

Chapter 5. Genie and Dan's Origin Stories

This project began innocuously as conversations among Genie, Dan, and many of our peers in conference hotel hallways, meals between sessions, and phone calls to check in with each other. We shared stories.

What we present here is, at its core, a collection of stories: stories to challenge us, to upset us, to bring us joy, to excite us, to activate us, and most of all, we hope, to unite us. In the spirit of storying experience and of unity, Genie and Dan first share our own stories of labor and our burgeoning class consciousness as we entered the writing center profession. We offer them in hopes that others will consider what motivates them, what sustains them, and what they wish to change in their own experiences with work.

From there, we include stories from 34 contributors. We have broken the stories into themes, though, as we note in Act I, we hope readers find their own meaning and connections (of which there are many) among these stories. We also include thematic interchapters where we share some insights from reading and putting these stories into conversation.

But first, here are our origin stories.

Genie's Story

I have always been interested in people's stories. When I was dissertating, life narratives surrounded me. I heard people talking about their lives on the bus and the subway. I looked at advertisements from upscale supermarkets that promoted their organic food by telling its "story." I gobbled life narratives in comics, blogs, books, and documentaries. Stories also shaped my earliest memories. My grandmother, my great aunt, my mother, and her friends regularly swapped stories during social gatherings, large and small. These tellings were performative, they were instructional, they were aesthetic, they were effective, and they were visceral and deeply meaningful. Frequently, these stories were about work and its vicissitudes as much as they were about other things.

And though, as an undergrad, I studied stories under an advisor's research methodology (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008), once I became a writing center director, I moved away from this visceral, qualitative, creative, and powerful mode of knowledge sharing and data collection. I bought into what seemed like a very real (but misunderstood) argument that RAD research (Driscoll & Perdue, 2012; Haswell, 2005) was critical to expanding my field of study. Without empirical and countable research (which I glommed onto, though qualitative research wasn't excluded by RAD definitions) writing center studies would be *less than* other disciplines in the field of rhetoric and composition.

It happened over time and out of necessity. In looking for jobs and moving through this field as an outsider, with a Ph.D. in literature, I kept pace with current scholarly conversations about data, specifically, even separate from RAD. These arguments, however, are not value-neutral. So much of the research argued that without data our budgets would evaporate, our centers would shrivel on the vine, and our staff would languish in a kind of austerity hell. I bought into this thinking because, at my heart, I was a very good Capitalist (or a very bad one, by some definitions). I understood work as a meritocracy; I believed that with logic and data of a very specific kind I could convince others to support me. In short, I thought RAD research was the way out of financial precarity.

This story is about becoming an anti-capitalist writing administrator as much as it details my development as a researcher (these cannot be separated, either). What came with years of experience and time spent in different jobs was a hard-won set of lessons where all the data and logic in the world could not protect me from the creeping extractive fingers of neoliberalization (Giaimo, 2023). I traded narratives, stories, and personal life experiences for what I thought were generalizable scales. I added numbers to my reports: writers served, tutors trained, hours spent working, retention, and persistence outcomes. I wove magical proposals for further support, further resources, and stability. And, in the end, as I have written elsewhere (but not so honestly or personally), it was a zero-sum game played against administrators and unfeeling institutions (Giaimo, 2022). In short, data could not protect me from precarity, toxic bosses, laundry-list job responsibilities, my own workism, or any number of other work-related issues that arose. I needed to find another way.

Stories, I realized, are protective as much as they are kairotic and cathartic. Sharing detailed information about institutional culture, pay rates, toxic bosses and departments, state-level meddling in education can prepare us or position us for action. Stories give us information that is critical to navigating complex interpersonal relationships and institutional culture. Stories allowed me to share and mentor and be mentored in turn. They allowed me to be vulnerable, to connect with others, to advocate for change with specific detailed information, and, ultimately, to organize labor at my institutions. Stories, in short, were a way out of that zero-sum game where I provided ever more and complex data only to be told that there would be no raises this year or that my budget would be cut once again or there was no money to hire X (coordinator, graduate assistants, undergraduate tutors, etc.) which we so desperately needed. Stories are critical to understanding writing center labor.

I might be overcorrecting back towards a specific methodology/method—a verb and a noun as Aja Martinez notes (2020)—that I favor in what seems like an uncompromising way. Thing is, I still love quantitative research. I still conduct complex empirical work. These days, though, I don't think that this is the answer to our current labor-related predicament. I no longer buy into the hype.

And I am in good company. In this book, as well as in the larger field of writing center/writing studies, there is more research than ever before of a qualitative

and story-centered approach, particularly on labor. As we detail below, much of this is in the necessary counterstorying work of our BIPOC and queer colleagues, but it is also in the testimony of wellness work, and in the ethnographic research that follows directors navigating their first jobs. Stories are critical to our field—to its origins, its development, and its future. Stories also guide us in our search for meaning, especially in making meaning about our work. Stories help us to realize that we are not alone—no matter how much it seems like it when we are often the sole writing center director or writing program administrator at our institution. Stories give us information which, in turn, gives us power. Below, we share resources for those who want to engage in storying about their labor, but we also share the stories of several dozens of practitioners in the field in the hope to bring a clear-eyed view of writing center labor in the 21st century, during a particularly charged moment for higher education, as well as for labor advocacy and worker rights (2022-2023).

