

CHAPTER 10.

# THE WRITING CENTER AS BORDER PROCESSING STATION

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Writing centers align closely, and often overlap, with other areas of writing studies and research. This is especially the case with composition and writing program administration work. In some institutional contexts, writing centers exist within composition programs or are a part of larger writing programs. Certainly, writing centers are as equally affected by institutional systems and contexts. The editors' noted in the introduction,

As writing program administration, writing center administration, and writing across curriculum/communities scholarship shows, it is downright challenging—and sometimes impossible—to do meaningful work, sometimes *because of* the existing systems and networks that define the parameters of our jobs, our spheres of influence, our resources, and our agency.

Systems and networks also often delimit the work of writing centers as much as they form the borders of that work. If writing center administrators aim to change the nature of writing center work, then they must find ways to engage with those systems and institutional networks. Activity theory is one such method of theoretical engagement. As Yrjö Engeström (2015) explained,

Third-generation activity theory expands the analysis both up and down, outward and inward. Moving up and outward, it tackles multiple interconnected activity systems with their partially shared and often fragmented objects. Moving down and inward, it tackles issues of subjectivity, experiencing, personal sense, emotion, embodiment, identity, and moral commitment. (p. xv)

In activity theory, objects can be purposes or goals, but they can also be motivating factors and “generators and foci of attention, volition, effort, and meaning” (Engeström, 2015, p. xvi). What activity theory offers writing centers, then, is a better way of understanding the work we *really* do rather than the work

we aspire to do. Activity theory can help writing center directors and staff better understand and account for the systems in which we're placed, the stakeholders to whom we answer, and the borders of our work. That is, activity theory allows researchers to examine the tensions that exist within an activity system (see also Bradbury et al. in this collection). Samuel Van Horne wrote in his dissertation *An Activity-Theory Analysis of how college Students Revise after Writing Center Conferences*, "Activity systems can be situated in networks of other activity systems, so this framework is helpful for analyzing how different contexts of activity interact and influence each other" (2011, p. 26). Through this lens, we can examine how a student's behavior (their writing habits) necessarily changes when visiting or after visiting a writing center. Like any border place, the writing center functions as an activity system within a larger institutional network.

In the introduction to this collection, the editors wrote of the importance of systems theories in creating environments where social justice can emerge in sustainable ways, especially for administrators. In particular, through these critical action-analyses that highlight social, epistemic, eco-critical, and network theories as practices, as means of professional/corporate interaction, we can open working spaces that can serve differing communities in useful ways. Activity theory allows writing center administrators to take a wider view of the kind of impact writing centers have on students and to find better, more useful ways of serving their locally diverse student populations.

Yet, the writing center isn't just a border. It is itself bordered. And like all border areas, there are limitations to how flexible the boundaries are and to what extent border crossing will be tolerated. Writing centers (and other sites of hegemonic privilege) tend to protect their borders, their boundaries, in order to prevent what might be viewed as chaos. A "center" necessarily centers bodies and discourses, normalizing them and flattening difference. The very name and nature of writing centers, then, may be regulatory and immutable. This may especially be the case when writing centers try to help students meet professor expectations. In Nancy Grimm's (1996) work on "the regulatory role of the writing center," she recounted a story of working with an African American writer in an advanced composition class. While the assistant director "appreciated the unique rhythms and metaphors of the paper . . . a week later the young man returned with his paper, which had been marked by his professor for problems of diction and questions of appropriate word choice" (p. 12). In helping the student change the paper to meet the professor's needs, "the normalized writing practices of the institution remained unchallenged, and the writing center had again functioned to keep things in place" (Grimm, 1996, p. 12). The extent to which liberation is possible in writing centers, then, may be limited by both a writing center's history, the expectations of faculty, and other sorts of institutional networks.

