers and writing programs experience work and understand their labor–especially place-based labor and labor outside of U.S. contexts–persist. For example, many of the texts about writing center work that we mention above engage in ethnography. These accounts, however, are filtered through the interview methodology which necessarily comes with editing and far less detail from individuals. Another methodology, oral history, comes from legal and historical research, and it centers on the past lived experience of the speaker, but it is often also mediated and not as commonly used in our field's scholarship. While originating in different disciplines, counterstory, storying, and testimony center first-person experience and the disruption of dominant narratives (or lore) through direct engagement with the narrator/subject. In this book, we center first-person experiences that are structured (and mediated by external factors like word count) but that are not edited or otherwise filtered through our analysis.

Contributors to this book disrupt epistemic bias in ethnographic research (Code, 2006) wherein some forms of experience are counted as evidence while others are seen as mere anecdotes. As Robillard (2021) and Micciche (2018) have noted, the label "gossip" can often be used as a form of punishment against women for trying to identify and rupture patriarchal norms. However, gossip can serve as a way for women and other vulnerable populations to protect themselves, and to freely circulate information about environments that are often hostile to them. Here, then, we want to foreground and honor these lived experiences and

call attention to how stories are often viewed through gendered, heteronormative, and racialized lenses when they are ascribed more or less authority. Interestingly, the turn away from lore very much follows this pattern of gating shared knowledge. At the same time, we also acknowledge that lore and storying can perpetuate non-inclusive, simple, and otherwise unhelpful narratives about our field. Turning to labor, and considering that less than a third of writing center directors are afforded the protection of a tenure-line (National Census of Writing, 2017), we feel that direct–at times anonymous–testimony is the best way to disrupt many of our current understandings around the conditions of their labor. This book, we hope, facilitates this necessary conversation about labor while recognizing that our profession includes scholars who have engaged in storying our work in other intersectional ways (Haltiwanger Morrison & Evans Garriott, 2023; Webster, 2021; Faison & Condon, 2022; Hallman-Martini, 2022; Caswell et al., 2016).

Methods

The Call for Stories

When we put the call out to listservs, social media, and direct colleagues, we described the objectives of the book and the central topics of labor, material needs and conditions, joys and frustrations in the work, student and contingent labor, advocacy and reform, joining and leaving the field, and more. We wanted to collect as many narratives as possible, recognizing that we may not have space for all of them in a traditionally conceived academic monograph. We worked to try to accept *all* submissions for Act II, only disqualifying a couple that did not quite identify the task in the call and would have to have been completely rewritten. Accordingly, after publication of this project, we are collaborating with *WAC Clearinghouse* to develop an archive that includes future labor narratives.

Inspired by the oral historian and radio broadcaster Studs Terkel and his book *Working* (1974), which collected oral histories of a broad range of workers across the United States, we wanted to capture what we saw as the essence of the lived experiences of workers in our field. Yet, we also realized that the hundred-plus stories that Terkel featured in his book were highly excerpted and edited. We also recognized that, sadly, our publishing landscape does not really allow for *Working's* unorthodox publication approach (10 books of stories on related themes clocking in at over 750 pages). This book–along with a digital archive–will allow the stories to live beyond our purposes and expand this project's scope and reach. We imagine, for example, practitioners who might seek narratives echoing their own experiences and find comfort, commiseration, and possibly solutions. We also hope these stories provide a corpus for other researchers who seek to better describe and understand our field in more nuanced ways. And, of course, we hope you and your colleagues will contribute stories to the archive to help this project grow and change over time.

The Feedback Process

From the beginning, feedback and community engagement were critical elements to story development. Ahead of the call, we held a virtual writing collective where we invited prospective contributors to workshop their ideas. In fact, the labor story heuristic that we include below and the resource in Appendix A were originally developed out of these workshops as guidance for contributors who were trying to "story" their labor experiences and who were getting hung up on the "laundry list" approach to writing about work that we commonly see in our field. Then, stories were collected through a Google Form with other information such as contributor(s) name, institutional affiliation, position, and attribution structure (i.e., anonymous or with name attribution). Once the stories were submitted, we worked with the writers–through multiple rounds of feedback and, in some cases, additional meetings–to ensure that they were telling their stories in an accessible way, honoring the word limit (to ensure as many submissions as possible), and conveying themes directly related to the book. We also wanted mostly unadulterated stories–ones that were not heavily excerpted, edited, or otherwise mediated, as can happen when collecting stories using interview methodologies like Terkel or even like some of our colleagues in the field.

However, we must acknowledge our own editorial and researcher roles in mediating these narratives. As Chase (2011) explained, "When narrative researchers interpret narratives . . . they begin with narrators' voices and stories, thereby extending the narrator-listener relationship and the active work of listening into the interpretive process" (p. 424). We hoped to reconceive notions of narrative agency and the typical researcher-subject dynamic by simply offering a topic–labor in the writing center–and enabling workers to tell their story rather than guide them with questions. In turn, however, we needed to make sure that these stories would meet the needs of their audience, exercising and negotiating another form of agency.

