

2

CHANNELING JIMI HENDRIX *or Ghosts in the Feedback Machine*

Ear always came after eye in the creative process.

*Trinh Minh-Ha, on learning the importance
of the soundtrack to film production. (202)*

On June 28, 2000, the Arts and Entertainment section of *The New York Times* covered the opening of Seattle's Experience Music Project (Hendrix fans will recognize the reference in the project's title), focusing particularly on the museum's showpiece, a work entitled *If 6 Was 9* (also known as *Roots and Branches*), "a giant sound sculpture made up of 600 guitars strung along the branches of a metal tree rising more than 30 feet into the air," and on the sculptor of the piece, Trimpin (like Cher and Madonna—one name only, please). The article chronicles Trimpin's "more-than-20-year obsession with turning acoustic instruments into sculptures that can be played by motors or by valves that release water, air and even fire." Particular attention is given to prototypes of *If 6 Was 9*, a dozen or so "player" guitars strung along the walls, set in motion by striking a key on Trimpin's computer.

Trimpin traces his interest in such experimental instrumentation to his childhood. His fire organ, for example, ("a thermodynamic organ that uses a glass flame in a Pyrex tube to produce sound") harkens back to the bonfires he used to go to as a child. There, residents of the town would heat wooden discs in the fire and launch them into the air. Trimpin recalls that, while others watched the glowing objects being hurled into the distance, he was (*shhhhhh*) listening: "I could always hear choirs singing and whole symphony orchestras playing in the sounds created by this tremendous heat. . . . I always looked forward to going to the bonfire because I could listen to this symphony" (Strauss 2000, A5).

By the end of the article, Trimpin is readying himself for a James Brown concert that evening. His parting comment? “I like to go to concerts and galleries and museums, but when I go to the junkyard I have the same experience, because I can fantasize about discovering things. So junkyards and museums and concerts are all on the same level for me: there are inspirations to be found at all of them” (A5).

I start with Trimpin simply because this piece is so appealing to me. I want to give it to my students when I talk to them about creative vision, about the artist’s angle. While others are looking up at the night sky, Trimpin has his head cocked to the side, listening; while others may be content to make music within the constraints of existing instrumentation, Trimpin makes instruments that will play the music of the world he hears around him. I want to give it to my colleagues, to remind them that, while we may find intellectual stimulation and challenges in teaching the honors students, the scholarship students, the campus student movers-and-shakers, we can also find joy and challenge and stimulation among those students relegated to what many consider the academic dump. The writing center as junkyard.

As a child, I often spent Sunday mornings with my father and his best friend, Mr. Abby, trash-picking. We’d begin with breakfast and coffee at the Pitt Grill, where my father would run into people he knew but whose names he could never remember. Then we’d drive slowly around town, tapping the brakes as we passed piles outside the neighbors’ houses. Occasionally, like Trimpin, we wound up at the dump, but most often we stuck to our garbage-picking drives.

I don’t know what became of most of the trash my dad and Mr. Abby rescued on those Sunday drives, but I have come to love the one piece I remember. Driving around one morning, they passed a huge roll-top desk (72 inches wide by 48 inches high by 36 inches deep), coated with the lime-green paint that was popular in the 1970s and covered with muck and crud from having been stored in a shed or maybe even left out to brave the sticky Louisiana summer. According to my dad, he and Mr. Abby couldn’t believe their luck, and they rang the doorbell to make sure that the people in the house intended to throw this piece away. Indeed, they did. My dad and Mr. Abby hauled

it off in a borrowed furniture delivery truck, but not before they paid the man \$50 for it. My dad says they couldn't in good conscience take it for nothing.

Working all summer, the two men painstakingly restored this piece, slat by slat, drawer by drawer, in the garage behind our house, until that roll-top desk was ready to occupy the whole back wall of our formal living room. In a home filled with antiques lovingly selected and cared for, the roll-top desk, set out to pasture only months before, became the most stunning piece of all. I was fascinated with it then, for all its secret hiding places and for the textures on its surfaces, for the rolls that I used to finger like the keys on my piano. I am fascinated with it still, for those things, but also for what it represents. And though I no longer visit junkyards or pick trash from my neighbors' drives, I like to think that some of my father's and Mr. Abby's sensibility resides in me, that I now spend my days in a writing center, dusting and polishing and admiring things that my neighbors might discard or dismiss.

I love Trimpin's vision for its sense of possibility, for his fascination with what surrounds him at the same time that he fails to settle for that. What is noise to the townsfolk circling the fire, sounds carried off by the wind, is music to Trimpin, carried in his head into adulthood. In important ways, Trimpin operationalizes the aesthetics contained in Luigi Russolo's *The Art of Noises*, penned nearly a century before.¹ Russolo imagined a "futurist orchestra" whose instruments would be built specifically to realize the "six families of noises" characteristic of everyday life in an industrial society (28). While Russolo's descriptions of the specific instruments and performances are fascinating, it is Barclay Brown's introduction that provides readers with a sense of the project's significance. Brown, who also translated Russolo's work into English, describes *The Art of Noises* as issuing forth "a new musical aesthetic," one which has as its thesis, "If music is sound, why does not music employ all the varieties of sound?" (2). Composing pieces for this urban symphony necessitated "the construction of an entire orchestra of incredible instruments with which to realize that model" (3), an enterprise that consisted of "twelve different systems of noise generation [with names like 'the

howler’, ‘the roarer’, ‘the gurgler’, and ‘the hisser’], each producing a highly characteristic timbre” (12). Russolo’s crowning achievement, however, may have been the “noise harmonium, a unification of the twelve basic timbres within a single instrument that could be played by one performer” (15).

Russolo and his contemporary F. T. Marinetti were careful to note, and I feel I should note here, that “the four noise networks [were] not simple impressionistic reproductions of the life that surrounds us but moving hypotheses of noise music. By a knowledgeable variation of the whole, the noises lose their episodic, accidental, and imitative character to achieve the abstract elements of art” (Marinetti, qtd. in Russolo 18). With this quote, I am returned to the PC memos. Perhaps, for me, the noise of the writing center has lost its “episodic, accidental . . . character,” has become instead a “moving [hypothesis] of noise music.” *F-f-f-fluidity*, as Davis might say.

In much the same way, the epigraph from Trinh Minh-Ha that opens this chapter disturbs the solid state of the lab, the clinic, the center. It reminds me of how rarely we are inclined to set the gaze aside—to the extent that we can do so, at least momentarily—and rely on our other senses, in this case on our sense of sound, for what it can tell us. Tales of writing centers are invariably tales of location, of space. They involve a privileging of the gaze. But we have learned (through feminist initiatives, through multicultural initiatives, through postmodern, postcolonial, and queer theory) that the gaze—once posited as objective, as disinterested—is actually quite partial: both limited *and* interested. The perspective of the gaze, in other words, has been called into question and we should be searching for ways of representing ourselves *to* ourselves in partial terms. Paying attention to noise might be one way of doing so. Where we can shift our gaze, avert our eyes, even (as Peter Elbow points out) close them altogether, we have no such aural filter. Many of us, I would imagine, talk with tutors about the difference between hearing and listening—the former being passive, the latter being active—for example. In other words, we receive sound in an undifferentiated manner—it is disorder; it is chaos—and we

must constantly labor to make sense of the input, to filter and to direct our attention appropriately.

Our writing centers seem clearly to be academic spaces designed to explore the relationship, to exploit the tension, between sight and sound. The memos in the prologue to this book, however, have forced me to acknowledge how very little we say about what we hear or what others hear in the din of our writing centers. Following Trimpin, following Russolo, I think as a result we may be foreclosing possibilities we have yet to imagine. Trinh Minh-Ha writes, “SILENCES are holes in the sound wall/SOUNDS are bubbles on the surface of silence. Sound, like silence, is both opening and filling/concave and convex/life and death. . . . [E]ntering into LIFE is also entering into the DEATH process. Every day lived is a step closer to death and every sound sent OUT is a breaking IN on silence” (203).

What a beautiful image, I think: sounds as bubbles on the surface of silence, as eruptions/disruptions, rising to the surface and returning to obscurity, sound and silence as partners rather than opposites. Silences as momentary risings to the surface of (ambient) sound. Here’s Davis quoting Jean-Luc Nancy on this issue: “When a voice, or music, is suddenly interrupted, one hears just at that instant something else, a mixture of various silences and noises that had been covered over by the sound, but in this something else one hears again the voice or the music that has become in a way the voice or the music of its own interruption: a kind of echo, but one that does not repeat that of which it is the reverberation.” (2000, 234).

It is these re/surfacings I am interested in: What are they? Where are they? What are we doing with them? Bubbles may burst with the shocking force of a straight pin on a balloon or with the gentle *plink* of a soapy round blown from a child’s plastic wand. How do we know what we’re listening for?

Nancy Welch writes about breaking in on such silences, on death-work and life-work, in a chapter of her book entitled “Collaborating with the Enemy,” a piece she describes as a “chronicle of loss, violence, and compromise” (1997, 37) between Welch (as tutor) and Lee, an ex-marine struggling to make sense of his experiences in the Gulf War.

Welch cites previous work on the teacher-student/Lacanian analyst-analysand relationship (specifically Robert Brooke's 1987 *College English* piece) as "helping [her] to see the process Lee describes of 'opening up' and 'letting go' as trust between [them] being established" (38). Brooke's analysis falls short of illustrating for Welch, however, what to do when that relationship is threatened by "sharp shifts in emotion and attitude." Welch offers a few examples: "As Lee, for instance, hits the brakes, becomes wary of me or his text, or as I become wary of him and his writing" (38). It is worth quoting Welch at length here, as she explains what we might make of such moments:

Even while our dialogues promise a means for understanding, they can also expose our illusory sense of wholeness and lead us into death-work—the dismantling of that fragile scaffolding of experiences, beliefs, and identifications we experience as self. A student's resistance to this revision-as-death-work is very much a part of the transference relationship. Resistance for Lacan is the mark of a divided self striving to maintain unity and stability even as the self perceives contradictions and gaps—contradictions and gaps that, given the intimate link between language and being, are felt as a death threat. (38)

Welch is careful to note the possibilities these gaps hold, the potential not only for "revelation, revision, and learning" but also for threatening the carefully constructed stable sense of self that student *and* teacher hold dear (39).

