

Theme 5. Trauma and the New Workplace Normal

This section explores what happens when awful things that are outside of our control happen in the writing center. Trauma has become an increasingly important topic in writing center and composition literature (Brentnell & Dixon, 2021; Clinin, 2020; DeBacher & Harris-Moore, 2016; Giaimo, 2023; Owens, 2020; Perry, 2016), but here we focus especially on the labor associated with trauma—whether it is emotional, logistical, preparatory, or response-based. We see this especially in the metalabor that accompanied university responses to the pandemic. Although trauma clearly pervades (and is sometimes referenced directly) in many of the stories in Act II, in this section we focus less on the traumas inflicted by our positioning in the managed university and more on how our experiences in the managed university interact with traumas originating elsewhere.

Pseudonymous contributor Belkin (“Tragedy in the Writing Center,” this collection) shares the sad story of a tutor who completed suicide. Detailing “William’s” development as a tutor and his engagement in the writing center, Belkin shares how he honored his tutor’s life but, also, the need for us to support tutors in their labor even as we acknowledge the labor of writing center workers who cope with and have to address these kinds of tragedies (likely without any training).

Lack of preparedness runs through this section whether it is the sudden loss of a tutor (Belkin), an active shooter situation on campus, or the effects of the pandemic on writing center workers and their responsibilities (Chadderdon et al., “A Story of Writing Center Labor,” McMurtrey, “Boundaries and Labor During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” Lundberg, “Bearing Witness”). We navigate these situations often with little training or support. But as we see in these stories, the contributors make meaning and support their workers. Through this kind of community work, they process trauma and make their workplaces more ethical and more sustainable. This post-emergency responsiveness does, however, come with personal burdens and challenges. Chadderdon et al., for example, structure their story as a dialogue that details the events leading up to and following an active shooter situation on campus. While there are no easy solutions when violence presses into the center, this story is evidence of restorative practice and offers ways to process traumatic events together.

The pandemic, of course, features in many of the stories in Act II. Although a wealth of material on writing center work during and after the pandemic has emerged (Giaimo, 2021; Guay, 2023; Jiang et al., 2022; Mayo & Dixon, 2021), we hope these stories provide readers a felt sense of this challenging time, especially long after the pandemic has finally receded. McMurtrey details the dissolution of work-life boundaries during the pandemic and the positive ways in which Zoom and online learning impacted their work. However, they also recognize the need

to reestablish their work boundaries as writing center work is not really in crisis (even if tutors can't work their shifts). This urgency, which has driven many of us for the past three and a half years, is rightfully examined here. We need to find ways to break out of the "on-call" nature of our work that the pandemic (and our institutions) demanded of us. The managed university worked to ensure that labor continued to produce surplus even during this trying time, and the narratives we see in this section bear witness to this exploitation.

Lundberg frames her story as one of bearing witness during the pandemic. Moving online dissolved the boundaries between personal and professional lives, and it unearthed a lot of personal pain and trauma that writers brought into virtual sessions. While many contributors write about difficult topics, Lundberg believes that the remote environment and the pandemic gave rise to an acute vulnerability (and loneliness) in tutoring sessions that otherwise would have remained invisible. From these experiences, she advocates for trauma-informed ways of both tutoring and also talking about tutoring work. The story ends with hope for the future that is accompanied by a reduction in the emotional labor of the past few years.

Hochschild, the originator of the concept of emotional labor, has decried the concept creep that has come with the term (Beck, 2018). She observed that the term has become elastic, leading to a certain blurriness around it. She defines emotional labor narrowly as "the work, for which you're paid, which centrally involves trying to feel the right feeling for the job. This involves evoking and suppressing feelings." Many of these narratives demonstrate just that. While others may not always conform to a narrow definition of emotional labor, they do highlight the often-invisible work that comes with managing emotions and administering during traumatic times. This sort of labor, though not often in the job description, is crucial to writing center work. And we are neither prepared for this work nor recognized for this work. Still, this work is critical to our missions. Trauma finds its way into the writing center, after all.

Discussion Questions

- In "A Story of Writing Center Labor in a Violent Age," Chadderdon, Herb, and Hundley share their perspectives during an active shooter situation and its impact on them (as well as the writing center). What are some feelings that have arisen in an on-campus crisis in the writing center? How have tutors and administrators processed these feelings and experiences?
- How do we, as Belkin shares, respond to the death of a tutor in the writing center? How do we honor workers? Do we have plans in place for responding to the death of a community member?
- McMurtrey details how boundaries around work and availability dissolved during the COVID-19 pandemic, yet the ongoing crisis also shifted how McMurtrey responds to day-to-day crises. How do we set boundaries

in our jobs, particularly during periods of protracted stress or upheaval? What might these boundaries look like? What might we apply from Wright's (2019) strategy of "escaping capitalism," such as pleasure activism and "work to rule," to McMurtrey's discussion of work boundaries?

- Is your writing center "back to normal" or has the culture and the work shifted since spring 2020 and the start of the COVID-19 pandemic? How has your work-life balance been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What positive lessons about writing centers and our work can we take away from the last four or so years, since the start of COVID-19?
- Do we feel like we need to perform certain emotions in our tutoring and administration work? If so, what are those emotions? And, what happens when our emotions about and around our work shift?
- What kinds of emotional labor do we perform in the writing center? Do you think this has shifted over the past several decades and, if so, in what ways and why?