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The Writing Center Director as Archivist: The Documentation Imperative

Joyce Kinkead

Utah State University
Logan, Utah

When I started thinking about the role of writing center directors as archivist, I realized that 2017 marks 40 years since I started in writing center work. I was fortunate to do my graduate work in Texas with fellow students Lil Brannon and Jeanette Harris. In fact, Jeanette was the inaugural director of the writing center, established in 1977, where I was a tutor. Frankly, at the time, I wasn't sure I wanted to tutor, as doing so meant I couldn't teach first-year writing courses. But what a thrilling experience it was to work one-to-one with students of all levels—first year through dissertation writers. We were right at that exciting cusp of a new writing center on our campus and the wonder of being tutors. It was a foundational experience that created a career path for me. I departed Texas to direct a writing center of my own in Kansas.

Although those were early days for writing centers, the work of Lou Kelly, Muriel Harris, Mary Croft, Joyce Steward, and others provided guidance. True, we relied often on lore, as Stephen North explained in *The Making of Knowledge in Composition*. Though lore has been belittled in some circles, it acknowledges the wisdom, tradition, and experience that writing center folks bring to their work. In this essay, I argue that we need to make our work more visible through artifacts that document experiences and that can be housed in archives for future researchers and scholars. I am speaking here of institutional history and archives. We need to collect the stories of writing centers—the lore—as well as qualitative and quantitative research.

Overall, we've done a good job of documenting writing center histories. The Writing Centers Research Project (WCRP), launched at the University of Louisville, has moved to the University of Arkansas at Little Rock.[1] Its mission is to conduct and support research on writing center theory and practice; to do so, it maintains a research repository of historical, empirical, and scholarly materials related to Writing Center Studies. The archives contain physical materials, oral interviews, and the Peer Tutor Alumni Project. The WCRP is a wealth of material to be mined, and it welcomes further contributions.

The International Writing Centers Association (IWCA), founded in 1983 as the National Writing Centers Association (NWCA), has two published histories, both accessible at the IWCA website. I wrote one at NWCA's tenth anniversary celebration for its first stand-alone conference (Kinkead "The National Writing Center as Mooring"); a second account celebrates the 30th anniversary (Kinkead, Simpson, Harris, Farrell, Brown, and Harris, "The International Writing Centers Association at 30: Community, Advocacy, and Professionalism").

The National Archives on Composition and Rhetoric (NACR), assembled by Robert J. Connors prior to his untimely death in 2000, focuses on composition textbooks. But Connors also directed the University of New Hampshire writing center, now named in his honor.[2] Connors' interest in and dedication to archival work is legendary and may provide inspiration for individuals to undertake the important work of saving documents and artifacts that others will find as fascinating as he did. His landmark essay, "The Rise and Fall of the Modes of Discourses" is but one result.

These archives and histories are omnibus, recounting the work of writing centers writ large. But what about local archives? Shouldn't we be housing local histories in our institutional special collections? Students in my University of Utah research methods course visit the school's Special Collections and Archives to learn about its resources. During one such visit, when the librarian leading our tour pulled out documents that might be of interest to Writing Studies students, I was fascinated to find a late 1970s Faculty Senate report that investigated the University Writing Program. At that time, the director, a linguist, employed a sentence-level approach to writing; once students could write a passing essay, they could exit the course, no matter the time of the academic term. Imagine a writing class in which enrollment dwindles until a handful of students are left. And, imagine how those students felt about writing after that experience. When the department was asked to re-envision its approach to writing, to seek a new director, and to contract for a Writing Program Administration consultant-evaluator visit, John Bean and Harvey Wiener drafted the evaluation visit report—referred to as "The Bean and Wiener Report." I'd heard of but had never seen this report and was intrigued by its recommendations, including one arguing for hiring a faculty member to direct the writing center. That hire turned out to be me. This Faculty Senate document was significant on a personal basis, but it also provided a roadmap for writing theory and pedagogy evolution at the university.