I hope this book provides readers the solace I once felt sitting in my grandmother's apartment listening to her stories or the feeling of vindication that comes from a hurried explosion of truth in passing at a conference or the commiseration that comes from puzzling out day-to-day experiences “at the office” with colleagues. I also hope, however, that these stories help workers in our field to further examine their work and their relationship to it more fully. I hope this book can help workers to compare notes, and to advocate for change. In short, I hope that these stories—counterstories, testimony, testifying, and narrativizing—raise consciousness and lead us to develop more protective behaviors, even as we advocate for change. We are not our production. We are not our jobs. We are so much more. I hope this book and the stories of its contributors inspire others, as much as it has me, to figure out what “more” there is.

Dan's Story

My favorite way to explain the word “serendipity” is that it happens when you go digging for worms and you strike gold: when you go looking for one thing and you find something much, much more valuable. I have benefitted from serendipity more than I probably deserve, and my hope is that the stories we've compiled will serve as such for others because serendipity and stories are what have enabled me to find and persist in writing center work.

Serendipity, for instance, led me to my first writing center experience. I was a military brat who changed schools once a year on average before settling in the rural upper peninsula of Michigan. I was also a first-generation community college student. As such, I was less than a model student my first semester. My grades early in the semester were middling in part due to never having learned how to really be a student—I had no experience with structuring study time, with annotation and marginalia, with what faculty office hours were even for, with peer review, and with even basic implicit knowledge like how to get student loans.

I was working part-time at a local McDonald's and part-time servicing air filtration units in local bars (this was back when people still smoked cigarettes in bars). So, in addition to my inexperience, I was also busy with work because I was paying out of pocket for my schooling and attempting to save for future semesters.

My saving grace was that I was an avid reader and writer. I wasn't great at school, *but I enjoyed it*.

My composition instructor that semester required conferences over our mid-term papers, and though I figured my work was probably passable, I wasn't sure how she would receive it. I entered the meeting ready to plead for mercy and for the chance to revise. However, after playfully scolding me for not meeting my potential, she told me she was recommending me for the writing center. She felt my writing was good, but more importantly, she seemed to feel after meeting with me that I had an appropriate disposition for the work. I had only gone into the conference hoping to plead my case, and I came out with a potential new job: serendipity.

That experience was empowering for me and helped me to become a better student. Serendipity and the writing center continued to be themes for me even after my time in community college. After I transferred, my writing center experience helped me get a job as an embedded basic writing tutor, which later helped me land a job as a languages lab manager. In addition to supervising the assorted world language tutors, I worked with multilingual language writers. This, in turn, opened doors for me in graduate school, where I would return to the writing center. That return later secured precious summer funding for me and helped keep a roof over my new family's head. In each of these jobs, I had only looked for a way to make money, but the experiences kept landing me better opportunities.

That summer work was serendipitous as well. At the time, it was simply a means to pay the bills, but the experience later tipped the scales in my favor, securing my first job out of graduate school: a non-tenure line faculty position developing and directing a writing center. While it was in many ways a means to an end—I needed a job—it was also serendipitous. Now that I had to learn how to run one, I fell in love with writing center work. It was a *lot* of work, but like so many other writing center administrators (including those in this collection), I found joy and meaning in it.

That position also helped me transition to my current tenured position. However, after several years I fell prey to the same sorts of workism, lack of self-care, and shifting boundaries that readers will also find throughout the narratives shared in this book. I was ready to leave the profession—and academia—entirely. I started looking at jobs like those I had held while making my way through school: postal work, custodial work, and manual labor. Mercifully, serendipity intervened yet again.

One of these interventions was the timing of my sabbatical, which happened to be scheduled the semester after I had reached peak overwhelm. In addition to giving me a break, I was fortunate enough that the faculty member covering the

center in my absence (himself an experienced tutor and administrator) was willing to “swap” positions the following year, extending his coverage of the center while I taught a full course load. The time away saved me—not because it was “better,” but because it revealed a lot to me: the toxic work habits I had adopted, how I had been a much more effective advocate for the center than I had for myself, and how deeply my imposter syndrome ran. That imposter syndrome drove so much of my labor in and around the center. More than that, I learned a lot about the “survivors’ guilt” that also informed so much of my labor. After all, in addition to having escaped my working-class roots, I was one of the lucky writing center practitioners in a tenure-line position.

Another serendipitous intervention was through the relationships I developed via conferences. I originally attended conferences to burnish my credentials, cultivate a professional network, and learn about new concepts and trends in my fields. However, I found something far more valuable there: friends and mentors. It was commiseration with these folks—particularly at a conference the semester before my sabbatical—that kept me going. Their stories and their familiarity with my circumstances helped me feel less alone, less like there was something wrong with me or like I was a poor fit for the work. I talked about my thoughts of leaving, and their encouragement helped me persist and reconnect with my original joy for the labor.

In discussing the conditions of our labor with each other and with others, Genie and I came to realize that many of the stories of labor in our field were being lost. There were others like me who considered—but actually went through with—leaving, and their stories left with them. Along with those lost stories were lost opportunities for solidarity, organization, and action. We originally began this project in hopes of capturing those stories and trying to render a clearer and more expansive sense of what it means to work in writing centers in the pandemic and post-pandemic eras. However, in yet another instance of serendipity, we have found allies, colleagues, friends, and fellow advocates. As readers will see throughout the narratives in this Act, writing center practitioners are often selfless advocates for writers and for writing centers. I believe it is well past time that we began advocating for ourselves.