

Chapter 3. Key Concepts in the Book

Below, we share and define several key concepts (in order of appearance) that help to guide our discussion in this book. We bold the font of the concepts here and bullet point them for ease of reading, but they emerge more organically in the discussion of the book's exigency in Act I, in the stories and interchapters of Act II, and in how to take action in Act III. We also hope, however, that other concepts will surface for readers who bring their own identities and experiences of work to these narratives. Thematics—and Genie's and Dan's work on this—can only take the reader so far. Thus, we offer discussion prompts alongside brief interchapters that attempt to situate the stories while leaving a lot of room for interpretation. We have arranged the concepts below by their order of appearance in the project.

- **Neoliberalism:** A philosophy positing that governments and institutions work best by serving private interests and by privatizing its functions. It is “devoted to enforcing economic competition, protecting the power of businesses, and celebrating the ‘free market’—that is, the capitalist market—as the wisest and best judge of people, institutions, and ideas” (Leary, 2023).
- **Anti-Capitalism:** Philosophy, political ideology, and set of social movements (e.g., Civil Rights, Black Liberation, Black Feminism, Global Feminism, Labor Movements, Occupy Wall Street, etc.) that oppose free market, capitalist economic approaches. Can involve replacing capitalism with other economic systems like socialism, but not necessarily so (See Wright, 2019).
- **The Managed University:** The result of neoliberalism's incursion into academia. This has led to “the emergence of a new kind of ‘academic capitalism’ . . . that shifts resources away from a wide range of traditional, but economically marginal, university activities, and redirects them to activities that generate revenues and enhance the competitive position of U.S. corporations in the global economy” (Mahala, 2007).
- **Metalabor:** Work for and about work. Metalabor is a form of invisible work most specifically engaged in the work of validating writing center labor so that the “actual” labor can occur and thus be compensated.
- **Labor Organizing:** The many and varied activities that include union drives, signing union cards, taking work action through strikes and walk-outs, collective bargaining, contract negotiation, union recognition by management, and other actions and processes related to the establishment and continuance of organized labor through unions.
- **Pleasure Activism:** Anti-capitalist activism or “the work we do to reclaim our whole, happy, and satisfiable selves from the impacts, delusions, and limitations of oppression and/or supremacy” (maree brown, p. 11, 2019).

brown discusses pleasurable activities separate from intellectual (or paid) work, such as food, fashion, humor, the erotic, the arts, and “passion work,” even as she also recognizes that there are “policies and power dynamics inside of everything that makes us feel good” (p. 11). Pleasure—and who feels it and who does not—in a capitalist society is bound by precarity, oppression, and scarcity. Engaging in pleasure activism—particularly focusing on “those most impacted by oppression”—we can tap “into the potential goodness in each of us [even as] we can generate justice and liberation, growing a healing abundance where we have been socialized to believe only scarcity exists” (p. 11).

Where Are We Going? Story Trends

While we discuss this more specifically in the interchapters of Act II, it is important for us to trace the labor trends of the field reflected in the stories that were submitted and that will be featured here in this book. We received a great deal of interest when we circulated our call for contributions in spring 2022. This, again, likely speaks to the current moment perhaps more than our specific call, insofar as there is a renewed interest in work and stories about labor.

The stories in this book are highly personal, weaving together personal life experiences and moments with ideas and experiences about writing center labor. Directors talk about students who have affected their work. Peer tutors talk about navigating the vagaries of their work—especially when they feel underprepared to do their jobs. Many talk about the gendered dynamics of writing center work and the precarity of marginalized workers. Some talk about class and how this impacts their work ethos and workplace interpersonal dynamics. Several stories talk about the transition from tutor to administrator—from job-to-job, including leaving the profession—which reminds us that this work, and our expectations of it, can change over a career. All kinds of events—first jobs, births, deaths, new positions—help to shape these stories. What this tells us is that we not only bring to the writing center the full weight of our life experiences; we also experience a lot of life (often divorced from writing) in our writing centers!

At the same time, material conditions can and do lead to workplace tensions. Contributors detail taking on more responsibilities with fewer resources provided to them: doing “more with less.” Some talk about feelings of survivor’s guilt and imposter syndrome as they received relatively stable (even tenure track) positions while their colleagues did not. Yet, others talk about their desires to grow beyond their current positions at the same time that they feel worn down by constant self-advocacy for their professional growth. Writing center work is described as a “side hustle,” as a “dream job,” as “unsustainable,” and as “weird” (but in a good way!). In many of these stories, the contributors detail having to stretch themselves in ways they previously had not considered before they became writing center workers and they talk about some of the struggles with doing this work unsupported.