The process of revision is also at the same time a process of life-work, according to Welch, *if* we imagine that working together, teacher/tutor and student, might involve reveling in the gaps as productive spaces, might involve a teaching/learning dynamic that is "dialogic, relational *and* interfering and disruptive" (40). Or, to put it in terms particularly appropriate for this chapter, "[I]t's *within* that rhythm of dissonance and consonance, with self-consciousness of the dynamics of control and resistance, that teaching can locate its liberatory power" (40).

The liberatory writing center remains a goal toward which many of us strive, but the writing center also—as has been suggested by

Nancy Grimm, Neal Lerner, and others—can be read as functioning institutionally to *impose* order, to contain the chaotic nature of this otherwise “unruly” mob. In the introduction to her book *Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times*, Grimm calls writing centers “normalizing agents, performing the institutional function of erasing differences” (2000, xvii). We all know that this doesn’t happen: students don’t leave here looking any different, dressing any different, having more money, or even, quite frankly, sounding *different enough* to say that writing centers have accomplished this task. Grimm knows this too, and she makes a more persuasive argument later when she describes the function of the writing center not only as a “normalizing [agent]” but as an institutional distancing mechanism for “special” populations: “Because faculty distanced themselves from social change by the very programs they established to manage change—writing centers, at-risk programs, equal opportunity programs—curriculum and teaching methods quickly become out of sync with the changing student population. Serious gaps between the rhetoric of inclusion and the actual conditions belie the appearance that the university has included a new constituency” (9-10).

Writing centers themselves, according to Grimm, are implicated in this distancing maneuver, in the appearance of cleanliness, and she cites writing center professionals’ desire to be seen as something-other-than, something-more-than a remedial service as one attempt at such distancing:

[M]any writing centers distance themselves from a remedial classification by promoting writing centers as places for *all* writers, *not just* remedial writers. The *not just* qualifier was a defensive response to the lack of recognition accorded those who work in writing centers. Thus, the increased diversity of students in higher education is avoided twice—first by universities establishing programs like writing centers that distance faculty from students; and second by writing centers’ distancing themselves from a remedial function. (10)

This kind of critique is hard to hear, and I mean that, here in this chapter, quite literally.

When framed as Grimm has framed it, I don't know of one single writing center that escapes the bounds of this critique (though I'm certain once this line is published I will be informed of a few!). Frankly, I don't know how a writing center could. My own doesn't. I have spent my entire tenure at Fairfield challenging the remedial associations of writing center work in part because—why?—it's what we do, it's part of our History, and because it is true enough, I believe, that seeking out response to their writing *is* what writers do—all writers. Yet, when I read Grimm, I am ashamed. And shocked that I had never had the thought before.

HARD (HEADED) NUMBERS: INEFFICIENCY AND
WRITING CENTER OPERATIONS, PART ONE

After reading Grimm, I suppose I should be happy to report that my repeated attempts at writing center inclusion have arguably had little demonstrable effect on the actual population of students who frequent the writing center. Most of these students still come (or are sent) because they're having "trouble." The literature on writing centers suggests that this is in fact the case in most writing centers. And, I find it a profound irony that, just as many writing centers shy *away* from their remedial mantles, they are being pulled *into* discussions of institutional efficiency and the efficiency model of operations. It would seem that we are being beaten at our own game.

I fear, sometimes, that we are too willing to give our institutions *what we think they want*, whether or not it is what *we want* or, ultimately, even what *they want*. The shift from remediation to efficiency illustrates this point to me. We take great pains now to highlight in our studies, in our annual reports, the very broad appeal that most writing centers enjoy on our campuses and the cost-effective manner in which we operate. Most of us, for example, are advised to include in our annual reports *hard numbers* (As opposed to soft numbers? Or easy numbers?): number of students served (Do you want fries with that?), number of students from each course, from each major, from each year, from each school, always-another-from-each-that-I-seem-to-have-forgotten. Is this what we do? No. But do we do it? Yes. And

we do it for “good” reasons, I suppose, though I don’t feel like writing about those. What I do feel like writing about is what happens when we mistake *doing it* for *what we do*—and when our colleagues, administrators, and occasionally our tutors and students, follow us in making the same mistake. I feel like thinking about what happens when we fetishize the numbers of students we see from every end of campus, the numbers of hours we’ve worked, the numbers of students we’ve helped to retain for so comparatively little cost, *rather than* what happened during those hours, between those students. It is rare that annual reports—my own included—tell stories of the latter.²

It seems we instead feel we have a lot to prove—to whom, I wonder—and yet, we have never proven quite enough. **Enough!**

A worrisome trend, for example, appears to be one Muriel Harris lays out in “Preparing to Sit at the Head Table,” part of *The Writing Center Journal’s* twentieth anniversary issue. In that issue, authors were invited to respond to three questions:

Given changing educational demands, populations, budgets, and technology, how do you see writing centers continuing as viable parts of the academy?

In what ways will writing centers continue to be viable contributors to the research community?

Can you target any issues that writing centers need to open up or begin to address that have to do with our future place in the academy and the larger community? (DeCiccio and Mullin 5)

Responding, I imagine, to question three, Harris observes that online tutoring companies (like Smarthinking) pose a threat to the continued operation of the individually supported writing centers we’ve come to know and love (and depend on for our livelihoods). Anticipating arguments against the outsourcing of writing center work, Harris notes, “Several studies have already shown us that writing center tutoring works in terms of grades (an overt sign of success in many circles)” (18), and she cites studies by Neal Lerner, by Stephen Newmann, and by Craig Magee, all of whom independently determined that students who used the writing center had better

grades than those who did not (or in the case of Lerner, performed “as well as students who had SAT verbal scores over 200 points higher!”) (qtd. in Harris 18). I feel torn. I am glad to know this, happy that someone is interested enough and knowledgeable enough to do this research. But I am also troubled by reports like these. I do not agree with the premise that we need to learn to speak administratese to be heard in our universities, nor do I agree that speaking it acts as a talisman against initiatives like the outsourcing of university work. I do not intend to have conversations like the one Harris anticipates above. At least, I don’t intend for them to follow that same trajectory. I was, in fact, disappointed to read this passage so soon after I had argued successfully to our university outcomes assessment committee that grades are *not* an appropriate measure of a successful writing center session, since better grades might simply mean, for example, that a tutor overtook the session, and since poor grades do not necessarily mean that the student did not benefit from the exchange. Instead of implementing this measure, we decided on a more qualitative method of assessment, involving focus groups, that seemed to please the committee and that will also provide, in my opinion, a richer description of our work. If the quantitative, “bean-counter” mentality provides us with an answer that (we think) administrators *would like to hear*, whether or not it reflects what *we* believe to be important about the work of the writing center, I fear we may not look for an/Other way out of here! A way that might even (*gasp!*) leave everyone reasonably satisfied.

Harris’s solution, and the research she cites to support it, is an example of what Harvey Kail, writing in that same issue of *The Writing Center Journal*, calls “‘value added’ research, in which we try to measure the development of student writing in relation to writing center sponsored interventions” (27). While acknowledging the importance of this research, Kail urges himself to move beyond it, to follow North and John Trimbur, both of whom have “issued intriguing calls . . . for research that emphasizes the writing center as a window into the unique conversations about reading and writing that abound there” (27). The sticking point? We all know it: Time. As Kail writes, “[I]t is late in my day when I get around to

thinking of the writing center director as the writing center researcher—very late in the day” (27). In what he describes as an “only slightly exaggerated” manner, Kail lists his priorities as “teaching, service, service, service, service, and then research—on our service” (28).

At the small, private university where I work, every faculty member whom I respect feels beleaguered at one time or another by the amount of service he or she feels compelled to perform. I don’t think that the situation Kail describes—one which I’m sure elicited knowing smirks from every writing center director who read it—is particular to us. I think it is specific to faculty who take their jobs, and consequently the health and integrity of their universities, seriously. While it may be attractive to imagine that such (over)work is solely our province, I simply don’t think it’s the case, and I question where we think this depiction of ourselves gets us.

At the 2000 National Writing Centers Association meeting, Neal Lerner refuted his earlier study (on which Harris relies) in a presentation entitled “Choosing Beans Wisely.”³ In his introduction, Lerner revealed “an embarrassing truth: my study was flawed both statistically and logically.”⁴ The published version of his talk offers a detailed critique of those flaws, especially the problems with the assumption that low SAT verbal scores are highly correlated with poor performance in first-year composition. Lerner observes, for example, that “the relationship between SAT math and Expository Writing I grades is actually stronger!” (3). All in all, Lerner views his article as a “cautionary tale,” one which he hopes will discourage the view that writing center directors are “little more than the ticket tearers at the writing center turnstiles” and will instead “link writing center outcomes to larger writing center values and theories, as well as to college/university-wide goals” (5).

I am encouraged by the care with which Lerner sets out to raise and respond to important questions about our work (and by the strength it takes to turn such a critical eye on his own), yet I was disappointed that Lerner’s audience for this work at the NWCA conference in Baltimore included so few people. More participants at that same convention were present, I’m sure, to hear Molly Wingate’s

keynote address, which provides an interesting counterpoint to Lerner's argument. Wingate provided more value-added research for the audience to consider. Her talk began with this thesis: writing centers contribute to a culture of academic seriousness on their campuses. Her evidence: statistics gathered (primarily) recording the GPAs of writing center clients (along with some more informal comments about the academic strength of the tutors). Apparently, writing center users have higher GPAs than non-writing center users. There was more information that washed over me, I'll admit, partly because of a bacon-induced stupor (it was early) but partly because I was disappointed. Wingate first had the unenviable task of following Cindy Gannett's heart-wrenching, beautifully-constructed tribute to Bob Connors. But I know Molly Wingate to be someone invested in what's-so-funny-'bout-peace-love-and-understanding, and I was hoping for something, I don't know, different. I was not expecting so clear a turn to the rational/e.