As my title implies, this chapter draws comparisons between writing centers and border processing stations, a “real-world” place that secures and maintains the integrity of country borders. To be clear, though, the comparisons here are purely metaphorical. Border processing stations are imbued with actual imperial power. They control and regulate the physical movement of bodies and can even determine the life or death of those who enter their spaces. Writing centers don’t, even as they work to maintain (deliberately or otherwise) hegemonic power structures within their larger institutions. The comparison between these two types of centers, then, relies mostly on their similar power to filter, exclude or change, particularly when relying upon and deploying a set of standardized practices.

To this end, I’m drawing on the border processing station as a metaphor for the student experience with writing centers. In *Postcomposition*, Sidney Dobrin (2011) complicates the use of space-based metaphors, arguing that “to employ metaphors of space to simply describe the conditions of subjectivity in relation to writing or writing pedagogy is to reduce the potential for what we can ultimately come to know about the phenomena and function of writing” (p. 40). Metaphors can be used to describe this relationship, but description alone is not enough to develop a theory. However, Dobrin eventually noted, “when talking about space, we must acknowledge that we cannot escape space as a metaphor, escape all representation as metaphor” (2011, p. 40). He asserted that descriptive metaphors are a necessary transition for the development of any theory.

To approach a comparison between writing centers and border processing stations, the chapter begins with an account of writing center spaces or writing centers as places. From there, the chapter discusses how the work of writing centers is often described in writing center scholarship before moving into an application of activity theory to writing centers, examining the various moving pieces that can potentially make up a writing center’s activity system and how this system may brush up against institutional networks. Finally, the chapter will close with a discussion of how best to account for potentially exclusionary and border-protecting actions in which writing centers engage in order to craft a fundamentally more equitable center.

## THE SPACE OF WRITING CENTERS

As a field (another spatial metaphor), writing centers often theorize and write about their physical spaces. Jackie Grutsch McKinney (2013) asserted, “[T]he idea that a writing center is—and should be—a cozy, homey, comfortable, family-like place is perhaps most firmly entrenched” (p. 20). Spaces also often figure into the lore of writing centers. According to Randall Monty (2016) in *The*

*Writing Center as Cultural and Disciplinary Contact Zone*, writing center studies “has been historically and inextricably linked to physical space” (p. 10). The most common bit of lore is that writing centers began in basements of academic buildings or libraries before finally emerging from their subterranean origins. One important note here is that “space” and “place” are being used interchangeably in this chapter, but scholars and other theorists treat these terms separately. For instance, Dobrin (2011), in his discussion of geographic principles, noted, “Space is marked and defended; places have ‘felt value’: they have been given identity. Places are divisions of space to which meaning and organization have been attached” (p. 40). Places offer security; space is less limiting.

Dobrin’s (2011) discussion of space and occupation is especially relevant for this chapter. He argued, “What occupies space, then, are bodies: specific bodies that mark and identify segments of the space they occupy” (p. 51). The bodies, the people, in spaces then turn these spaces into places. In this way, the places people occupy become a synecdoche for the people themselves. Asao Inoue (2015) takes Dobrin’s ideas further, casting place as an element in a larger writing (assessment) ecology. For Inoue, a “place” need not be in a physical space. He wrote, “I use the term place to identify both the rhetorical context and material conditions of the production of assessment (judgment) of writing in the classroom, which includes places like writing groups, the remedial location, an evaluation rubric . . .” (p. 159). Inoue draws on Dobrin to highlight the conflict that arises as spaces are defined into places.

The idea of conflict directly contradicts the grand narrative that writing centers assert for themselves, particularly the idea of the writing center as cozy home (McKinney, 2013). McKinney wrote when writing center administrators fill “writing centers with touches of home, [they] may be marking it as familiar and comfortable for directors and tutors, who are often . . . of a certain class (upper or middle class) and cultural background (white American)” (2013, p. 25). Her argument ties into Dobrin’s notion of struggle over spaces. Dobrin (2011) explained,