However, many of these accounts also present joy. Many contributors talk about the special something—sauce? spice?—that comes with doing writing center work: the gratitude towards mentors and feeling love and pride in empowering student writers; the experience of feeling like this work was *meant* for them—a calling, not just a job; the gratitude towards others; the community (and meaning) we find in our professional lives outside of our institution; the “weird” serendipity and pleasure of encounters between writers and tutors in the writing center as an under-explored mainstay of the work. Many also talk about the pain and guilt of having to leave untenable positions or having to take a step back from doing unsustainable levels of work for little to no compensation. The writing center work, however, never seems to be the mitigating factor in these stories. Rather, the material circumstances—the administrative callousness, the lack of professional advancement, the tensions between unions and management—often drive the decision to leave.

Despite these issues, several stories detail their protagonists (and they are heroes) refusing to give up. They continue to advocate for the importance of writing center work and the value of writing center workers even as they are sometimes devalued in this work themselves. They volunteer their time, they push to make more ethical and inclusive spaces, they do supportive work even when they are no longer affiliated with the writing center, they engage in collective bargaining, they advocate for tutors to HR for better wages and more accurate job descriptions, they question current administrative practices, they demand better of their workspaces and workplace practices. And while even just a fraction of this advocacy work is a lot, it is often far above and beyond their job duties. The invisible work of writing centers is so often hidden and under-explored, yet understanding it can make the difference between a sustainable position or wage and an unsustainable one.

These observations led us to articulate one of the core concepts of the book, explained earlier and further explicated in Act III: metalabor. Nearly all the stories featured in the project describe some form of metalabor. In writing center studies, the term first appeared in reference to one of Caswell, Grutsch McKinney, and Jackson’s (2016) case studies. The pseudonymous Anthony was a second-year director struggling to balance his assorted identities/affiliations in the field: scholar, teacher, administrator, and all of the sorts of work associated with those roles. Caswell et al. (2016) explained:

Anthony’s internal struggles strike us as a kind of labor about labor: a metalabor, if you will. It is different from emotional labor, which we see as highly relational work. And yet this worrying about identification has the same drag on his everyday and disciplinary labor that emotional labor (sometimes) has for other participants. (p. 61)

And though the stories in Act II show the “same drag . . . on everyday and disciplinary labor,” we would distinguish our conception of metalabor in this

project from Caswell et al.'s (2016) use by broadening it: we argue that it comprises the various sorts of writing center labor that are not explicitly involved in the production of sessions. More specifically, *metalabor is the work done in order to make working possible, feasible, and/or sustainable*. It is the often-Sisyphian task of addressing (mis-)perceptions about what the writing center does in an institution; the constant negotiation over rank, salary, positioning in the university; the bargaining for wages, budgeting dollars, and other resources that make the actual act of hosting sessions possible; the advocating for legitimacy; the work found in community organization; and still more. If you have ever done this sort of para-work for the privilege of simply doing “the” work of writing centers, you have engaged in metalabor.

Beyond passing reference, writing center studies provide little formal conceptualization of how this vital and time-consuming work that writing center workers perform outside of their formal duties impacts the field. Our contributors talk about sudden changes to their material circumstances (loss of staff, reduced budgets, cut positions, etc.) that required a lot of metalabor (advocating, report writing, coalition building, meetings, etc.) in response. But under the surface of these accounts is how blindsided we seem to be by metalabor, despite how often it arises in our profession. We are not prepared for metalabor, which is perhaps why we tend to overwork and take a reactive stance to our labor rather than a proactive one. We are always on the backfoot. We need to reveal the metalabor we and our colleagues perform, we need to deconstruct it, and our professional organizations and publications need to analyze it; we should not do such labor individually and privately.

We hope that these stories help you navigate your own writing center labor. We hope that the contributors’ experiences prepare you for new writing center positions while also recognizing how often our expectations may not be met with the resources or support that we expect (and perhaps were provided in the writing centers where we cut our teeth). We hope you are inspired by stories that reimagine writing center labor as more sustainable, mutual, and compassionate. We hope you turn to these stories if you are giving birth, mourning the death of a tutor (or family member), or are considering ways to disrupt your center. In short, we hope these stories inspire you and teach you and that they show you a world outside of your own work that is collective, connected, just, and fair.