During the Q-and-A segment, audience members seemed focused on whether or not these stats would be made available to everyone. Would she be publishing them, for example? Wingate graciously agreed to provide them to people, but then backed off any claims to statistical rigor by admitting that these numbers were collected fairly unscientifically, that she's no statistician, that one of her assistants had in fact questioned their validity shortly before Wingate left to give this address. She downplayed the "seriousness" of the assistant's concern by pointing out (rightly) that no one in the crowd would really *care* about such pretensions to statistical validity (or if they cared they certainly wouldn't call her on it). I was left with the impression that the writing center's contributions to academic seriousness were perhaps some sort of . . . game. If we're *just* "playing" at academic seriousness, shouldn't we admit it? Had she just done so? Why can't we talk about *that* bold move?

When those sitting at our table turned to speak to each other, at Wingate's request, about "bridges and barriers" to our own writing center's academic seriousness on our campuses, Carol Haviland admitted that she thought their writing center was "too much devoted to academic seriousness." I had to agree.



As my husband and I planned our wedding—my second, his third—I found myself wondering whether Samuel Johnson’s wry observation about remarriage as the triumph of hope over experience would make for an appropriate toast. (Ultimately I decided against it.) I see this same triumph repeated over and over again in our service work, in our drive to quantify what it is that writing centers actually *do*. Much of this work may seem—may actually be—necessary, but very little of it has resulted in a real shift in the nature of our “institutional viability” (Brannon and North 2000, 9). When we do research on the relationship between grades and writing center attendance, on the relationship between writing center attendance and GPAs, I have to wonder whether this is research *we* really care about or whether this is research we think *administrators* really care about. (Wingate’s presentation certainly suggests the latter, to me at least.) Like Kail, it is late in my day (some days) when I manage to do the research I really care about. I can’t tell you how nearly impossible it is to find time to do the research I *don’t* really care about. Maybe you already know. Somehow it seems there’s *always* something better to do than that. I’d rather imagine doing the research I care about and then *persuading* others that this is the research *they* should care about, since that research is (presumably) one of the reasons I was hired to do this job.

Though we hold out hope that the typical calls for more research in/from the writing center should change (perceptions, funding, status for faculty), somehow they seem not to have the desired effect. Instead, they threaten to merely reduplicate the noise of the institution. Like the closed feedback loop I will describe later in this chapter, such value-added research may serve simply to return the noise back to the institution, unchanged. You want us to demonstrate broad appeal? Just look at all the students we saw from all these different classes and all these different majors. You want us to demonstrate efficiency? Just look at all the students we saw from all these different classes and all these different majors. Just look. Just look. Just look.

But does anyone hear?

HARD (HEADED) NUMBERS: INEFFICIENCY AND
WRITING CENTER OPERATIONS, PART TWO

I am reminded of Trimpin when I drop my annual report into campus mail and send it (flying). Then I can cock my head to the side and (*shhhhhh*) listen—to the tapes of tutoring sessions, to the tales my notes tell (or don't tell) about the previous year, to the tutors' voices on the phone when they call to ask for references or to talk about jobs for which they're applying, to Hendrix and, this summer, to Lou Reed. (Thanks, Dave.) To summer days and swims and bike rides. To inefficiency.

Early last fall, I received a call from the coach of the women's basketball team here at Fairfield, asking if we could set up group tutorials with several of her players who seemed to need particular—what?—help, ummm, attention, (academic) motivation? Without some significant assistance, these women were in danger of being deemed ineligible to play. Some of them already were. Before I gave the request much consideration (in retrospect, of course, I should have given it more), I agreed to work with her to e-n-c-o-u-r-a-g-e the players-in-question to meet with Katie, a recently-graduated Fairfield alum doing a stint in the writing center for a year. Katie is bright, approachable, articulate, funny, a student who has retained a remarkable intellectual curiosity despite having had more than her share of academic difficulties. Katie, I thought, is the one for this job.

Katie met with each of the women throughout the year—in pairs, in small-group sessions—at assigned times and at other times. By the end of the year, a couple of them had stopped coming, and Katie had figured out to stop calling them, but several of them seemed to represent the kind of success stories we like to tell at orientation or at lunch or at other public forums where we're supposed to tout the writing center's effectiveness, the kind that figure neatly and cleanly into the research Harris writes about—research on grade correlation; on retention; on dedication, motivation, and improvement. The story of Katie and the Basketball Players turned out, on the face of it, to be uncomplicated and unsurprising. Except for Angela.

Angela arrived for her first, for her second, for her third appointment in the writing center with no books, no notes, no syllabi, with

apparently no work to do at all. Angela stood out, quite literally, on our campus. Angela, in fact, stood out even among her peers on the basketball team. She towered over Katie, who at 5'11" herself was no slouch. Though Angela was first scheduled to work in a small group with two other teammates, her resistance was sabotaging the work of the others, so we scheduled her for individual appointments with Katie. After each meeting, Katie would walk into my office and shut the door. We would strategize. Katie carved up her requests so that, by the end of one meeting, her only request for the next session was that Angela bring a book, any book, whether she had read it, was reading it, was supposed to read it or not. Before that meeting, Katie and I discussed options. We both considered it meaningful, in some way, that Angela actually showed up for the meetings, though we didn't quite know what meaning to assign to her attendance. And we agreed that Katie needed to fill the hour in some way so that Angela wouldn't think that her failure to arrive with any work would actually turn into the reward of her early departure from the session. We both resented the position in which we found ourselves, as disciplinarians, complicit with someone's agenda other than the student's. We also felt, however, that simply giving up on Jessica was somehow not the solution, either. That seemed to be what she was expecting, what she was waiting for.

Instead, Angela learned something she couldn't have known to expect when Katie revealed during one of their meetings that her own academic career had been punctuated by failures, both course failures that were the consequence of a learning disability and career failures that were the result of her inability to secure a place in any of the graduate programs to which she had applied. Everyone was surprised by this admission: Angela, of course, because she could not and would not have known otherwise; Katie, because she had not planned to disclose these very personal details; and me, because I was nervous about the direction the sessions would take from that point on.

At their next scheduled appointment time, Angela arrived with books in hand and with a list of assignments she needed help completing. I could offer in greater detail the triumphalist narrative of

Katie's and Angela's sessions: the one where Angela receives her first A ever on a paper and comes bounding into the writing center to share the moment with Katie, exclaiming that she can't wait to tell her parents, even though she doubts they will believe she did all the work herself; the one where Angela discovers that she really likes her psychology class and decides to major in early childhood education; the one where Angela's grades climb high enough to qualify her to play basketball for the first time in her nearly three years at Fairfield. I could tell this narrative because it really did happen. I could even include Angela in the kind of end-of-semester grade correlation Harris talks about.

But then I would have to figure out what to do with the rest of the story, with the part that has Angela looking at schools other than Fairfield, where she had never fit in; that has Angela researching schools with programs in her newly-declared major (which Fairfield doesn't offer); that has Angela transferring mid-year to a larger state school, one where she could maybe get lost in a crowd once in a while, one with a better basketball team *and* an early childhood education program. It is a narrative worthy of an academic satire, really. It is also, I think, a tremendous success story, at least to the point where she left Fairfield. But it is not, obviously, a story I share with many of my colleagues. It is not a story that would make many administrators happy. It doesn't write the writing center as a mechanism for university retention. Yet I take great pleasure in having watched these events unfold.

Angela was sent to the writing center, to be sure, to have her signals straightened out, to have her attitude adjusted. No one would have anticipated this outcome. Even though we don't tell stories like this one very often—we are more apt to tell the ones that position the writing center as *contributing to* university retention efforts rather than *detracting from* them—stories like these are frequent enough, even in our own writing center, to make me wonder what other stories are not being told. So I am suspicious of the neat, clean, efficient research like that on writing center-letter grade correspondence because I suspect it actually tells us very little at the same time that it fails to tell us a whole lot.

TURN IT ON—AND ALL THE WAY UP

Katie's and Angela's meetings were not efficient. In fact, a full twenty percent (is that a hard number?) of their sessions, as near as I can figure, focussed on absolutely no writing at all—not Angela's or anyone else's. This, to my ear, is the noise of the writing center: Noise in the system is considered extremely inefficient. It is disruptive, an interference in the clear, harmonious well-ordered transmission of information. It is something (usually) to be *gotten rid of*. When we concern ourselves with how to transmit information from sender to receiver in the most efficient manner, with the least possible distortion—with, in other words, the least amount of noise—we are constructing a theory of dialogue that *depends upon the exclusion* of a third party, whose contributions are dismissed as mere static in the system, whose mere presence is deemed unsanitary. What—or who—has been sacrificed in this straightening out/up becomes a serious issue.

Does this sound like our university system? How about a theory of education that *depends upon the exclusion* of a third party? Does this sound familiar?

Critics such as Michel Serres (1982), N. Katherine Hayles (1988), and Jacques Attali (1996) contend that this “efficient” transmission of information results in a system that is endlessly iterative, redundant, repetitive. These same theorists have rescued noise, arguing that the exclusion of this third party amounts to the exclusion of genuine information. In fact, these theorists argue, order develops *out of* chaos, not through the elimination of it. Moments that threaten the stability of a system are also moments that may, in the words of information theorist Eric White, “provoke systemic transformation” (1991a, 94). Ironically, it is the noise, not the official information, that allows for the mutation and potential reorganization of the system.

How about the writing center as a place where people seek out the genuine information that might otherwise be suppressed or eliminated? As a place powerful enough to allow for the mutation and potential reorganization of our system of education? These are not rhetorical questions. I really believe the writing center is that place. And if you are working in a writing center, if you are “supporting” the

writing center at your own institution (however you might define that support), then you had better believe it too.

The final chapter of this book will consider what such moments of systemic transformation might look like. In the end, they appear less revolutionary than we might imagine. They are, in fact, the kinds of interactions that we see every day in our writing centers, the exchanges that should give us pause but often don't. For now I will merely point out that "microscopic random fluctuations—purely chance occurrences—can bring about macroscopic transformation" (White, 1991b, p. 263). The sum total of those microscopic fluctuations—movement produced by reading a memo from a colleague, by mindlessly arranging magnetic poetry only to discover that it has relieved a writer's block, by swapping a favorite film with a frequent writing center client—results in a sort of institutional (over)growth.

