

Chapter 39. Keep Writing Centers Weird

James Donathan Garner
AUGUSTA UNIVERSITY

“We’re done early. Could we look at one of my poems?” The student fumbled around in her backpack, removing a well-loved, spiral-bound notebook.

“Sure. What’s it about?” I replied, eagerly flipping my legal pad to a new page.

I was no poet, but I was a new Ph.D. student in Rhetoric & Writing at the University of Texas at Austin. First-year R&W students could work either in the writing center or in a digital writing lab. I had worked in writing centers as an undergraduate, between college and grad school, and later during my MA. Living for the first time in Austin, I thought that the familiar environs of a writing center might make adjusting to graduate school easier. Tutoring would be an easy side gig, and after five years of it, nothing could surprise me.

“Great. I’ll have to sing it for you, though. It’s like *Lord of the Rings*.”

Okay, except that. *That* surprised me.

Before I could process what was happening, the consultee began to sing forlorn iambic tetrameter couplets in a distinctly high-fantasy idiom. Dragons roared. Lovers mourned. Soldiers clashed. A tyrannical wizard god met his end in a torrent of fire. The modest tutoring room buzzed with the expected noise of concurrent meetings, but as enthrallment and confusion washed over the room, it gradually fell silent. I don’t remember how long the poem lasted. In the moment, as I scribbled furious notes to battle the unnerving feeling of having all eyes on our table, it felt like an eternity.

However long it lasted, it was, well . . . weird.

Weirdness isn’t a quality that writing center practitioners often ascribe to (or want to ascribe to) our work, especially given our perennial fights for institutional legitimacy and vital funding. When we do talk about weirdness, it’s generally to capture more uncomfortable events happening in our spaces (McKeehen, 2017). In fact, as much as I love writing center work enough to have devoted over a decade of my life to it, when I stop and think about it, the labor involved is itself kind of weird.

Take, for instance, our bread and butter: the one-on-one peer consultation. Two perfect strangers sit down together to discuss writing. One has more training than the other but not necessarily a lot more. The writer shares a draft that they’re likely anxious about. Sometimes, that writing contains material that’s deeply personal, or it’s simply personal because the writer has sunk time and tears into it. If it’s academic writing, the tutor probably isn’t an expert in the writer’s field. And the tutor has just a few minutes to build trust before the whole thing goes

sideways. Peer consultations have been some of the most rewarding, exhilarating, and transformative events of my life, but—except for the most convivial extroverts—they are not normal social interactions.

By the time I reached UT, peer consultations no longer felt weird, but I'd certainly had my fair share of weird ones. As an undergrad, I once had to explain to a student why inserting frequent profanity into her sociology research papers probably caused the bright red grades slashed across her essays to be lower than she wanted ("Shit, you're right," she replied). Perhaps my favorite weird moment entailed helping a student draft a custody agreement for a shared Xbox (his friend got the console Monday through Thursday. The student I worked with got it on weekends—no question, the better deal). Of all my weird writing center moments, though, being sung a fantasy ballad at 3:30 pm on a weekday was by far the weirdest.

But I don't want to be misunderstood as complaining about weirdness in writing center labor. In fact, I think that weirdness—weirdness of a less sinister variety, which actually contributes to understanding between tutor and writer—probably occurs in writing center work more often than we stop to recognize. Call it "productive weirdness," a weirdness we should celebrate and embrace. All of these experiences—even helping a student figure out how to maximize his gaming time—were productively weird as they revealed potential and possibilities in writing center work that I wouldn't have noticed without having my comfortable understanding of peer tutoring disrupted. My tutee's own literary hero, J.R.R. Tolkien, once wrote that what he termed "fairy-stories" could show us how to look at green and be astonished again by red, blue, and yellow (Tolkien, 1983). I see productively weird moments similarly: they can be opportunities that shift our understanding or teach us something new, helping us see all of the possibilities of the writing consultation that we may take for granted.

It feels appropriate that the student sang to me in Austin, TX, known for its famous rallying cry of "Keep Austin Weird," first coined in the early aughts. From 2000 on, the slogan could be seen emblazoned on bumper stickers, t-shirts, billboards, storefronts, and more, a crucifix held aloft by small business owners to ward off the forces of capital swarming to suck the life out of the Bat City's local economy. The slogan's actual success is unfortunately debatable: tech oligarchs and real estate moguls have made a meal of the city's last remaining bits of character. Likewise, Wassenich's call for Austin to retain its weirdness has been rendered bloodless, succumbing to commodification as part of a wildly profitable marketing campaign. Nevertheless, this episode is instructive. Both the original spirit behind this rallying cry and the slogan's failure illuminate how I understand the productive weirdness that we encounter in writing center work.

Being sung poetry about immolated wizard gods while tutoring shifted my understanding of why writing centers matter. It could have been a moment to stop the student and re-explain the norms and decorum that upheld our legitimacy as an institution within the broader university system. Or just to tell her,

“Hey, this is interrupting the other sessions.” But I’m glad that I didn’t. When she finished her song and our conversation became lost again in the gentle hum of the other sessions, she explained that her dad, who had passed away a few years earlier, would read *The Hobbit* to her and make up melodies for the poetry. Writing (and singing) fantasy poetry gave her a way to feel close to him, and she was grateful for a place to share her work. There aren’t many other institutional spaces where this could happen, but the writing center can be one.

I just had to learn to welcome the weirdness.

We collaborated on her writing weekly for the next two semesters. We discussed her coursework, her novel, and—of course—more poetry (it was a five-book cycle). She sang verses a few more times, and our discussions of her verses, of how she assembled words and images to stir the same feelings in her audience that she felt reading Tolkien with her dad, trickled into our work on her class projects and led to lots of engaging discussions about writing and genre expectations. Weird sessions can be tough, but the minor discomfort is nearly always more enriching than the ones that go perfectly according to plan. Sometimes, they may even refresh your perspective of work that had long become commonplace.

In the years since those sessions, I have moved from tutor to graduate student administrator to writing center director. If I could encourage my writing tutors in one thing, it would be to welcome those moments of productive weirdness. But productive weirdness is a tricky thing to try to capture and cultivate, especially in writing center work, which is so situated and dependent on social interactions that it can be difficult to anticipate. You can’t just make these moments happen, so they’re hard to prepare for. Even if we could, we would risk hollowing out what makes them special by trying to codify and replicate them. They would, like Austin’s ill-fated slogan, cease to be weird.

So how, precisely, do writing center administrators and practitioners keep our centers weird without forcing it? At the risk of undermining everything I wrote in the previous paragraph, I see a few ways to hold space for the productively weird. First and foremost, productive weirdness starts with helping tutors appreciate the messy humanity that makes up our learning communities. Sessions don’t always go according to plan, but we can help tutors prepare to welcome these moments by giving them the tools they need to listen actively, see the best in the writers they collaborate with, and adapt to meet those writers’ needs in the moment. Relatedly, administrators can work to design and promote flexible policies and practices that grant tutors the autonomy to improvise when writers’ needs conflict with our rules. Finally, writing centers can continue cultivating inclusive spaces where every writer feels welcome and confident that they belong. Without embracing the sometimes uncomfortable, sometimes joyful moments of productive weirdness, writing centers risk becoming too institutionalized and impersonal. Keeping writing centers weird means being receptive and open to every radically individual writer and every radically individual writing task that comes our way—especially when wizards and dragons are involved.

References

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