Space is defined by the boundaries imposed by its occupiers. To make the partitions/borders/boundaries appear natural—nonexistent, if possible—and nonpolitical is the ultimate goal of use: to identify occupations as appropriate, as natural, as correct. This is my space; it always has been. This is the manufacture of consent; this is hegemony. This is how space is used; this is how it has always been used. (p. 55)

Dobrin’s conception of space allows a stronger connection between the idea of a writing center and the border processing station metaphor. The occupiers of

a space define what the space is and, through this defining, create a place that appears to be natural and, therefore, correct. Those who do not occupy the space, but merely visit, are targets for correction. Dobrin noted, “[P]laces may be safe, but they are safe only for those who make them” (2011, p. 55). Writing centers, as outgrowths of composition and, more largely, the hegemonic academic values of institutional networks, are only safe for those who occupy them—much like border stations.

Finally, it’s important to remember that writing centers don’t just exist in physical spaces. The coronavirus pandemic spurred many writing centers, many of which may have only offered face-to-face services, into virtual spaces. As I note elsewhere, “The difference in mode creates new possibilities for bias and prejudice, unconscious or otherwise, that need to be considered, navigated, and mitigated” (2022, p. 19). Online spaces are no less bound by systems and networks than physical spaces, and we should take a social justice lens to online work as well.

## WHAT HAPPENS IN WRITING CENTERS

Writing center scholars talk frequently about the work that goes on in the writing center. In his foundational article, Stephen North (1984) asked, “What is the Idea of a Writing Center?” (p. 437). There are many approaches to answering this question. Many scholars and administrators attempt to answer North’s other call to describe our work, most often a kind of talk, that goes on in the writing center space (p. 444). Anis Bawarshi and Stephanie Pelkowski (1999) discussed how traditional writing centers reinforce histories of colonialism; Grimm (1996) highlighted the regulating function of writing centers; Laura Greenfield (2011/2019) presented the function of racism and linguistic discrimination in writing center practice; Romeo García (2017) argued writing centers should develop decolonial frameworks in order to best serve their locally diverse student populations; and there are others. The writing center is a highly discursive space where “talk is everything” (North, 1984, p. 444), so focusing on the activities that occur within the writing center space, and how they reinforce or breakdown the borders of institutional networks, offers valuable insights into how writing centers currently work and how they can be transformed.

There are best practices in the field of writing centers, particularly regarding the traditional face-to-face writing consultation (or session or conference). From North (1984), writing centers adopt a constructivist point of view for observing student writing; rather than worry about specific texts, writing centers focus on the writing process of students. More directly, writing centers take the writing process itself as their purview. This practice enables writing centers to work

with a wide variety of documents from an increasingly diverse student body. Jeff Brooks (1991), in his “Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Student Do All the Work,” introduced the notions of authority and power in the writing center, ensuring students retain agency over their documents. These ideas also solidify into specific practices like making sure the paper is physically closer to the student or that the consultant never wrote on the document. Building on North’s social constructivist stance, Andrea Lunsford (1991) weaved collaboration as an integral part of writing center work; and in “Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of a Writing Center,” she frames collaboration itself as the work of the writing center.

However, these best practices and, perhaps, traditional writing center work focus more on individuals and their individual actions. Lucien Darjeun Meadows, in this collection, noted how social systems theory can help writing center administrators better understand writing center work by looking at the system of a writing center interaction rather than the individual parts. Meadows’ particular focus is on disclosure and concealment and the ways in which writers and writing tutors may, or may not, “come out” to each other. Even without necessarily revealing part of their identities, Meadows wrote,

[T]here is so much coming out on the part of a writer in any session. Writers must admit they feel their writing needs another set of eyes, must admit the elements of their writing that concern them, and must admit their writing voice and style to consultant-writers with the text under discussion.

Yet, despite these pressures to come out or disclose, social systems theory and the holistic view of a student can allow writing center administrators to resist traditional hegemonic systems and, as Meadows encouraged “to find liminal borderland—room to create, experiment, and play.” Meadows argued being able to queer the writing center consultation in this way, to bend it away from hegemony, turns the writing consultation itself into a kind of third space, a border or in-between space.