Where do old writing center materials go? For part of my 30+-year career, I was a packrat, adding filing cabinet after filing cabinet to my office. Next to the official archives, I was the go-to person for institutional history in Writing Studies. When I left administration to return to my faculty position, I decided to let go of the weight. I loaded recycling bin after recycling bin on a daily basis for a month. In retrospect, I should have contacted our Special Collections librarians to gauge potential interest in these materials. Fortunately, I'd lodged in the archive at Louisville my work as NWCA's Executive Secretary for its first eight years. But I tossed materials that could have been helpful to archivists.

I've lived through several eras in Writing Studies history. As Langer and Applebee wrote in their overview of Research in the Teaching of English from 1984-2015, "every era is one of change" (333). The history of writing centers is also a social history. Every era is imbued by the values and practices of society at that moment/time. In the 1970s, the move to open higher education admissions and access meant students weren't always prepared for college work. That concern was captured on the December 8, 1975 *Newsweek* magazine cover, "Why Johnny Can't Write," which sounded an alarm about the writing skills of college students, even those enrolled at the University of California at Berkeley. Concern about writing skills is one reason writing centers grew in increasing numbers.

When I moved, in 1982, from the Kansas writing center I directed to a similar position at Utah State University, I found storage closets stuffed with tape players and instructional cassette tapes. The "auto-tutorial" was one way people were trying to meet the literacy demand. As writing center professionals, we were drawing then primarily on "skills center" approaches to writing instruction. The Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) commissioned a study on Learning Skills Centers in the 1970s, concerned about just this kind of auto-tutorial method. Carol Laque and Phyllis Sherwood wrote one of the first volumes about writing centers, *A Laboratory Approach to Writing*. Jackie Goldsby, by way of the Bay Area Writing Project, offered a tutor's journal, and Ken Bruffee's The Brooklyn Plan, which focused on one-to-one tutoring, anticipated the peer tutoring model by addressing the misperception that it might be viewed as "the blind leading the blind." Another important collection was Muriel Harris' *Tutoring Writing: A Sourcebook for Writing Labs*. That volume said, "we have arrived."

Muriel Harris said in our IWCA 30th anniversary panel that the creation of writing centers "was like playing a violin while constructing it." The field was instantly appealing, but still forming and expanding (Lerner). No courses in writing center practice and few, if any, books or journals existed, yet our centers were exciting and new intellectual homes. We were building them as we worked in them. Langer and Applebee in their 2016 *RTE* article noted as follows:

> The late 1970s and early 1980s were a wonderful time in the field of English literacy research. The wealth of conceptual possibilities brought on by the cognitive and computer science revolutions, as well as the civil rights movement, and the knowledge and research methodologies gained from related work in linguistics, anthropology, psycholinguistics, psychology, and sociology, offered promising new ways to study issues of language, thought, teaching, and learning in situated contexts. Together with new research in our own field, they held much promise for substantive theoretical and pragmatic reform." (333)

I certainly felt that excitement. In graduate school as a TA, I was still using modes of discourse as an organizing principle: the comparison and contrast essay; the process essay. But we were learning about process vs. product through researchers such as Janet Emig. Paradigm shifts were all around us. I was fortunate to be on the cusp of computer integration in my own writing program, which used UNIX, dumb terminals, and Writer's Workbench, as well as partnered with a local high school that had computer/writing labs with PCs and WANDAH (Writer's Aid and Author's Helper, which evolved into HBJ Writer). Serendipitously, I found that e-mail might be used as a pedagogical tool (Kinkead, "Computer Conversations"). My individual history in writing centers parallels the larger social, cultural, and political changes. It's but one reason why such discrete narratives and histories matter.

