

Chapter 9. Why Write?: Writing Center Publishing as Labor

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You seem to assume greater familiarity—with both your own arguments and those of others—than you actually have.

– *Professor feedback on my first seminar paper*

I still remember the first piece of feedback I received as an MA student in rhetoric and composition. I clung close to what was at the time familiar ground, writing center scholarship, but my ability to bridge texts in second language writing and global English ultimately failed. When I received a B in the course, I remember wondering if this was a sign that maybe I shouldn't be in graduate school.

Although I was naïve and inexperienced, I was working as hard as I knew how to. I had no idea what to do with observation-like comments, like the one above, without clarification. I quickly realized direct writing instruction in graduate school was rare, but that learning how to write was essential. I did not know how to read sources together as part of a field's conversation, or how to identify a gap and make an argument that filled it. I was lucky to eventually work with Joanna Wolfe, who taught academic genres (like the literature review) explicitly and shared models of unfamiliar writing (like empirical theses and dissertations). With her help and more experience, I got better at writing.

Early in my Ph.D. program, I learned that publishing is critical to scholarly success. At the time, I was the graduate student representative on the International Writing Center Association (IWCA) board and an attendee at the IWCA Summer Institute. My original idea was to create a blog for emerging scholars that would facilitate the exchange of good ideas rather than being a space where people “signal” their intelligence in ways deemed acceptable by those with power in the field. When I mentioned the idea to then-president Kevin Dvorak, he listened to my pitch and said, “why don't you just start a new journal?”

This idea had never occurred to me, as I continued to feel unqualified to do academic writing work. My only experience with academic publishing up to this point was with rejection. And yet, I wanted to learn more. I became intimately familiar with what was obscured in the writing/publishing/feedback process, and how difficult it was to try and learn about it without a direct connection to someone currently publishing in your target journals. I began to wonder if there was a way to do so, if there was a way to open up the publication process to make it more transparent for new writing center researchers who had important

contributions to make but had little prior experience with the process and thus faced uncertainty about how and where they fit. If you are likely to face cold rejection, why write?

With these ideas in mind, IWCA's most recent venue, *The Peer Review* (TPR), began. From the beginning, we centered mentorship by bringing in graduate students as reviewers and offering support to writers as they navigated peer review feedback and contemplated revision. The journal was open access so that all writing center practitioners could engage with the content, which I believe is one of the first steps to seeing yourself as a capable contributor. And the journal was more egalitarian than others as it was edited by both graduate students and professionals in the field on a rotating basis. In theory, this all sounded quite good and was supported almost immediately by the IWCA board. The funding and enthusiasm were there. Yet, in practice, we struggled hard for the first couple years with respect to the flexibility of the publishing platform, a lack of publication mentorship happening, and incompatibility of editorial leadership styles. It turned out all these central elements—open access, mentorship, shared editorship across roles—were not easy to work out in practice. Our field wasn't used to doing things this way.

I didn't know whether TPR was going to make it until my colleague, Travis Webster, and I opened a call for a special issue on *Writing Centers as Brave(r) Spaces*. We carefully crafted a call and then let the proposals that came in shape the direction of the issue. The writers brought in ways of writing that we hadn't considered before, and rather than being confined by the space of a typical print-based publication, we accepted whatever we wanted and had the space to enable writers to creatively compose and contextualize their pieces. In that issue, we had a wealth of thoughtful pieces, from both well-known and new voices, on diverse topics. For example, we had a dialogue between a director and a tutor as the tutor went through gender affirmation surgery while working in the center and living in a conservative state. I hadn't seen anything like this kind of piece in our scholarship before, and we hadn't anticipated it. We positioned ourselves as thoughtful readers with something to learn. When writers pushed against our suggestions or feedback and explained why, we tried to understand and ultimately support their writerly agency. This meant recognizing that sometimes (often), the writer knows best, not the reviewer nor the editor—a radical idea about publishing in academia.

. . . there is an assumption that more revisions is always better, when, actually, the article reaches a point where more revisions simply make it incoherent and it begins to disintegrate. (Zebroski, 2020, personal email)

This concept, which Jim Zebroski would eventually term “hyper-revision” (Zebroski 2020), is a relatively new way of reviewing/editing in rhetoric and composition studies, and one that does not make for better scholarship. It's not something that was happening 25 years ago, but it's all too common now: gatekeeping

at its worst, working from the assumption that the editors and reviewers know best, including when it comes to the minutiae of a piece. It makes the process of publication more about meeting the (often tedious) expectations of one or two editors or reviewers, not about the story or the message or the findings, and certainly not about the writer. If this is the case, why write?

My work with Travis on the Brave/r Spaces Special Issue helped me learn that writing belongs first and foremost to the writers themselves, and we can trust them. This means that revision and feedback should not be about fitting pieces into what we think they should be, but about trying to understand writers on their own terms and helping them revise in ways that make the piece a stronger version of what they want it to be. With this approach, TPR could be about something other than meeting the expectations of the editors and appeasing all reviewers. Since then, and during my editorship from 2015-2020, we had some tricky situations that required some risk taking on our part to move forward. For instance, we had writers who were incredibly resistant to editorial feedback and who were publishing work that was critical of experienced writing centers at their local sites, thus risking possible retaliation. We also had writers questioning long-standing scholarship and accepted practices in our field. It's a small writing center world, we worried, so might these pieces too directly call out programs and people in our field?

I began to ask: if not here, where? I began to think about the fact that these writers had chosen TPR as a venue to submit their intellectual labor; it was their chosen audience. As editors, here and elsewhere, we are given a valuable opportunity to help decide what stories are heard and told. It is our responsibility to respond with respect, and to recognize that, in some cases, rejection of scholarship is a rejection of an experience, a story, an argument, a voice. Pieces that challenge us, that make us uncomfortable, that require hard conversations, that offend us should signal greater attention and listening, not less. We should not let our ability to gatekeep kill projects of value. This does not mean that every piece submitted should be accepted, but it does mean that we don't have to like, agree with, or fully understand everything that gets published.

. . . our continued establishment of a discipline, our very livelihood and sustainability, rests upon positioning ourselves as a research-based, dynamic discipline led by intersectionally diverse stakeholders. Our queer and of color practitioners are telling us to listen and to act through recruitment, retention, and research. What queer and raced research projects may lie dormant due to an imbalance of labor experienced by queer practitioners? (110-111, Webster, 2021).

In his seminal work, *Queerly Centered: LGBTQA Writing Center Directors Navigate the Workplace*, Travis Webster (2021) raises questions about the connection between labor, research, and how we will continue as a discipline. There is

a lot at stake here. Publication is political, classed, raced, able-bodied, and gendered. Who gets to publish, the authority they are given once they publish, and all the possible voices that are left out of the scholarly conversation are critical to how our field makes knowledge, retains members, and ultimately works with writers. This intersectional approach to publication is one that we need to attend to more in our field and TPR led and continues to lead that charge in a very real way. As editors and reviewers, we should honor people's intellectual labor, hear their stories on their own terms, and provide mentorship through our feedback that helps instead of leadership that hurts and silences. Our entire field, not just the writers, lose when we further marginalize voices different from our own through our publication practices. Our journals should welcome new writers, unpopular opinions, weird ways of writing, and stories we haven't yet heard. Otherwise, why write?

References

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- Zebroski, James T. (2020). Hyper-revision in composition: Neoliberalism and the business of professional publishing. *Quarterly Journal of Composition*, 1(1), 18-37.