While many writing center scholars and administrators write about the work that *should* be going on in writing centers, few of them write about what actually happens in writing centers. Van Horne (2011) utilized activity theory as a framework for analyzing the revision process for students. While he’s mostly examining the behavior of students, Van Horne also makes observations of the writing tutors. He found

[T]he writing consultants did not try to promote situation redefinition by moving the discussion away from the text

toward a conversation about the strategies the student used to produce the draft. They conducted the conference at the level of the student in order to fulfill the student's agenda. This contradicted the main philosophy of the writing center, which was that a conference should be a productive conversation about the ideas in a piece of writing. (2011, pp. 1-2)

In activity theory, a situation definition is generally a set of expectations one has for a particular kind of space or activity. When students had a plan for their writing, they also generally shared a situation definition of the writing center with the tutors. That is, this type of prepared student expected from the writing tutor what the writing tutor expected to give. In contrast, students without a plan for their writing had mismatched situation definitions for the writing center; their expectations did not match the expectations of the writing consultants. However, despite being trained in process-oriented, minimalist, and collaborative tutoring, these consultants did not attempt to shift the students' perspectives. While Van Horne's study is admittedly small (he only observed eleven students), his methods are detailed.

## ACTIVITY SYSTEMS AND WRITING CENTERS

Van Horne's conceptual framework offers writing center practitioners ways of re-thinking how their work is done and how their spaces are created, particularly regarding the various end goals of writing center work and engagement with institutional networks. When viewed as an activity system, we can see writing centers functioning as microcosms of larger cultural values. Engeström (2015) claimed, "[H]uman learning is pervasively shaped according to normative cultural expectations. Such expectations are extremely diverse, and they change historically. Thus, human learning processes are also very diverse and continuously change" (pg. xviii). Larger cultural views and values, then, influence what "good" learning looks like or change perspectives on how people "should" learn, which necessarily changes the processes and procedures for sites like writing centers. Yet, students are not just entering into the writing center's activity system—they also become part of that system and can influence it as well. Engeström asserted that a prescribed process from an instructor may not always be followed by the learner, that the learner may deploy their own process for learning. How can our systems allow students to develop and deploy their own processes without attempting to process the students themselves?

Before going further, we should first examine the components of a writing center's activity system and some of the various other systems with which

it interacts. Aside from discussing what actually occurs in a particular writing center (rather than on what *should* occur), Van Horne (2011) also discusses the boundaries of writing center work and how other academic sites, specifically classrooms, relate to the writing center. He asserted, “But for all of the writing about how faculty should or should not use the writing center, there is little research on the actual ways that instructors integrate a writing center’s services into their pedagogy” (2011, p. 223). However, better understanding the relationship between faculty and the writing center is critical to understanding how students themselves interact with the writing center. Van Horne recognizes that the writing center’s activity system exists within “a network of other activity systems in which students are completing many kinds of writing assignments” (2011, p. 223). What are the components, then, of a writing center’s activity system? While Van Horne is also examining how social structures mediate activity, the scope of this chapter is much narrower. However, we can still draw on the adaptation of Engeström’s (2015) model of activity systems that Van Horne applies to writing centers.

In Van Horne’s diagram, we can see the various activities that occur (or should occur) in the typical writing consultation. He has provided pertinent labeling of this activity system in at least two stages: an initial visit to the writing center with a rough draft and what happens after that session. Van Horne locates the student as the subject in this activity system and “Ideas about the topic” or “Current draft” as the object of the activity, depending on which stage the writer is in. The outcomes in each lead, eventually, to a new draft of the paper. However, the tools used to mediate the activity vary, it’s likely that these tools change relative to the subject-student.