Sharing information among writing center administrators, staff, and tutors has always been important. The *Writing Lab Newsletter*—created after a vibrant CCCC meeting and initially cut, pasted, and scotch-taped on Muriel ("Mickey") Harris's kitchen table—offered a lifeline. Notably, it was described as a kind of kaffeklatsch, a coterie of friends coming together to share ideas (Connors, "Journals"). (See also Michael Pemberton's: "*The Writing Lab Newsletter as History*"; Kim Ballard and Rick Anderson's: "*The Writing Lab Newsletter*: A History of Collaboration.") A pivotal moment in the professionalization of writing centers occurred at Purdue University in 1983 when Harris hosted the Writing Centers Association (now known as East Central WCA) and Nancy McCracken introduced the idea of a national association. Some regional writing centers associations had already been meeting or started soon after (e.g., Rocky Mountain in 1983, South Central WCA in 1989), and regional peer tutoring meetings were forming, such as the one organized in 1994 as the Intermountain West.

Writing centers diversified, adding online writing labs (OWLs) for asynchronous tutoring, and establishing satellites in specific academic centers—pharmacy, business, engineering—and co-curricular sites, such as athletics. One-to-one tutoring in a "center" sometimes morphed into or added a decentered model of Writing Fellows, embedded in specific classes (Haring-Smith; Spigelman and Grobman).

The number of writing centers established in the last several decades is truly astonishing. Rarely is an institution without such service. The National Census on Writing reported from its 2014 survey of two- and four-year institutions that 97% and 99%, respectively, have writing centers. We find ourselves in a context of shifting identities. The rise of the writing major and minor has paralleled a shift to some stand-alone writing departments, divorced from traditional English departments. The National Census on Writing asked where writing majors are housed and reported that 79% of respondents said English, but 11% said a department of writing with 20% reporting other. Some writing centers are being folded into comprehensive learning centers. The administrative structures for writing are in flux.

Now is a particularly interesting time in our histories, and I urge writing center directors to contribute documents to their local archives or the Writing Center Research Project[1] that will benefit future researchers. Archival research is on the rise as noted in recent articles such as "Gifts of the Archives" (Hayden; see also, Connors, Greer, Grobman, L'Eplattenier, Gaillet). Reviewing methods of historical research can be helpful in determining what to document and what to save. Archival sources can be documents, records and reports, objects, sound and audiovisual materials, or other materials. Some of these texts may be in print while others may be electronic or digital. The provenance of materials should be clearly noted. In other words, think about the historians two or more decades into the future. What will they need to make sense of our artifacts?

A simple starting point is to ensure that the local writing center history is visible to those who work and study there. Photographs, framed histories, and plaques provide visual evidence to a center's users. Augment the visual artifacts with origin stories of the center. A local history can be very helpful to present and future directors and administrators. One way to structure such a history is to draw on the Self-Study Guidelines the Council of Writing Program Administration prepared for its consultant-evaluator program. It offers guiding questions about mission, philosophy, goals, staffing, and assessment.

In looking to the past to construct, or re-construct, a writing center history, consider research projects that tutors might undertake as part of research courses or independent studies. Writing Studies research courses are springing up in degree programs, so directors could submit a list of possible topics for archival or current study focused on the writing center. Students can produce data analysis, for instance, perhaps longitudinal, that can prove highly beneficial to the center. One student in my research methods course collected data on what majors used our center between 2013-2015; that data is serving as a baseline because in fall 2016, our center spawned a science satellite and an engineering one. What documents are already available that might be mined? What oral histories might be produced? If all goes well, such research project reports can be disseminated orally and/or in print. Lauren Fitzgerald and Melissa Ianetta offer excellent advice in *The Oxford Guide for Writing Tutors* on how to conduct historical research. To see a stellar history of an early writing center director, visit the University of Wisconsin's blog post by Brad Hughes, "Our Writing Center's Founder: Professor Joyce Steward."

I believe we are in a time of what I term "the documentation imperative." Of the many people present at the formation of the organization that became IWCA, some are no longer with us. Is their work and the work of their writing centers documented at local and national levels? This is the right moment to make an all-out effort to document our histories. I hope that you have already or will consider taking up this challenge.

NOTES

1. The Writing Center Research Project is currently housed at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock and maintained by Allison Holland, <adholland@ualr.edu>.

2. This video shows the story of the NACR: <www.youtube.com/watch?v=N5O2DPy-tbc&feature=youtu.be>.

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