Engaging with the Book

Because of the unique structure of this book, we envision many ways to engage with its contents. We see this book as having three interrelated but distinct “Acts.” These Acts are temporal stages in our book project. We see Act I as looking back at our histories and examining our exigences. Act II looks at the lived experiences of our current moment. Act III looks ahead. We hope to create a kind of continuity that “parts” or “sections” do not fully capture. These Acts are not meant to invoke a play,

though we do see drama unfolding in and through the stories collected here. The main throughline in each Act is work, but the first and third acts of the book are co-written by Genie and Dan and they provide a roadmap for readers, whereas Act II largely consists of the stories of 34 writing center workers along with inter-chapters that provide questions for discussion and some engagement with themes. We also hope readers bring their own analytical lenses to bear on these stories.

- Act I asks *Where Have We Been?* It provides context for the past and recent state of writing center work; it examines how neoliberal capitalism which gives rise to austerity impacts that work; it connects much of our labor to the concept of metalabor; and it argues for why storying this work is critical to collective action and a clear-eyed sense of the profession (especially for new practitioners).
- Act II considers *Where We Are*. It is a repository of stories that others can learn from, study through discourse and corpus analysis, and commiserate with. This is the “gossip” Robillard (2021) and Micciche (2018) allude to as being a means of circulating vital information to protect laborers and let them know they are not alone.
- Act III asks *Where Are We Going?* It further interrogates the concept of metalabor in connection with the stories in Act II; it provides a guide to unlearning internalized capitalism; and it further details how to take collective action in the workplace, reimagining writing center labor using an anti-capitalist framework.

After a lot of discussion, we *reluctantly* placed the stories in Act II in grouped themes (see below) that speak to commonalities in the stories as well as throughlines about labor, such as care work, advocacy, trauma, etc. Coding and organizing stories, as we anticipated, was challenging because even when a story examined precarity or workplace trauma, for example, it also talked about advocacy, joy, or other positive aspects of writing center labor. This is the double-edged nature of the work we do—the thorns and roses, so to speak. Some of these stories admittedly could just as easily have been grouped into one category over another. So, while we gave these stories themes for ease of reading and as a way to structure crosstalk between contributors, we encourage readers to make their own meaning (perhaps in courses or in book clubs) out of these stories as they move through the book. As we’ve asserted elsewhere, the structure we provide to these stories is mediated and incomplete. We recognize that the complexity of these stories might not be fully reflected nor contained in the themes we developed. Nor do we offer the final say on what these stories are accomplishing. In fact, we have kept the interchapters brief—and included discussion questions—because we hope readers will bring their own analysis and interpretations to each story. We also hope to create community around storying and its interpretative work.

For readers at different places in their professional journeys, we provide some prompts to consider based on subjectivity and career status. We can imagine

early-stage practitioners taking away very different things about the current state of the profession and writing center work from these stories than those who are mid-career or senior practitioners. For those with more stability in their positions, we hope that you find these stories drive you to action on behalf of those with less stable positions; perhaps you can advocate for wage increases or you can recommend hiring tenure lines for this work at your institution and elsewhere (i.e., through external reviews, accreditation reviews, etc.). For those with less stable positions, we hope that these stories help you to create a career plan, and to advocate for yourself and others who are in similar positions at your institutions. We also hope that our organizations do more work to understand our changing field and become advocates. In many ways, we hope that this book radicalizes its readers and helps them to shape a burgeoning class consciousness but also labor-centered politics. This radicalization will help individuals navigate the managed university and hopefully encourage collective action. We would also argue that our approach is *not necessarily all that radical* in that it extends several vital strands of current scholarship around race, labor, intersectionality, social justice, and more. As a field, we are so adept at sharing trainings, budgets, reports, data, etc. Imagine if we applied that collective ethos to unionization, worker rights, and field-wide standards.

The thematics we decided upon are as follows:

- Theme 1, Career Trajectories and Labor: Narratives tracing the development of careers and stories of leaving the field.
- Theme 2, Precarity & Failed Advocacy: Narratives detailing the precariousness of writing center working conditions, focusing particularly on contingency and examples of metalabor that didn't succeed
- Theme 3, Advocacy Successes: Narratives where laborers successfully worked toward more just, sustainable, or meaningful labor conditions
- Theme 4, Identity and Labor: Narratives grappling with intersectionality and labor, including Queer labor, labor done by BIPOC workers, and with class consciousness
- Theme 5, Trauma and the New Workplace Normal: Narratives examining the role of trauma and how we adjust to it in our work whether derived from the pandemic era or from trauma external to the center, such as deaths and campus emergencies.
- Theme 6, Care Work and Sustainability: Narratives examining how mutual support, care work, solidarity, weirdness, and joy in communal practices can give rise to enjoyable and positive work experiences.