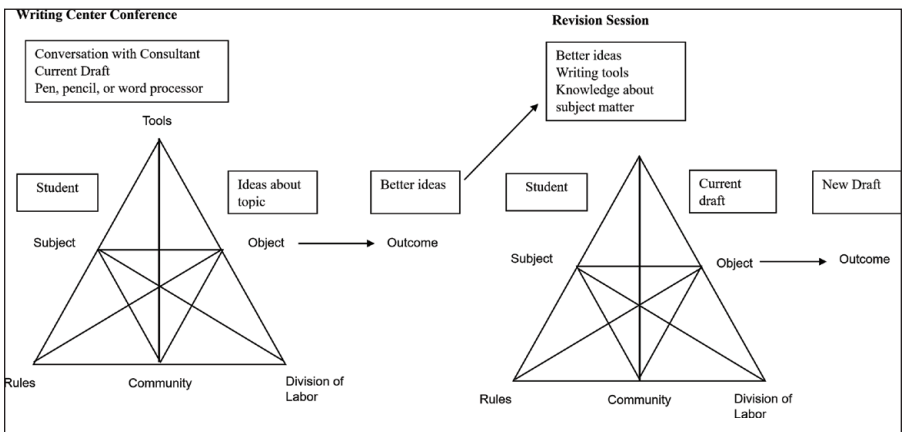


Figure 10.1. Van Horn's depiction of Activity Systems of the Writing Conference and Revision Session.



Viewing the writing center and the classroom as activity systems allows us to see the motivations some students have when entering our spaces and how institutional networks may pressure them into engaging with us. Do students choose to come to the writing center? If so, why? Or are students compelled to come to the writing center? Does the professor require writing center visits of all students? Does the professor require visits only for certain students? When a student enters our spaces, we need to consider what brought them there. Students do not always visit because “more often than not, they are genuinely, deeply engaged with their material, anxious to wrestle it into the best form they can” or because “they are motivated to write” as North (1984) contends (p. 443). Sometimes they come just to fulfill the requirements of the course or to get the necessary points. We must question at what point a student experiences a border or a harbor, and by whom that systematic understanding is enforced.

The writing center visit can just as easily become another barrier rather than a truly integrated part of a writer’s process. As Engeström (2015) noted, “[T]he concept of activity is necessarily connected with the concept of motive” (p. 54). However, Engeström also discussed the all-controlling nature of activities and activity systems. He asserted, “Under the conditions of division of labor, the individual participates in activities mostly without being fully conscious of their objects and motives” (p. 54). In terms of writing centers and writing classrooms, students may be required or recommended to visit the writing center without fully understanding what the purpose is, which could especially be the case when the professor requires all students to visit the writing center.

However, these compelled visits may disproportionately affect students whose writing is viewed as somehow “aberrant” or “basic.” These students may be ostensibly identified by their language use, but Greenfield (2011) noted the role race and racism play in such identifications. She argued that students of color are asked less to learn a particular dialect (in this case, dominant academic discourse or what might be called Standard English) and more to rid “themselves of all linguistic features that may identify them with communities of color” (p. 46). When students are referred to or coerced (through grades) into the writing center to have their writing “fixed,” what’s being changed is more than just surface-level linguistic features. Writing centers are also playing a role in changing parts of the student’s very identity. In this way, we see how the activity system, and the larger institutional network, may control individual behavior, may contribute to border processing, rather than the individual being a truly empowered agent.

When discussing what work goes on in the writing center and what writing centers should be producing, one should also examine why and how certain policies or rules are adopted over others, who controls these policies, and who benefits from them. There are common practices that seem to span writing centers: reading

a paper aloud, not writing on the paper, asking questions over providing answers, and so on. Within the framework that Van Horne (2011) provides us, these policies become part of the “tools” section of the triangle because they mediate the writing consultation activity, determining what can be done and what cannot. For example, the main rule of the writing center that Van Horne observed is “consultants did not write on student papers” (2011, p. 60). This type of policy was popularized in Brooks’ (1991) idea of minimalist tutoring, resisting the imagery of writing consultants as editors. Yet, this focus on what *not* to do did not necessarily control the editing impulse. As Van Horne observed, “If the rule was supposed to prevent consultants from . . . making too directive suggestions to students, the rule was not effective. I observed consultants tell students exactly which word to use or which punctuation mark to use” (2011, p. 61). This policy helped mediate writing consultations that might be considered more directive than a consultant modeling a sentence for a student or even physically adding the punctuation marks themselves.