Paying attention to these microscopic fluctuations may also mean, however, admitting that our writing centers are (uh-oh) extremely inefficient. Let me be the first to admit this about our own operation here at Fairfield University. The Total Quality Management types would have a field day with our operations. I have refused, am continuing to refuse, to be pulled into conversations about the efficiency of the educational system. Efficiency is a bad model for the growth and development of the human mind. When I read my students' literacy autobiographies, they never write about how *quickly* they can get through a really good book or how *few* extraneous words their favorite ones have. They write about their special places to stretch out and linger over those precious last few chapters, about the smell of the children's library at storytime, about a conversation with a friend that led them to discover a new author. These experiences fly in the face of efficiency, thankfully. Such moments baffle the "practical" tutors of Emily Meyer and Louise Smith (1987). These moments are not replicable. They are simply happenings.

Discussions of the institutionalization of the writing center often focus on the ways in which and the degree to which the academy echoes within the walls of the center, rather than on the ways the

center might amplify, even distort, the noise of the academy. PC might have expected that his memo would be one instance of such an echo. He might have imagined that I would use it for support, as back-up, in trying to maintain (or regain) control, to impose order on my tutors (as if they are *mine*). He probably did not expect that I might use it to turn up the volume on some of the difficulties the tutors and I have faced in doing this job. Or that it could even be used to tout some of our successes. Or—*horror!*—to champion even less traditional ways of teaching and learning than what he witnessed here that night. He probably did not expect that I would read his memo as an invitation to talk back to him and to others on my own terms. I see this move as an amplification of the noise he instigated. He might view it as a distortion. It is, in all probability, both of these things, and I see them both as being good.



It is in the spirit of amplification that I return to my argument with Leahy's piece, to the suggestion that committee work and/or a sabbatical for the director result in the suffering of the writing center, for example. These suggestions, and those like them, smack of narcissism and of co-dependence. At the risk of invoking the very nurturing, maternal overtones to which I object, I wonder why we don't imagine that our occasional absence might be *good* for the writing center, that it might be *healthy* for us to take a break from each other, the same way that parents (especially mothers) are encouraged to "carve out" a little time for themselves in that *Good Housekeeping* sort of way. Leahy's comments seem designed to make us feel *guilty* for leaving our babies in the care of others.

I have had occasion to experience, in the last several years, the particular benefits accrued by two of the mechanisms Leahy singles out for criticism: applying for tenure and taking a sabbatical leave. While I am well-aware of the dissension among the writing center ranks regarding faculty/non-faculty status, I will not debate the issue here. I will point out, however, that these same two mechanisms have resulted, for me, in some of the most productive exchanges I've had with colleagues.

In graduate school, Mark Hurlbert, who was then teaching a course called *The Politics of Composition Instruction* and who later directed my dissertation, returned to our class after break one Thursday evening toting a box nearly as wide as he was tall, and probably as heavy. In it were his tenure materials. As I recall, most of us were too intimidated to do much more than circle the box curiously and maybe flip through a header or two, giving it only the most cursory examination. It seemed so personal—years' worth of evaluations from students, years' worth of publications, letters of recommendation from colleagues near and far, proof of service on this-or-that committee. Our class traveler and good friend Ann Ott later described it as "a box of blood" (Ott, Boquet, and Hurlbert, 1997, 165). The box loomed large over the class that evening, and I'm sure we asked questions about the process, though I don't remember anything specifically. I suspect no one, including Mark, had anything good to say about the whole experience, short of being happy that it was over. I remember feeling that the road from there to here—from graduate school to tenure—seemed long and daunting and not quite real.

The road has, in fact, been long and daunting but also very, very real. And, like Mark, I am happy that it is over. Several things about having applied for tenure and promotion, however, cause me to think differently about this process now, to consider it as more than something to be gotten through, something other than simply a hurdle to be jumped.⁵ Gathering and preparing the materials takes a long time—years for the gathering and months for the preparation. I tried hard, most days, not to resent the process, to view it instead as an opportunity to reflect on my time at Fairfield and to educate those who would see the materials on the work of the writing center. It was a lofty goal, and many days I didn't accomplish it—days I spent trying to set up a grid to summarize my student evaluations, afternoons I spent looking for a missing syllabus or two—but some days I did manage it. Writing the Statement of Case for Tenure and Promotion was eye-opening in a lot of ways as I began to make sense of where *I* fit here at Fairfield, not just where *the writing center* fit. Organizing my materials forced me to admit that I have a role here

in the life of this university *independent of* the life of the writing center, and that (more importantly) the writing center has a life at this university *independent of* me. Somehow that seems as it should be. So committee work and service work and teaching do not take me *away* from the work, as Leahy apparently perceives they do in his case. These things, in fact, more fully realize the work of the writing center to the extent that they allow me to more fully participate in the life of the university.

Waiting to hear—now, that’s another matter. October to April. Running into colleagues on the committee in the hall, in the dining room, at meetings, wondering what’s been said about the quality of your work and, by extension, you. Paranoia. But the waiting seems necessary and inevitable. And one day, you get The Word.

Soon after the letters went out, but before any official celebration had commenced, I received a call from a colleague with whom I had a passing acquaintance—friendly, but we’d never had much contact—and who had been one of the members of the Rank and Tenure Committee. He called to tell me that he had been “blown away” by my application. He had in fact had no idea that the work of the writing center was so fresh and invigorating and, well, interesting. He felt it was “cutting edge stuff” and asked if we might get together and think about ways that we could drum up more support for the writing center, since he had figured out, without my ever explicitly saying so, that we didn’t have the resources to be an all-revolutionary, all-the-time writing center.

Nearly two years have passed since that initial phone call, and the relationship we’ve developed has been mutually beneficial, I hope, without being demanding. We have worked on proposals for more writing-center space, as well as for more writing-center funding. We are trying to imagine something really different, some sort of trans-disciplinary work, without being quite sure what that means. But we’re thinking. And sometimes we just have lunch. But that’s important. In the meantime, I feel he is a powerful advocate for the writing center, helping me, for example, to strategize ways to think about assessment that make sense to me as well as to our administration. He has never asked me for a statistic, for “proof,” for a breakdown of anything, even when he functioned as an administrator. Knowing that he

understands and supports the work of the writing center makes it easier for me to be here and to do this job. And that is important too.

For the purposes of this book, he is also my link to Hendrix, mainlining info about feedback and amplification when I have needed it. A killer musician with a theory-head. What could be better?

But his office is in the Other college, on the Other side of campus, and I'm not sure we would ever have had an/Other occasion for contact, Other than this one.



Post-tenure: I am now fully vested, I suppose, in this university, and I have been awarded the time this semester, as I mentioned earlier, for sabbatical research, to write this book, which I have been trying to write for the past four years. It is now August, several weeks before the official start of my fall sabbatical, yet already I have seen two important-though-not-necessarily-anticipated outcomes from this impending leave. The first involves research I proposed as part of the sabbatical project, a study of the staff meetings at the Rhode Island College (RIC) Writing Center, which is directed by Meg Carroll.

Nine years. That's how long it had been since I spent any time in a writing center for which I was not responsible. This summer, I spent several days each week doing the assigned readings and writing for the RIC staff meetings, conferencing with Meg and the tutors in charge of coordinating the staff meetings, and participating in paired and group discussions and activities. Truth be told, I didn't know how badly I needed to do such a thing until I did it. To participate in the life of a writing center and not be in charge of, oh, let's say, the payroll, the supplies, the scheduling, the public relations. I had not realized how heavily these details weighed on my experiences in my own writing center until I was relieved of them for a while. (I run the risk now, I realize, of invoking the very nostalgia I seek to critique.)

I am not suggesting that, during my time at RIC, I was "just" a tutor. I know better than that. I am, however, suggesting that there is no way out of the administrative role the director plays in her own

writing center, even if, for example, she regularly sits down with a student to tutor, as many of us do; even if she participates in cross-curricular efforts and committees across her own campus. And while the administrative component of the job is necessary and important, few of us, I would imagine, chose to spend our careers in writing centers because we wanted to *administer* them. We chose to spend our time in these centers because we appreciated (and continue to appreciate) the richness of *tutoring*. But, to paraphrase Kail, it is late in the day when we quit thinking about ourselves as administrators. That, I think, is unfortunate.

So spending time in the RIC writing center was nice. It was just nice. And it was important. An added bonus lies with the fact that Meg and I gathered loads of good material and had a really wonderful time.

Before beginning the RIC project, I was required to submit a summary of my proposed project to the RIC Human Subjects Review Board in order to secure their permission to conduct the research. The board meeting came up in a hurry, and neither Meg nor I spent much time thinking about the text of the proposal. We just got it done.

Meg's position at RIC is defined as part-time administrative staff, converted from the full-time, tenure-track faculty position that it was when John Trimbur held it in the early 1980s. Her goal before she retires is to get it converted back. Like most part-time writing-center directors, hers is a full-time job and then some. Over the last several years, Meg has been active on the regional board as well as on the national board, and she has hosted the regional conference. Her undergraduate tutors routinely attend and present at the Northeast Writing Centers Association Conference, at the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing, and for the last two years at the Conference on College Composition and Communication. Her administration? Well, we're sure they appreciate it.

We really never imagined that the submission of our project proposal would begin a buzz on her campus about the writing center's clout; and yet, it has made the rounds, with board members actually approaching Meg about the research taking place in the writing

center, with bits and pieces of the document showing up in annual reports and in performance evaluations. We are left to wonder what the effects of the published research will be. We are hoping it might be a significant piece of the evidence necessary to convince her administration that the writing center needs more support than it currently receives. Of course, the research might not have this effect. But if it does, the RIC writing center has gained a lot; and if it doesn't, no one has lost anything. In fact, no matter what, Meg and I and the tutors and maybe even some students still come out ahead. All of this is to say that perhaps we need to think more broadly about the impact of time for research, time for committee service, time for sabbatical leaves and tenure preparation.



Meanwhile, back at the ranch: no doubt there have been logistical problems. I have learned, for example, that it takes someone who is much more organized than I am to turn over this operation to someone else for a semester. As a result, I have not managed to let go of the writing center entirely during my sabbatical—I'll admit that. Mariann Regan (the colleague whom I have pressed into writing-center service during my sabbatical) and I have set up weekly meetings to stay on top of the writing center's operation (though we wind up meeting briefly more often than that); and I have agreed to attend staff meetings when I can. Mariann began, late in the spring semester, attending my staff education class and staff meetings with me, as well as reading the course materials and current research. All of this has taken a bit of coordination on both our parts. But Mariann is the person who had the idea for this incarnation of the writing center at Fairfield in 1981, and she is a thoughtful and considerate colleague who has been a member of the English department for nearly thirty years. So I feel fortunate to be able to leave the writing center in her care. That is a luxury, I realize.