In the process of collecting stories and assembling the book, we also worked with participants who wanted to write anonymously or de-identify themselves and their institutions. Indeed, part of what motivated us to collect stories in this way was inspired by the conundrums of anonymity. For example, in describing her research in rural Ireland, ethnographer Nancy Scheper-Hughes (2000) outlined some of the problems with representing others' accounts. In particular, many of her participants took offense at her interpretation of them and what they had tried to convey to her. Much of this happened through her efforts to anonymize them. At this time, faculty in higher education are experiencing many different kinds of challenges to their academic freedom, from what they are able to teach to how they can present their identities in the classroom to retaliation for detailing an institution's negative treatment of workers (AAUP, 2022). Accordingly, we asked contributors to provide their own accounts of their work experiences and work histories with the option to publish their work anonymously or with attribution. Several contributors

who chose to remain anonymous cited the compounding challenges that BIPOC, queer, disabled, and other intersectional academic workers face, especially when in non-tenured positions. We wish to hold space for colleagues who are in such positions and who want to contribute to this collection about work: their voices are necessary. At the same time, we recognize that freedom of speech and other rights related to academic freedom are under unprecedented threat by activist legislative bodies and school boards. In short, it makes sense that many of our more precarious contributors–many of whom are also historically marginalized in academia and our field–want to remain anonymous.

We thus acknowledge that this collection cannot provide completely unmediated, unfiltered, accounts of writing center laborers' experiences. Storytelling is always mediated at a number of levels. Nor is what we offer a generalizable, or even necessarily *valid* data set. As Polkinghorne (2007) pointed out, the point of narrative inquiry is not about the accuracy of events but rather to understand the meanings attached to those events by the narrators. As we worked with contributors, we emphasized the importance of their impressions and experiences while navigating the quandaries Polkinghorne (2007) observed in narration: that words alone are not always enough to adequately convey meaning, that narrators can be selective in their meanings, and that rhetorical situations shape how and what meanings are expressed. Our aim in providing editorial feedback, then, was to help our participants render their meanings for a broader audience interested in learning about the conditions of writing center labor. We also hoped that in writing and revising these stories, the contributors found new meaning in their experiences and, perhaps, new modes of action.

The Writing Collective: The Challenges of Storying Work

Even as we collected stories, though, there were challenges. At the virtual writing collective, we had to clarify expectations, help narrators articulate their stories, workshop narrative drafts, and commiserate. We worked to establish a community, encouraging participants to introduce themselves and share a bit about their work. We then broke into small groups. In one group, Dan provided feedback to writers who brought drafts. In another, Genie workshopped story and structure ideas. Other groups consisted of participants sharing their stories with one another and providing suggestions for writing them. This event–which had over 40 people in attendance–made us realize how hungry people in our field are to tell their stories and to connect and commiserate. Writing center work can be lonely, especially for administrators, as there is usually only one of us at an institution. But even among those who identify as tutors, professional staff, assistant directors, etc., there is also a desire to connect. As stories started to be shared, resources were given, comments were made, and people engaged with each other.

Afterward, we looked at the narratives people produced based on feedback and resources from the writing collective, and other early submissions we

received, noticing that many contributors tended to "academize" their stories by including lengthy citations, sharing research findings, offering report-style accounts of their center's successes, and otherwise over-explaining many of the elements around their story rather than focusing on the story itself. We realized that it can be difficult for people to tell their stories without centering other voices, other scholars, additional data, center reports, and such. Because we are trained–and perhaps socialized into–believing that research and certain kinds of data are the main ways in which to communicate about the writing center when it comes to our individual and personal life experiences with work, we found contributors struggling to find the plot, so to speak, of their story. Rather than extracting testimony, we saw the writing collective–and the resources on storying work that grew out of it, as well as the multiple feedback rounds that took place before and after that event–as a chance to help contributors assert narrative agency and move away from the kinds of capitalistic accounting so common in annual reports, presentations, and even academic scholarship in our field.

Perhaps because we are both steeped in non-fiction–as readers, scholars, and writers–many of the things that we advised contributors to do come from the field of creative writing and, specifically, writing non-fiction, as the heuristic we shared with contributors via email (below) demonstrates. We recognize, however, that it might be difficult for practitioners to toggle back and forth between different ways of knowing, interpreting, and describing their work. To address this rupture and to support contributors in engaging in the storying process, we offered a heuristic for storying labor here and a more detailed resource below (Appendix A) that guides writers to "narrativize" their work experiences and engage in the storying process. We hope this will be useful for pedagogical settings where different forms of storying (e.g., counterstory, narrative, oral history, etc.) are taught or in spaces where individuals want to engage in the creative writing process about their work but feel unprepared or uncertain about how to get started.

Guidance for Storying Your Labor: A Heuristic

- Try to move outside of an academic/scholarly narrative voice.
- Reduce citations and use APA to avoid over-reliance on direct citation.
- Find the narrative thread–sometimes, this is visual, sometimes it is aural, sometimes it is conceptual, sometimes it is mnemonic–and work backwards from there.
- Set a specific setting (sitting under a desk with a drill; standing in an examination room in a repurposed children's hospital turned office complex) for your readers.
- Composite similar experiences into one arc to avoid confusing, repetitive, or circular details.
- Be creative with dialogue: draw from journals, emails, memos, and other records.
- Work towards interiority: what were you feeling (then and now)? Why

might others behave as they did? Get into the minds (and identities) of your character.

- Think of a takeaway–stories don't always need to moralize but a lesson learned can help others to connect with your story and leave with a purpose or point.

We want to note here, however, the tension in presenting narratives as authentic while also mediating them for a larger audience or because of concerns about professional/personal retaliation. Personal narratives are mediated but they can also help us to reveal a kind of truth through engaging in the reflective and cognitive processes of writing personal non-fiction. Throughout the book–most especially in the Interchapters in Act II–we engage in the sorts of reflexivity required of narrative inquiry but we also want the stories to stand on their own as testimony about the experience of a variety of writing center workers in 2022.