This aspect of writing center work, of enacting best practices without thinking of their various negative effects, is particularly deleterious for students who come from places of difference or who use nonstandard discourses. As García (2017) wrote, “The power of whiteness continues to shape contemporary forms of management and control of practices and writing center scholarship” (p. 32). Writing centers (and their administrators), even as they seek inclusion, diversity, or student empowerment, as they seek to produce better writers, are always working from places of hegemony, their implicit practices serving to reinforce traditional power structures. Grimm’s (1996) story of an African American student writing in Black Vernacular English (BVE) results in the student changing the paper in order to meet the expectations of the dominant academic discourse. In Grimm’s telling, the consultant did not feel comfortable, or empowered, to confront this standardizing force. Indeed, both the writing center and the student became objects in the activity system of the institutional network, with the professor’s policies demarcating the border both for the student and the writing center.

Within the realm of activity theory, these invisible, unquestioned practices or values help produce the object of an activity system. In most cases, what is produced by the writing consultation activity is a real draft or new draft of an assignment. Van Horne (2011) makes space for the product to be “better ideas” in his model of activity systems, but these ideas are then used to produce or enhance some form of writing. What this model of activity system does not make space for, though, is better writers as its object. Ultimately, this may be because student-writers and the consultants who work with them have different aims and end goals. As Engeström (2015) explained, the actions of instructors and students are

dialectically intertwined. This means that the prescribed and

planned process the instructor is trying to implement must be compared and contrasted with the actual process performed by the learners. The two will never fully coincide. The gap, struggle, negotiation, and occasional merger between the two need to be taken as key resources for understanding the processes of learning as processes of formation of agency. (p. xix)

If writing centers are working to produce better writers, as North (1984) urges, ultimately, we are also producing more independent and empowered writers, who may be less willing to make the changes we recommend or to respond to the questions we ask.

There are contradictions inherent in activity systems, such as the one above. Students who have thought less about their projects or feel less ownership over their writing may be likelier to cede authority to writing consultants (Van Horne, 2011). They are, thus, likelier to be more responsive to direct suggestions and recommendations but less responsive to the Socratic style of questioning that may characterize writing center work. Students who have a stronger sense of agency over their writing projects may demonstrate the inverse: more responsive to the conversational model of the consultation and more resistant to directive methods. Yet, the contradiction lies in the use of the writing center—how boundaries and borders of agency are realized and by whom.

Although North (1984) posited, “Nearly everyone who writes likes—and needs—to talk about his or her writing,” it can be argued that writing centers typically serve writers who are identified as struggling or basic (pp. 439-440). In the eyes of many faculty, serving this student population is the *raison d’être* of writing centers. Engeström (2015) explained, “The essential contradiction is the mutual exclusion and simultaneous mutual dependency of use value and exchange value in each commodity” (p. 68). That is, even as writing centers work to produce independent writers, the existence of writing centers relies on the presence of “dependent” writers. Or rather, writing centers rely on identifying certain writers as basic, an act that disproportionately affects students of color, students from nonstandard discourses, and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