And yet, it is strange to walk into the office in the morning and see Mariann sharing bagels with the tutors. It is alienating to receive copies of flyers to faculty and to students with her name on them, to read email messages from her to the tutors. I have resisted the urge several times already this morning to go out there and see what

they're laughing about or why it suddenly got so quiet. With the door closed, I can hear them talking but I can't quite make out what they're saying, and I wonder if it's something I should maybe know. Or something I could maybe help with. Or something . . . I don't know. The more uncomfortable I am with all of this, the more I realize I need to step back from it.

In conversation with Mariann, I ask her to talk to me about her impressions of directing the writing center—a very different writing center—again, after all these years. I admit to her that I'm having difficulty letting go (as if she hadn't figured this out already), and we joke about this. She gently suggests, "As I understand it, letting go is what the philosophy of the writing center is about." She adds, "Freedom of inquiry is not a one-person job; it is a many-person job." This line, in my opinion, should rank right up there with North's "our job is to produce better writers, not better writing" as a mantra for writing center staff.

Obviously, having Mariann in the writing center is already good for the writing center. She has managed to accomplish things that I have put off. She is a different voice articulating the same needs: more space, a new computer, recognition for the tutors and acceptance of the writing center philosophy. Today, she asked me whether she should know anything specifically as she prepares the budget for next year. "Don't ask for more money," I tell her. "Ask for more space." She casts a glance around the crowded room and nods in agreement. "Do you mind if I try talking to a few people about this?" she asks. Mind?! Mind?!

In the midst of all her excitement, Mariann has also been nervous about her new role in the writing center, and she has been very open in admitting this to me. I have been less open about my own concerns about having her in the writing center, concerns wholly unrelated to her level of competence. I have complete confidence that she can do the job admirably. But I'd be a fool not to worry that she might do the job better than I. She very well might. In fact, I think she can, and I hope she does.

This writing center is not mine to (dis)own. I find myself having to renegotiate this relationship I thought I had with *my* center, with *my* tutors, with *my* colleagues. An identity in crisis.

Noise has us reimagine the relationships between the writing center and the academy, relationships like those I've begun to complicate above. Noise asks us to consider how and where the writing center echoes throughout the institution. Making noise might be a one-person undertaking, but it can also be a many-person undertaking. And the many-person version is quite likely to yield different results. In either case, noise positions the writing center as a site of amplification and of feedback rather than merely as a (waste) receptacle, though such feedback may result in pain as often as it results in pleasure. And sometimes the two emotions (pleasure and pain) are inextricably linked, in a hard-labor sort of way.

WOULD YOU PLEASE TURN THAT DOWN?: FEEDBACK AS PAIN

At a mom-and-pop Jamaican restaurant at our final-Friday-lunch-before-the-students-return-for-the-year, our colleague Malcolm is having difficulty following the conversation at the table. Olivia gets up to ask the owner if he would turn down the "background" music. Malcolm's wife April explains that Malcolm can't hear, and we joke that this is the result of standing too close to the stage at all those Pixies concerts. We joke, but it is probably true. My mother was right: we have gone and ruined our ears.

Every once in a while, I still manage to go to a concert or two. I paused at a local club concert recently to note that nearly everyone was wearing earplugs. The members of the band were; the members of the road crew were; even people in the audience were. I felt so . . . naked. Exposed. And terribly, terribly retro. First no sunscreen and now this.

I've paid to see moderately forgettable, appropriately obscure bands at dark, stinky clubs all over the country, and I could always count on one thing: at least once during every show, someone on the stage would forget himself just long enough to position the source too close to the amp. Then, like fingernails across a chalkboard magnified a thousand times, came the unmistakable screech, squeal, and howl. Microphonic feedback. Ouch.

The audience's response at these moments is predictable (at least it was before earplugs): people slap their hands to their ears, scrunch up

their shoulders, contort their faces. It's instinctual. So while microphonic feedback itself may not be inherently interesting (as is, say, harmonic feedback, which I take up later in this chapter), the primal nature of the audience's reaction actually is. Microphonic feedback reminds me that feedback, if we're not careful, can be quite painful.

This semester, we have seven new tutors, all of whom have taken the staff education course and all of whom have, as a result, spent a great deal of time thinking about appropriate feedback to give to writers when they arrive. Enough of this talk and we might forget that writers often have *already received* feedback by the time they get to us. Many times that feedback has been quite painful, the type of feedback that causes them to slap their hands over their ears (or at least over their papers) in an attempt to retreat from this allegedly communal experience and fold into themselves instead. Once they begin working in the writing center, the tutors never forget this for very long. They don't have that luxury. They know instead that they can count on a steady stream of students whose end comments may include a professor's wry observation that "paragraph 12 was a *delightful* surprise, in that it actually made sense" or otherwise helpful hints, such as this simple one offered by a faculty member in the English department: "Learn how to write." Thanks. We'll get right on that. And, by the way, you've just made the job *sooooo* much easier.

Tutors know too that they are vulnerable to this type of feedback as well—more so, perhaps, because they, of all students, are supposed to "know better." More than once, a tutor has questioned whether she can be of any help to other writers when she can't seem to get a handle on her own work. One particular tutor, whom I found sitting on the couch, staring blankly at the wall, told me of a difficult meeting she had just had with a professor, discussing the rough draft of one of her own papers. In his initial comment, scrawled alongside the student's introduction, the professor advised, "One should never begin a paper with an introduction that is boring and lacking in content . . . which you have successfully done." [Ellipses are the professor's own.] This tutor and I talked for a bit, and I assured her that I wanted her to continue tutoring in the writing center. She agreed, but then she asked whether she had any

appointments scheduled for that afternoon. “I don’t want to help anybody today,” she muttered.

For many of us—certainly for me—the writing center is most interesting for its potential to transform the system. I am suspicious, however, of the language of transformation within our universities—and certainly within our writing centers—a language that is celebratory, jubilant—like butterflies drying their wings in the spring. After moments like the ones recounted above, with tutors, with students—with Todd—we have to be wary of such language, I think. Noise rather insists that transformation can be quite violent (though it is not always and doesn’t necessarily have to be). I am reminded of Toni Morrison’s trilogy (*Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise*), a trilogy exploring violent social cleansings and the function of the sacrifice—to provoke disorder and then propose order. To say, See how much better it is once things return to “normal”? Noise works against the idea of normalcy—the writing center as a place to bring aberrant students into line; the scripted session that takes a disorderly student/text and orders it into a pretty (dull) paper; the faculty member who claps her hands to her ears and pleads with us to make it stop. At best, such moments should not be considered normal; at worst, they hurt.

I can’t write myself out of this section, knowing as I do that I have surely included comments on student papers that were ambiguous, unsupportive, maybe even mean. I don’t intend to indict others without indicting myself. Only last semester, in the second half of our first-year English sequence, I grew increasingly frustrated with a class that repeatedly refused to engage multiple interpretations of a text we were reading. Finally, after the seventh student offered essentially the same interpretation as the previous six, I stomped my foot, whirled around from the blackboard, and yelled, “*Why* do you all *insist* on assuming that the main character is male?” There was, to my mind, an air of jesting to the question, but when I saw the face of the student who had offered the final comment, the one that prompted the outburst, I instantly knew it had not come off that way. She was a quiet student who sat in the back of the class—I was a loud teacher standing at the front of the class—and her freckled skin was now marked

by bright red blotches. I apologized profusely to her in class and explained that I had meant the response to sound more light-hearted than it did. I also sent her an email message to the same effect. She said, "It was no big deal." Of course. What could she say? What can I say about an event like this? So much and then nothing, really. Just when I think I'm past it . . . Persistence, not perfection, I suppose.

This summer, while cleaning out my office, I dug through the artifact drawer, the bottom drawer in my corner file cabinet filled with materials I will almost certainly never use again but which tell me something about where I've been in this profession. There's a dialogue journal from Don McAndrew's Teaching Writing class at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, letters of acceptance from grad school, a memory book put together by high school students and counselors in the Rural Scholars program that Ben Rafoth ran, a copy of my first contract from Fairfield. At the bottom of the drawer are several student papers from the first English class I ever taught, a basic writing course that I planned shortly after the semester I worked in the writing center with Todd. It is a random assortment of essays, made up apparently of assignments never handed back because students were absent on the day they were returned. Each paper is handwritten and neatly folded in half. My comments appear beneath the student's name and beneath the oversized, red-letter grade. Jim Caldwell's essay #11 rated an F and the comment "good paper, but 3 major errors." Good paper, but here's your F? Who is this woman? Maida Alexander's paper was also an F. Hers too warranted the assessment "still not passing but your papers have improved." Improved to an F?! Russell Alvins made an F due to "major and minor errors—past participle endings on verbs. Also, the 3 things you listed *cannot* be traditions." I open the papers, hoping to find more thorough explanations written into the text itself, but I know I won't. And I don't. I discover, instead, a bold, red ? across one whole paragraph and annotations like "verb form" and "R-O." The one extended comment in Russell's text merely parrots the assessment on the cover: "These are not traditions. Look up the definition of a tradition." I cringe as I recall that class: the men who missed every other week because of their

seven-days-in/seven-days-out work schedule on the oil rigs. Women who showed up to an 8 A.M. class still in their hospital scrubs, having worked the night shift, coming to school before going home to see their kids, to have some breakfast, or even to get some sleep. My throat burns, and I can't bear to look at these papers anymore.

PUT A SOCK IN IT: FEEDBACK AS POSSIBILITY

Technical Tip of the Day (11/06/98): Have you ever noticed that once you get the equalizer tweaked it is usually the open strings that still tend to feedback or ring out of control? Try to dampen the strings a little bit. Just a little bit of felt on the close side of the nut (not the tuner side) will help a lot. One guitarist I know used to lightly tie a sock around the neck at the nut. He claimed that the sock helped to minimize feedback and helped to clean up some slop in his playing. (Sweetwater Sound, insync.sweetwater.com)

In the interest of full disclosure, I will admit that I don't play the guitar very well or very often, though I long to, and I alternate between toughening the pads of my fingers and relegating my Ovation acoustic/electric to the bowels of my basement when it serves as too painful a reminder of my technical (in)expertise. It is much the same with my writing.

