

Chapter 38. Disruptive Labor: The Transformational Work of Pushing Boundaries

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When I started working in our campus writing center as a writing center specialist in 2007, I was surprised at how little writing tutoring I did. I mistakenly assumed that having been hired as a well-paid though part-time writing tutor with benefits, I would, above all, be tutoring writing. I quickly learned that writing tutoring was reserved for faculty consultants whose writing center hours earned them a course release. At that time, it was a particular point of pride for the writing center and the department that housed it that writing tutoring was provided by full-time faculty.

The part-time writing center specialists primarily worked with students enrolled in developmental writing courses who spent one hour per week in the writing center reviewing language mechanics and taking required grammar quizzes. Our work was to provide feedback on students' practice activities in their workbooks and additional practice worksheets provided by the center. When a student was ready to take a quiz, we would administer and then grade it, offering detailed explanations for items where points were deducted. My other work included answering the phone, scheduling appointments, making photocopies, filing, shredding, and logging which chapters students had completed in their workbooks. My suggestion that the bulk of these tasks might be better allocated to a student worker was viewed as implausible.

"I feel like a receptionist," I blurted out in frustration one day. I was called into the coordinator's office where it was explained to me that grading grammar quizzes was "a form of tutoring" and "very important work." It wasn't that I thought language mechanics were unimportant. I just knew that this labor was inconsistent with writing center theory and practice. I also wanted to engage in more meaningful labor. I had a vision of what our writing center could be that far exceeded what we were. I wanted to share that vision and help make it a reality.

Dissatisfied with the limitations placed on me and wanting to bring our center into the 21st century and into alignment with standard practice in the field, I vigilantly watched for the right opportunities, and I pushed.

I pushed to abort the antiquated grammar quizzes, and while the center was slow to abandon them, faculty gradually stopped assigning them. I pushed for the creation of a mission statement and adjustments to the center's hours of operation. A new coordinator, open to these ideas, made them happen. I pushed for the

adoption of electronic appointment scheduling software, which we finally adopted once other centers on campus initiated the move away from paper scheduling. I pushed for the part-time professional staff and adjunct faculty to be allowed to serve as writing consultants. Again, a new coordinator readily adopted this into practice. I pushed for faculty writing consultants to have computers at their desks to use during appointments with students, and a retiring faculty member donated funds earmarked for this purpose. I pushed for the writing center to work with digital texts. With an increase in multimedia projects in our freshman composition courses, others slowly opened to this idea. I pushed for online appointments, which we piloted unsuccessfully, but were able to implement years later when the global COVID-19 pandemic required everyone to work remotely.

This labor of pushing was long and painful. A passionate and rather impatient person, my pushing was initially aggressive and understandably not well received. The resistance I faced largely due to my age (27 and newly graduated) and gender (female) frustrated and even angered me at times. I sighed. I raised my voice. I felt beat down and ragged. I kept pushing.

For years, my questions, suggestions, and presentations of research were viewed as challenging and threatening. And not entirely without good reason. The position of faculty coordinator of the writing center offered only a three-hour course release, hardly time to inspire the person holding it to embrace much less cultivate change. The specialists and faculty consultants alike understood the problematic structure of the coordinator position, but we never gained any support in redefining that role. It was a losing battle against the very ways long-time stakeholders at the college defined our writing center's value.

I was told I was "too invested," that I "worked too much," was "making others look bad," and that I was "subversive." My ideas consistently met with opposition. The message was clear: don't rock the boat. I think what others saw was someone trying to capsize it. What I wanted was for us to work together to build a ship because the boat we were rowing was obsolete and risked sinking. This became painfully obvious years later when a new Vice President of Academic Services asked an interim dean to make some cuts, eliminating over half of our faculty tutoring hours.

By this time, however, the entire staff was enthusiastic about change. For the first time, the administration was asking us what the writing center should be and how we could most effectively maximize our resources to best serve our students. This created a stronger sense of ownership over our work and space to look at the possibilities of our labor instead of its limitations. The seeds of change I had sowed now had fertile ground to take root in our community.

Together, we pushed for full-time hours. We pushed to do more of the writing tutoring ourselves. We pushed for expanding our services. We pushed for closer ties with the newly implemented corequisite model for composition courses. We pushed for greater collaboration with departments outside of English. We pushed for an embedded tutoring program.

Something amazing was born from all that pushing. Eventually, people started listening.

The coordinator position was suspended, and a new dean was hired who made the writing center a priority. Asked to review the writing center and make some changes, he led us through a grueling, year-long formative program review process. We interviewed faculty, staff, and students across campus about their perspectives on the role of the writing center and some of the new ideas we had for serving our students. As we drew the entire campus into the conversation, others began to envision the greater potential of writing center work too. This was the beginning of large-scale shifts in institutional attitudes toward the value and potential of our center. Recognizing the opportunity for our center to redefine itself and grow, we collectively pushed even more.

We brainstormed. We researched. We collaborated with each other and stakeholders across the entire campus. A new vision of the writing center was born, and now the center is thriving. The staff are all full-time. The writing center is no longer a place for grammar quizzing. Faculty, staff, and students are less likely to view the writing center as a place to get an essay edited. There is a growing vision of the writing center as a community space for writers. The center is now associated with process and practice instead of language mechanics. It is a place where writers hone skills and build confidence. The writing center is no longer confined to its physical location either. It sets up shop in the campus commons, at our outreach centers, and in virtual spaces; the specialists visit more classrooms; and a new embedded tutoring program was successfully launched. Working together as a team pursuing a specific vision, we were attuned to and seized the opportunity for change when it presented itself, and our writing center was transformed.

I was fortunate that I worked at an institution that valued writing center work enough to pay us competitively and provide benefits even if the work was only part-time. Because of this, I had space to invest in pushing boundaries. My passion for tutoring writing, persistence in pursuing my vision, and my refusal to be defeated by outdated and entrenched ideas of writing center work were essential to the eventual transformation of our center.

A lot of writing center labor often abandoned to silence is the disruptive work of pushing boundaries. Adopting this work into our conversations about what we do is an important part of changing narratives about writing centers and writing center work. While transformation requires a team effort and institutional support, it can begin with one person pushing against existing limitations of space, resources, and mindsets. This labor can be loud, difficult, painful, and frustrating; but it is necessary. There will be resistance. You will feel exhausted, sometimes outraged, possibly even defeated. Change is slow. It requires persistence, resilience, collaboration, and teamwork. Plant the seeds of change. Tend to them patiently. Be attuned to timing and seize opportunities. Guard your time. Work within realistic boundaries. But keep pushing.