Chapter 6. Laboring to Grow an Academic Field

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My story about starting a writing center began in 1975 when I had only a vague sense of what a writing center should or could be. When administrators in the Purdue Department of English decided to offer funding for some kind of tutoring help for writers on a one-year trial basis, the academic world in the 1970s was coping with vocal charges of "Johnny can't write" (Palmquist, 2020). Solutions needed to be found. The call that went out to Purdue's English Department was answered by three grad students studying literature and me, a faculty wife and mother with a doctorate in English 16th-century literature, whom they occasionally hired as an adjunct to teach composition. The challenge the grad students and I faced was to plan a tutoring place where we could meet students to help them with their writing. Though we had all taught composition classes, we had only a vague sense of what that tutoring center should offer or how it should be set up. Since there was no internet yet, googling was impossible. But internet searching wouldn't have helped much because while there were a few writing centers in existence, there was no field of writing center studies, no organization through which writing center people could meet and share ideas, and no books or journals focusing on writing center scholarship. Thus, we lacked any basic knowledge of models to study, questions to ask, or ways to begin our journey, but we shared the belief that one-to-one interaction with student writers could be more effective than grading papers written by students with whom we had no personal contact.

Eager to start meeting writers one-to-one, the three graduate students and I began to collaborate before we even realized the value of collaboration. We asked ourselves huge, broad questions, such as "Where do we start?" and "What do we need?" as well as smaller questions, such as "How long should each session be?" and "Should we make up some handouts?" Giving students a handout to take away, we all agreed, would help students remember what we talked about and give them a sense of having gained something from the interaction. Only later did we realize how much we, as the tutors, needed those handouts ourselves because while we knew a comma was needed there or a paragraph went on too long, we didn't have the verbiage for ready explanations. The handouts were needed by both participants in those one-to-one meetings and helped to personalize a session as we marked important points on the handouts or added a few words of explanation. The collection of handouts grew and grew as we discussed at staff meetings which handouts needed to be revised and what other topics could

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become useful handouts. As the internet came into existence, those handouts became available through email, and later with the birth of web browsers, the handouts became the basis of the Purdue OWL (Online Writing Lab).

What emotional and physical labor was involved as we started a new learning environment without having a model, a plan, or even a well-defined concept of where we were headed? There was an eagerness that kept us working for dozens and dozens of hours through a hot Indiana summer as we labored to prepare for opening the door to our writing lab when the academic year started. What perplexes me now is why we never expected the English department to compensate us for our time and effort. I strongly suspect the mindset of volunteering still exists because people involved in the labor of writing center administration and practice continue to care deeply about their writing center, the tutors, and the students who seek help there. And for too many, there's also an awareness that institutional support for the writing center isn't the strongest. In my case, I became acutely aware of some other faculty members' unhappiness that our writing center was sucking up resources that could have been better spent elsewhere. Among the more overt indications of that happened a few years later, after I had joined the department as an assistant professor. At a faculty meeting, there was an oblique reference to me or the writing center (or, more probably, both) as "the camel that stuck its nose under the tent." The irony here was that I never managed to get the kinds of support we needed (more tutors, an asst. director, more funding for the OWL, etc.) because we managed to have a writing center on a minimal budget. As an administrator near the top of the university hierarchy once told me (when I sought information about how the writing center had fared in the most recent outside review), the institution valued our writing lab because it produced "more bang for the buck." Our problem was that we were receiving great ratings and results with our small budget. (I suspect readers reading that last sentence are nodding in recognition of having the same problem.)

There was and continues to be another form of labor that is somewhat unique to writing center work, and that is the multiple aspects of administering a writing center that instructors teaching in large group settings do not have to deal with. For a writing center director, there is data to collect; reports to write; tutors to hire, train, oversee, evaluate, and professionalize; instructors to talk to about using the center; the physical room to set up and maintain; clerical staff to hire; technology to purchase and run; a budget to keep within; perhaps social media presence to maintain; staff meetings to plan and lead; the need to be physically present for many hours in the writing center; publicity to keep the institution aware of the writing center; and planning for continuing improvement and perhaps an increase of services offered. And–of course–arguments and data to convince administrators higher up the food chain that, if the threat of cutbacks loomed, the center is successful and necessary. Whew! All that is in addition to the labor of other faculty and adjuncts which includes going to conferences, reading the current scholarship, writing for publication, taking on academic service

responsibilities, and being reviewed by the department, though in fairness to classroom instructors, they go to conferences, read current scholarship and have research agendas, plus having to write syllabi, plan classes, grade papers, meet their classes, and hold conference hours–a form of labor that is not part of writing center work. Then again, many (most?) writing center administrators also teach in the classroom setting.

Not getting adequate support while continuing to offer services students appreciate and teachers ask for is a perennial aspect of the kinds of labor so many writing center administrators are involved in. So why do we continue to be so invested and experience so much satisfaction in our work, in spite of the overload, the complaints, the often total misunderstanding of our work, the minimal salaries, the constant need to defend what we do as educationally vital, and the effort needed to keep the doors open? One answer is the positive aspects of the work. We need to catalog those along with the negative emotions and effort as a way to stave off burnout. The joys, for me, included working with the tutors and their earnest commitment to being the best tutors they could be. And there were the tutors who found the professional world they wanted to work in, dozens of those whom I worked with who went on to work in writing center administration. Or the tutor who told us that he was hired for a position that was far more than he expected because the interviewer was impressed that he had been a writing tutor. Another tutor explained that most of all she loved her mailbox in the writing lab because she felt she had a home, a place she belonged to on our large campus. I suspect that in addition to having a mailbox, she also loved being part of the close-knit group of peer tutors who hung out in the Lab and bonded in the various ways undergrads spend time together (after-hours pizza was involved). For me, our long van rides to and from conferences were the highlights of the meetings. Equally rewarding were the reactions of students whom I met with in tutorials. I watched their reactions of relief, of satisfaction, of realizing they are writers, and their comments such as "I didn't know I knew that much" when I showed them notes I had taken as they talked about what they wanted to write. As classroom teachers, we often don't get the sincere and effusive thanks students offer when we've finished a session or finally worked through a last draft. There are also those gifts from appreciative students, especially the elegantly decorated bookmarks and silk scarves we all tended to collect.

While other newcomers confront similar emotional and physical labors, they too will confront the most all-encompassing question we all ask ourselves as we become part of a world we are not yet fully prepared for: "What don't I know that I should know?" The accompanying feeling is that of being enveloped in mists that don't clear, along with the perennial fear that our lack of knowledge will become public, the fear that hides behind the label of imposter syndrome. Perhaps we can seek some comfort in acknowledging along with that ill-defined unease should be an awareness that there will always be aspects of our work we do not know enough about. But that is also a very positive aspect of our work because

it leads us to keep asking questions. And, as we all agree, asking questions is a foundational practice of our field.

Reference

Palmquist, M., Childers, P., Maimon, E., Mullin, J., Rice, R., Russell, A., & Russell, D. R. (2020). Fifty years of WAC: Where have we been? Where are we going? *Across the Disciplines, 17*(3/4). 5-45. https://doi.org/10.37514/ATD-J.2020.17.3.01