Picking up my guitar, as sitting down to write, is a curious mix of an overwhelming sense of possibility and a crushing admission of my own limits. Music and writing—both remind me that inherent in the concept of possibility is an understanding of limits. Possibility is a word that gets thrown around with abandon in our educational circles, but it doesn't hold up very well to scrutiny. Educational possibility seems nebulous to me. What does it mean, really? Ultimately nothing, I think. It lacks any sort of intellectual reference point. The limit: now there's a concept with which we can all identify. Limits are appealing then (at least in analytical terms) first because they are quite tangible (though that is also often their frustration) and next because they force us to identify, even focus on, particular transcendent

moments, make those specific transgressions tangible and real as well. Davis writes, “this writing [of which Davis has been writing] will have been written . . . not to give or address anything to others but to expose the limit—‘not the limit of communication, but the limit upon which communication takes place’ (Nancy, *Inoperative* 67) . . . [A] genuine writing is ‘the act that obeys the sole necessity of exposing the limit’ (67). Writing is the singular gesture of touching that limit and so of *reaching for others*” (Davis 239).

Each day that I sit down to write, I am scared. What if people hate my book? (They will, Hurlbert says.) What if it makes people mad? (It’s supposed to, Hurlbert says.) It is Davis, though, who explains to me why I feel so exposed. (Where are those earplugs when you need them anyway?) I write in an effort to touch the limit. And in doing so, I inevitably expose my own limits as well. Nancy Welch once joked to me, as she awaited the publication of her book, that she wished to write in the preface, “No reviewer need point out to me the shortcomings of this book. I can list them all myself.”

Yet, we write. She . . . and I . . . and you . . . and our students. We write because in “touching that limit” we simultaneously “[reach] for others.” I wonder how often we teach with that in mind. What are we doing, in our classrooms and in our writing centers, with the hands that students are extending to us? What do our hands look like to them? (*First do no harm.*) I am consistently amazed, given remarks like those listed above, that students continue to write, not only when writing is assigned, but also when it is not. The biggest surprise of last semester came from Scott, a senior soccer player enrolled in my staff education course. Because he was graduating, he knew he would never be a tutor, but he wanted to take another writing elective because he thought he needed more “help” with writing. He was self-conscious in the class, often making self-deprecating remarks about being one of the only business majors in a sea of English major faces. Yet he presented to us, as part of the work on his literate life history, the class’s most interesting document: a chronicle (some might call it a journal) of every soccer game in which he had ever played, from pee-wee league straight through his senior year of college.

While all our students surely possess the capacity to be surprised and delighted (and to surprise and delight us as a result), writers arrive in our classrooms and in our writing centers with clear ideas of their own (discursive) limitations. Process theorists have expended a great deal of energy learning to talk to such writers, teaching them to talk to each other and to themselves about their writing. Process theorists have spent a lot of time, in other words, considering the feedback writers receive. Nevertheless, we are left with a paradox: For all our talk about the recursive nature of the writing process—the seemingly endless loop of revise and resubmit, revise and resubmit—our discussions of feedback presume a singularly linear, uni-directional strategy. Appropriate feedback, in other words, moves writers toward more controlled, more tightly-woven, more highly-organized products. In practice we know this not to be the case, yet the rhetoric of limitless possibility implicit in our discussions of feedback prevents us from considering what are, in fact, its very real discursive limitations. Thinking about this leads me to consider feedback's other life—in music.

I return again to PC's memos, specifically to the idea that what gets labeled as noise is essentially a value judgment, a means of dismissing signals as chaotic, disruptive, meaningless, uninteresting. So when PC refers to the work taking place in our writing center as "noisy," it means he doesn't hear what I hear. It means he's not listening the way I'm listening. He has, effectively, *written off* what those writers have to say, how they say it, and what he might actually learn from it.

I can consider our differing interpretations, PC's and mine, of the institutional function of a writing center in feedback's musical terms. His as a place where such noise should be contained, where signals should be straightened out. Mine as a place where not nearly so much control is exerted, where signals may occasionally come squealing back at us or may go howling off into the stadium.

Admittedly, PC's understanding is probably consonant with most institutional desires for the writing center, at least since the 1970s. Writing centers proliferated then and now largely because they seemed to hold the promise of containment—squirrelling

away certain student populations (athletes, international students, minority populations, remedial students). What institutions didn't bargain for, though, is that housing these student populations as such might result not always or even necessarily in containment but in *amplification*, in reverberation, might actually turn up the volume on the kinds of demands that students make on institutions of higher learning and might send institutional dictates and mandates screeching and squealing back to their source.

Distortion: ANY deviation in the shape of an audio waveform between two points in a signal path . . . The more harmonic distortion there is, the more the sound will begin to take on the quality we call "distorted." (Sweetwater Sound Website)

"The Sound of Silence: Vote on Noise Ordinance Draws Nearer" reads the headline of the September 22, 2000 issue of *The Mirror*, Fairfield University's campus student newspaper. This article is the latest installment in a series chronicling the ever-worsening relationship between Fairfield-student beach residents and year-round beach residents. If town residents get their way, after this vote, a students will be responsible for paying \$100 each time a police officer is called to respond to a noise disturbance at the student's residence. At the most recent town council meeting, town resident Colleen Sheriden showed a home video of the "close to 2,000 student revelers in [her] neighborhood [Saturday] night" (qtd. in Coffin 1). Responding to Sheriden's videotape and to the impending vote, Tim Healy, the Fairfield student representative on the town beach association, says, "Tensions at Fairfield Beach are now at the highest point they have been in at least the last two years."

I admit I derive a perverse sort of pleasure, as I write this book denouncing the academy's (in)tolerance of noise within its ranks, from seeing my own university embroiled in noise battles on several fronts. As Fairfield University continues to fight this beach problem to its south, we are also facing litigation from neighbors to our north, a new subdivision (that has gone up on property the university sold

explicitly for that purpose) only yards away from the university's townhouses (where some juniors and seniors live) and abutting our new artificial-turf practice field. Currently, the field cannot be used after 6:00 P.M. or after dark (whichever comes first) because the lights bother the neighbors, and the subdivision is pressing the university to construct a noise barrier to block disturbances from the townhouses.

"Practice Noise Control" reads the sign posted on the gate of a local swimming pool. The juxtaposition of *noise* and *control* strikes me as odd at first, until I pick up that copy of *The Mirror* and realize that "noise control" is getting to be serious business here at Fairfield. The university is dumping lots of money into this effort—new residence halls (to discourage students from wanting to live at the beach), more money for on-campus programming (to discourage students from wanting to go to the beach), a university beach officer to deal with town residents' complaints. And yet they can't quite keep it under (w)raps.

The official position of the university on these matters is one of sympathetic indignation. The unofficial position, heard when members of the university community discuss town residents complaints among themselves, is less tolerant, tending instead to portray town residents, in their beach cottages and McMansions, as having distorted the issue of noise control.⁶ The president himself, in his end of the year address to faculty, "concluded that the University was engaged in a public relations war with a small group of neighbors . . . who [were] ably assisted by the local press. Statements [were] exaggerated, students [were] harassed, and outright lies [were] accepted unchallenged by reporters" (Minutes of the Meeting of the General Faculty, May 9, 2001). Healy, interestingly enough in the article cited above, recognizes this same strategy and riffs on it a bit when he accuses town residents of "[amplifying] the tensions."

Distortion and tension are intimately related. In fact, distortion in music is often described as "tension release," as "grit." Yet feedback in writing is expected to be the opposite of distortion. Elbow, for example, writes that "[c]riterion-based feedback helps you find out how your writing measures up to certain criteria" and "reader-based feedback tells you what your writing does to particular readers" (1981,

240). In both cases, writers are left with no room to imagine that feedback will do anything but help them to “clean up some slop” in their papers.

What Elbow imagines here is what’s known in systems theory as a closed feedback loop. A thermostat provides the simplest, typical illustration of such feedback. The thermostat is set to a certain temperature—say, 70 degrees. When the temperature in the house drops below 70, the thermostat sends a signal to the furnace. The furnace kicks on and remains on until the thermostat registers 70 again, at which point the thermostat sends a signal to the furnace to kick off. Etc. There is little room for instability in this particular type of feedback loop, short of total system failure. There’s nothing random or unpredictable or particularly exciting about this type of feedback. It is very controlled, task-oriented, directed. But it is *not* the only type of feedback we might talk about.

We might also talk about harmonic feedback, which is the type of feedback Hendrix made famous (and is famous for). Here’s how it works: when an electric guitar is plugged into an amplifier, the string sound is converted to an electrical impulse. When the string begins to vibrate, the feedback loop begins. The amplifier makes the sound of the string louder. When the sound produced by the speaker hits the string, the string begins to vibrate more. Those vibrations are returned from the amplifier and, if conditions are right, the sounds get louder and louder and louder. The other strings begin to vibrate in sympathy, which is picked up by the amplifier and then they get amplified. And so on, and so on, and so on. You can see how this might quickly get out of control.

Before Hendrix, the only possibility most musicians might have imagined when this happened was to get rid of the feedback.⁷ First to prevent it, if possible. Next, to get rid of it. But Hendrix didn’t try to eliminate the noise. Instead, he embraced it for its randomness, for the possibilities that this feedback afforded, and he improvised by playing melodies *against* the feedback, by playing rhythm *and* lead.

Once you have the bottom there you can go anywhere.
That’s the way I believe. Once you have some type of rhythm,

like, it can get hypnotic if you keep repeating it over and over again. Most of the people will fall off by about a minute of repeating. You do that say for three or four or even five minutes if you can stand it, and then it releases a certain thing inside of a person's head. It releases a certain thing in there so you can put anything you want right inside that, you know. So you do that for a minute and all of a sudden you can bring the rhythm down a little bit and then you say what you want to say right into that little gap. It's something to ride with, you know. You have to ride with something. (Jimi Hendrix, qtd. in Hatay 106)

As I work on my writing this morning, I hear the tutors working with students in our writing center right outside my door. I hate to admit this, but 9 times out of 10, having worked with these tutors for a year or two years or three years, I can predict how the session is going to proceed: how the tutor will begin the session (by having the writer read the paper aloud), how the interaction will be initiated (by asking the writer some version of what-do-you-want-to-work-on-today), and how the session will move from there (Michelle favoring beginning with the thesis, Katie by talking about development, Kristy by determining what the writer knows about this particular writing assignment).