While not discussing activity systems specifically, Greenfield (2019) analyzes the conservative and liberal impulses that influence the policies of writing centers and how these policies don’t necessarily translate into actions. In critiquing the liberal practices of writing centers, Greenfield asserted, “Seeing it as futile to change their environments, many liberals work from a defeatist perspective in a way that serves to perpetuate the disparities in power they would otherwise critique” (2019, p. 52). This results in a lack of meaningful action to change

environments or to change the activity system. Instead, what results is a kind of cognitive dissonance. Specifically, Greenfield points to the “Students’ Right to Their Own Language” resolution from the Conference on College Composition and Communication. She argued, “These educators cite the resolution to pay lip service to valuing difference without drawing a tangible roadmap to change” (2019, p. 53). That is, what writing center administrators say they do is not necessarily reflective of what actually occurs in their spaces. This lack of a map from intentions to actions may be the result of the writing center’s activity system which, because it so closely overlaps with the writing classroom, prevents this kind of change from becoming the object of the system. The use of one spatial metaphor as an attempt to escape another spatial metaphor is potentially troubling but working at the level of description is arguably necessary for identifying how a writing center’s structural elements impact and affect the student experience. As others in the collection also note, by being transparent about our programs’ positionalities within their larger systems of operation, we make it more possible to transform those systems. Transforming complex, invisible systems begins by working with what we can define.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter offered a brief activity theory analysis of writing centers, examining the tensions that arise between the student and the writing center and the institutional network. This chapter highlighted how what writing centers say they do does not always, or even often, match up with what actually occurs in the writing center. Like any activity system, the writing center gives rise to contradictions between stated and enacted goals or objectives and these contradictions then inform the ways in which actors understand and interact with perceived borders or boundaries on their own agencies. However, without the language of activity theory, writing center administrators (and rhetoric and composition administrators more generally) may be less prepared to grapple with these contradictions and change the objects, or what is produced, from their systems. The writing center has products. Its existence as an activity system necessitates them. However, we lose the ability to determine these products if we lack the awareness of the tools that mediate our activities. We may find ourselves producing something antithetical to our mission statements or enacting policies that unwittingly oppress the students who come into our spaces. This risk is intensified if the students who come into the writing center are compelled to be there, moved by the activity system of the classroom or the larger institution. What activity theory offers writing centers, then, is a way to be more intentional and deliberate in how they work with students, writing instructors, and their institutions.

To better understand their activity systems, writing center administrators, and rhetoric and composition administrators more broadly, might expand upon Van Horne's model of the writing consultation's activity system. What Van Horne examined in his study was a slice of the work that goes on in the writing center. There are other branches of the system that are worth examining, especially along the Community and Rules points of the triangle. There are activities and decisions occurring well before the student enters into the writing center's physical or virtual space. When thinking about the rules of the writing center, administrators might interrogate where those rules came from and whom they benefit. These rules don't only need to concern the writing consultation itself; the rules around appointment-making, paper formatting, or other more procedural tasks are also worth investigating. When it comes to community, administrators might examine who they're hiring onto their staff and what backgrounds tutors or other professionals are bringing into the writing center. We know that the people in a place shape the definition and nature of that place; how do writing center staff affect the writing center as a place? How do they influence the writing center's activities? If writing tutors and other professional staff are all from similar backgrounds, there may be a greater danger of hegemony being reinforced in writing sessions, in document creation, in workshop presentations, and other manifestations of writing center work. However, diversity is one way to counter hegemony. Of course, diversity may extend beyond race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status. We might also think of diversity in terms of majors or areas of study, nontraditional student status, or other types of non-academic experience a tutor brings with them. While administrators need not fully diagram the larger view of their writing centers, it may be worthwhile to perform a sort of audit of the rules that govern behavior in the center and the sorts of people who inhabit it.

Woven into this discussion are metaphors of vision and space. To invoke the writing center as a border processing station is to invoke the hegemonic power writing centers, and spaces like it, wield in order to maintain their activity systems. This chapter relies on these spatial metaphors in order to make apparently neutral functions more visible. The danger of hegemonic power is not just that it oppresses, excludes, or forcibly transforms those who are considered aberrant, but that the processes by which it performs these functions often go unchallenged because the underlying motivations for these functions are unseen. While students have their own motivations for visiting or not visiting a writing center (and sometimes this motivation has a coercive cause), writing centers also have their own motivations when creating policies and procedures that dictate how they work with students. The work to recognize, name, and potentially change these motivations remains ongoing.

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