Gilles Deleuze writes, “[R]epetition is attributed to elements which are really distinct but nevertheless share strictly the same concept. Repetition thus appears as a difference, but a difference absolutely without concept; in this sense, an indifferent difference” (15). T. R. Johnson, who directs the writing center at the University of New Orleans, offered this interpretation of Deleuze's thesis in *Difference and Repetition*, a summary which I can match for neither its clarity nor its brevity, so I will simply repeat it here: “What's forever reproduced is difference” (Personal correspondence, September 30, 2000). We acknowledge this about writing centers when we champion them as sites for individualized instruction: the scene remains the same, but each session is different.

The sessions differ in part because the tutors differ, one from the other, in spite of their often all-too-obvious similarities. (Our student

population here is, on the face/s of it, quite homogeneous compared with other universities, and our writing center staff is more homogeneous still.) As even my sketch of their sessions demonstrates, these tutors obviously did not internalize a script to such a degree that they all even approach a session the same way with a student. I don't know why they begin where they begin—maybe because they perceive their own strengths lie in different areas, maybe because they interpret students' needs or desires differently. For whatever reason, they begin where they begin, and their beginnings are not the same beginnings from one to tutor the next, though they are often the same beginnings from one session to the next.

I couldn't responsibly suggest that we operate without a script all the time or that we have no sense where we might want a session with a writer to end up or how we might imagine getting there. But it's difficult to advocate even a loosely-scripted approach, for myself and for my staff, without seeing us eventually caught in a feedback loop that becomes less and less about limitless possibility and more and more about modulation and control, where the revise and resubmit cycle becomes an endless process of reiteration and redundancy, increasingly contentless. Along with that comes a recognition that such work creates its own brand of discontent, among writers and responders. Where is the pleasure? Where is the fun? Where is the place where writer and respondent can enter into a groove for that session?

The lockstep repetition of much of our advice to tutors ("Begin by asking the student what he or she would like to work on") and consequently the lockstep repetition of much of their practice, threatens to mask *what* gets repeated each time. The Hendrix quote above, in contrast, encourages us to find space for potential *within* that repetition, to search for those gaps. Trinh Minh-Ha writes,

Repetition as a practice and a strategy differs from incognizant repetition in that it bears with it the seeds of transformation. . . . When repetition reflects on itself as repetition, it constitutes this doubling back movement through which language (verbal, visual, musical) looks at itself exerting power and, therefore, creates for itself possibilities to repeatedly thwart its own power, inflating it only to deflate it better. (190)

Here Trinh calls for *purposeful* repetition, opening up a different class of strategy for those of us who work with tutors. Repetition-as-strategy differs from the pre-emptive strategies too frequently offered as palliatives to tutors, occasions where we offer *solutions* to *problems* tutors may not have even encountered yet. Language that looks at itself offers a different sort of mirror for tutors (and students) than the traditional mirroring model affords.⁸ This mirroring model considers what it sees *in its own reflection* and plays with it—makes a strawberry, sticks out a tongue, watches with detachment as its face dissolves in tears. Whereas the previous mirroring model sought to conceal the gaps, gloss over them with verbal volley, parrot back student questions and concerns to them, a self-conscious tutoring strategy using repetition would “[set] up expectations and [baffle] them at both regular and irregular intervals. It [would draw] attention, not to the object (word, image, or sound), but to *what lies between them*. The element brought to visibility is precisely the invisibility of the invisible realm, namely the vitality of intervals, the intensity of the relation between creation and re-creation” (191).

I occasionally visit writing centers at other universities as part of an assessment/accreditation team. At one visit, I met with a tutor who described the bulk of her sessions to me: tutoring thirty students from a film course, all of whom had written film reviews on one of the two movies that had been playing in town that weekend. “How do you deal with that?” I asked. “It helped me to talk to the professor,” the tutor replied. “He told me he wanted the students to develop their papers more. So when they come in, I know what to tell them.” “What do you say to them?” I asked. With a quizzical look on her face, she finally shrugged and replied, “I tell them to develop their papers more.” No doubt she told them more than that. She probably talked to them about *how* to develop their papers more. The point, however, remains the same: it is difficult, especially in the face of the kinds of pressures tutors face with each session, to move tutoring practice from rote repetition to fresh challenges. To be blunt, it is just plain hard work.

Can we follow Hendrix, I wonder, in using such repetition in productive ways? Repetition-as-strategy opens up an otherwise closed

system by becoming attuned to complexity. In doing so, repetition brings the noise forward so that it might become, in Eric White's words, "a force for renewal" (1991b, 268). This is that "certain thing" inside a person's head to which Hendrix refers. Here's White again: "Though noise may destroy one system, this destruction permits the emergence of another, potentially more complex system in its place. . . . As order comes out of chaos, so sense requires nonsense. Meaning emerges not as predictable derivative but as stochastic departure from tradition, as *invention*" (1991b, 268).

Hendrix's music (and his career) make evident the manner in which moments of transgression can grow out of such repetition. The key, perhaps, lies in how we *experience* those moments.

Hendrix was all about *Experience*.

May this be love or just confusion born out of frustration of not being able to make true physical love to the universal gypsy queen of true, free expressed music. My darling guitar . . . please rest in peace. Amen. (Jimi Hendrix, eulogy, written on the back of the Fender Stratocaster guitar that he smashed at the end of his farewell London performance, June 4, 1967, www.jimi-hendrix.com).

This was caught on tape: Hendrix smashing and burning his guitar at the end of the Monterey International Pop Festival in June of 1967, his American "debut," two weeks after the performance I just alluded to in London. At the end of the performance, Hendrix takes his guitar, smashes it and burns it before an audience who looks, for the most part, (dazed and) confused. What most people in the audience didn't know was that this scene was staged, had in fact been played out before, two weeks earlier. When I first watched the Hendrix performance on video, this destruction didn't make sense to me either. Guitarists love their guitars. They're weird about them. B. B. King ran back into a burning building to rescue his Lucille. Janis Ian puts a "please return—no questions asked" clause on every one of her discs to this day, hoping to find her Martin D-18 #67053 that's been missing since 1972. Hendrix slept with his guitar. His fellow squadron members in the 101st Airborne used to play keep-away

with Hendrix's guitar, as Hendrix followed them around the base on his hands and knees, begging, sobbing, pleading for its return (Murray 1989, 36).

The Stratocaster Hendrix smashed in London was already cracked along the back when he wrote his eulogy on it. Once I discovered this, what appeared to be a random act—one out of character for him, it seemed to me—began to make sense. He wraps up this powerful performance by sacrificing his instrument, dancing around it, conjuring up its spirit from the flames and releasing it into the crowd, *presiding* over this noise that he had just created.

In contrast, when Hendrix smashed and burned his guitar at the Monterey Festival, his American debut, he was already caught in a closed feedback loop of sorts. Once his fans saw what he could do, they wanted him to do it again and again and again. "Purple Haze" at every performance; the "Star-Spangled Banner," which Hendrix reinvented, simply repeated over and over and over; an uninspired encore performance of "Wild Thing" tossed in at the end of his New Year's Eve Performance at the Fillmore East. Murray (1989) writes, "[T]he fresh material seemed to be merely tolerated by the audiences, who reserved their most enthusiastic applause for the traditional crowd-pleasers. Both his management and his audiences seemed determined that Hendrix should be content with simply repeating his former triumphs" (55). An A & E Biography on Hendrix shows an interview clip of Hendrix, shortly before his death, remarking that he's "tired of doing the same stuff" and expressing the hope that his fans can "come along with [him] to the new stuff."

There's so much I want to do—I want to get color into music. I'd like to play a note and have it come out a color . . . in fact I've got an electrician working on a machine to do that right now. (Jimi Hendrix, qtd. in Hatay 109)

Having lunch with my favorite associate dean, who in his other life has a joint faculty appointment in business and religious studies and who in his *other* other life is a kick-ass lead guitar player. I was bouncing some of these ideas off him, about Hendrix, about the

writing center, and he was bouncing them right back. At one point in the conversation, he said to me, “What if it’s not sustainable? It seems to me you have to allow for the possibility that this sort of thing just can’t be sustained. Hendrix couldn’t sustain it.”

I’m not sure that Hendrix couldn’t sustain it. Maybe his pathetic, tragic death is evidence that he couldn’t. But maybe he just died. Maybe he just died. We know he didn’t die because he ran out of ideas. We know that he could imagine—that he *was* imagining—much more, was re-inventing the studio as he had re-invented the stage, was not above using bottles and cans to improvise a slide to achieve the *exact* sound he heard in his head, or constructing a kazoo out of a comb and Saran Wrap to lay over his track of “Crosstown Traffic.”

We too need to think about sustainability. But I also know that part of what sustains me is the idea that I might re-invent a moment with a student. And that enough of those moments might mean that I have eventually re-invented the idea of a writing center on my campus. And that enough of *those* moments might mean that I, along with others, have re-invented the way such work gets valued *beyond* my campus. Deleuze sees repetition as “the fundamental category of a philosophy of the future” (1994, 5). Given that repetition seems inevitable in the writing center (as in the rest of life), how are we using it to imagine a more challenging, fresh, productive future for ourselves and for others?

Jacques Attali, the economist/philosopher/musicologist, has defined music as “the organization of noise” (1996, 4). I hear most clearly the link between noise and music in feedback, both literally (as in Hendrix’s stuff) and figuratively, as I work with writers. And I’m prepared to imagine that thinking of feedback in this way might lead, eventually, to a greater tolerance of distortion, to a recognition that there exists an element of distortion at play in every interchange. And to imagine that we can grow to tolerate it, that we might even learn to like it and seek it out. Play (with) it. Riff on it a bit. That we might think of feedback not as a relay from point to point to point but as sympathy, as harmony, as vibrating independently and in tandem, like the strings on that sacrificial Fender guitar.

FEEDBACK AND WRITING CENTER "EXPERIENCE"

In the September 1999 issue of *College Composition and Communication* (CCC), Nancy Welch writes about the importance of *play* in the writing center in an article entitled "Playing with Reality: Writing Centers after the Mirror Stage." Welch describes a tutor's work with a student named Sun Young, who comes to the writing center as a self-described non-writer and presents herself as "hopelessly blocked" (58). When the tutor presses her on these points, asking Sun Young to respond in writing to questions that encourage her to characterize herself as a writer, the tutor learns that Sun Young does in fact write poetry. From there, poetry becomes a vehicle through which Sun Young and her tutor can explore other texts and Sun Young's own writing. Theorizing from this narrative, Welch uses the work of child psychologist Donald Winnicott to consider the importance of play in the writing center. Winnicott writes, "Play is neither inside nor outside" (Winnicott, qtd. in Welch 59). Welch follows, "Instead it takes place *within* the tension between inside and outside, between desire and demand, in an 'intermediate area of experience' between subjective and objective realities" (59).

As I read this sentence, I am struck by the musicality of it, not so much by the rhythm of the prose (though that is certainly admirable) as by the tenor of the ideas. The best analogy I can find for *play* in the writing center, for investigating the relationship between (job) performance and pleasure, is the one of improvisation in music.

As the previous Hendrix quotes suggest, improvisation is largely about repetition, repetition, repetition. It is also a consequence of expertise, of mastery, and of risk. The first thing a musician learns about improvisation is that it is *not* anything goes. Improvisation is instead a skillful demonstration performed by someone who knows the tones of her instrument, the rhythms of her musical traditions, so well that she can both transgress and exceed them, give herself over to them, play within and against the groove. The most interesting improvisations work because they are always on the verge of dissonance. They are always just about to fail. They are risky. But when they work well, they are also really, really fun. They leave you wide-eyed.

When is the last time you took a risk during a session with a writer? Writers, after all, risk a lot coming to us. What are we risking in return? When is the last time you could characterize a session as really, really fun? Today, I hope. Maybe so. But if not, why not?

As I write this, I am preparing to meet and greet the seven new tutors beginning in the writing center in two weeks. They would be quick to remind me that they are risking a lot too, and they would be right. I do not mean to diminish the anxieties tutors feel about their qualifications, their capabilities, their own academic records, their obvious and not-so-obvious differences (whatever those may be). I do, however, mean to disturb their carefully constructed shield of strategies.

I have risked a lot in this book (or at least it feels that way to me) in part because doing so seems only fair, given what I am asking, but also because it seemed like that was the only way to enjoy it. The work is too hard and the process too long not to have fun doing it. Writing this book has opened up a new area of conversation between the tutors and me. Though I am on sabbatical, I write daily in my office, and I take (frequent) breaks from my writing to emerge with a new favorite quote for the board, gleaned from a book I've been reading. I print out pages and bring them with me out onto the couch to get a perspective not afforded by my computer screen, scrawling notes in the margins or longhand (Luddite that I am) on a legal pad. When they ask, "How's the writing going?" I hope that my responses capture the complexity of a task as challenging as this one is as well as the enjoyment that I derive from those challenges (even when they frustrate me). One of them said to me, "It's really cool that you're writing a book." Yeah, I guess it is.

I want them to think that their jobs are really cool, too, and I believe most of them do, once they begin tutoring. But I struggle with how to get that component of the job across to them early on. I fear losing them in a semester-long training course that seems designed to dictate the "practicality" of the job, to "guide" them (like a seeing-eye dog) through their sessions. I am unhappy with a model of staff education that sets up a content model for tutoring, a low-risk/low-yield approach to staff education. Such a model frames the

guiding question as “What do tutors need to know in order to be effective?” and training sessions are organized around such concerns as steps in writing a research paper, how to clarify a thesis, and how and when to document sources.

It’s easy to see how this model for staff education developed. Writers come to the writing center often with seemingly specific needs: Write a research paper. Clarify a thesis. Tutoring to those needs can produce a competent session that proceeds along a fairly typical trajectory. By predicting what writers are likely to *need* in a session, we imagine we can forestall problems by preparing tutors to address those needs. We can give them *experience* with those *types* of sessions. This makes a potentially frightening occasion seem less risky, right? Here’s how to begin the session. Here’s a good question to ask after the student has read the paper aloud. Here’s a good question to ask if the paper doesn’t yet have a thesis. This is a very disciplinary model: It makes tutoring appear as a content area to be mastered. It assumes that gaining experience is the same thing as acquiring expertise. And it downplays the amount of risk involved in doing this work as well as the kinds of risks one might need to take in order to find the work meaningful, fulfilling, even pleasurable.

Two moments have come together that cause me to complicate this low-risk/low-yield model of staff education for myself and for my students. The first involves the inevitable question I face each semester after presenting a list of stock methods and stock responses (like the ones I mentioned above). Invariably someone asks, “What do I say once the student answers?” My only response was (and still is) well, that depends. Not a particularly helpful response, I’ve learned.

One recent work that addresses this issue is William Macauley’s “Setting the Agenda for the Next Thirty Minutes,” the opening chapter in Bennett Rafoth’s collection, *A Tutor’s Guide: Helping Writers One to One*. Rafoth writes that he asked contributors to follow a set organizational pattern for their articles: Introduction, Some Background, What to Do, Complicating Matters, Further Reading, and Works Cited (ix). I confess to turning, in each essay, first to Complicating Matters.⁹ The suggestions in the first three

segments are familiar and echo what readers might find in any other manual. Macauley writes, for example, “Setting the agenda for the next thirty minutes . . . will most likely be a variation on this general framework: review the assignment, decide on the goals for the session, and finally, choose the best route to reach these goals” (4). This, we are to understand, is our map, which may need to be negotiated and re-negotiated throughout the session. Macauley offers observations in the Complicating Matters section, however, which provide key insights into the problems with a strategy-oriented approach to a tutorial. He writes, “Though mapping a tutorial is a very smart way to begin, the work of a tutorial is often not predictable enough to allow that map to remain essential throughout the session. Second, if the map becomes cumbersome, drop it. As I said before, the map is only as good as it is useful. *Sometimes, it is better to explore than to plan*” (7, my emphasis). The students in my staff education would surely want to ask Macauley, as I do now: *then what?*

The second moment of dis/ease for me involves the dissonance produced by Elbow’s loop writing exercise, one of the first writing activities I assign in any of my writing courses (including my staff education course). Here’s what Elbow has to say about the loop writing process:

The loop writing process is a way to get the best of both worlds: both control and creativity. . . . I call this process a loop because it takes you on an elliptical orbiting voyage. For the first half, *the voyage out*, you do pieces of almost-freewriting during which you allow yourself to curve out into space. . . . For the second half, *the voyage home*, you bend your efforts back into the gravitation field of your original topic as you select, organize, and revise parts of what you produced during the voyage out. Where open-ended writing is a voyage of discovery to a new land, the loop process takes a circling route so you can return to the original topic—but now with a fresh view of it. (60)

Student writers often have a difficult time voyaging out, and Elbow’s loop provides a helpful way of talking with them about what it means to prematurely foreclose possibilities in our writing—a

reminder that we can't return home until we have ventured away and that the ad/venture re-frames our sense of home.

Every semester, before teaching the staff education course, I review the training (wheel) texts available to tutors. And every semester, as I try to decide whether to use any of these texts in the course, I wonder, where in these texts do the *tutors* get to “voyage out?” Davis writes, “[I]t may be time to stop offering *more* pedagogy or *altered* pedagogy in answer to the failure of pedagogy. . . . Here we will not attempt to inscribe yet another pedagogy into the pedagogical scene. We will hope, rather, to EXscribe ourselves, to locate a postpedagogy, a pedagogy that would be other/wise . . . a *pedagogy of laughter*” (2000, 213).

So I want to suggest that our current taxonomy—the research paper session, the thesis session—does an injustice to the principle we claim to hold nearest and dearest to our writing center hearts: that the benefit of the writing center is the personalized attention, the one-to-one work with writers that we can provide. The low-risk/low-yield model changes the scene in which a directive is given—the teacher gives it in the classroom, the tutor gives it (maybe friendlier, maybe more collegially) in the writing center—but it doesn't fundamentally alter the writer's relationship to the material, as Sun Young's tutor did with her.

The obvious question here is, at least as I see it, what would a different model for staff education consist of? How might we develop a model that encourages tutors to “voyage out?” The different model that I am working toward—and I'll be the first to admit (and I'm certain my tutors will back me up) that we're not there yet—is a higher-risk/higher-yield model for writing center work. The first step involves those of us who work with tutors (and I'm including at least some measure of faculty support beyond the director of the writing center): we need to recast our understanding of the nature of experience so that we might think of it, in terms of training, not as something someone “gets” (so that peer tutors always fall short when compared to graduate students who fall short when compared to professional staff who fall short when compared to faculty, etc). To think of experience not as something that someone either possesses or

doesn't but instead as something which is continually constructed and reconstructed.

This higher-risk/higher-yield model asks us to reformulate the question "what (or how much) do tutors need to know?" and to cast it, instead, in more musical terms: how might I encourage this tutor to operate on the edge of his or her expertise? And, for tutors: where is the groove for this session? Where's the place where, together, we will really feel like we're jammin' and how do we get there? Where, as Welch has framed it, is there space for play?

I fear that a low-risk/low-yield model for tutoring encourages a framework of mere competence, of error-avoidance. I don't want tutors to fear mistakes—because they *will* make them. The real skill lies in figuring out what to make of those mistakes. I don't want tutors to choose the safe route rather than (maybe) the exceptional one. I want them at least to *try* to exceed the mean expectations that they hold for themselves (and that perhaps others hold for them), even if such attempts result in their occasionally falling below those expectations. So I am suggesting here that we need to reject the institutional demand that the writing center produce institutionally competent tutors who help to produce institutionally competent writers. I think we do our tutors a disservice when we "train" them in ways that suggest that we are more concerned with their being competent than with their being truly exceptional—which will involve some horrible moments, no doubt. And I think we do our students a disservice when we don't allow them to see our growing pains, our own intellectual struggles, challenges, and successes.