

## Heading East, Leaving North

### *Thoughts from the 2016 IWCA Conference*

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There's a Bob Seger song entitled "Get Out of Denver," and it is running through my head as the plane taxis away from that city's airport. Admittedly, I'm mentally singing the Blues Traveler version, but there's no mistaking the up-tempo, driving imperative: "Go, get out of Denver, baby. Go, go, get out of Denver, baby." The singer's reason for leaving is criminal, as he and his partner are being chased by the police, and though I don't share that situation, I'm still dogged by the feeling that someone, or something, is right behind me. Yes, I am excited and exhilarated to implement all the ideas

that were shared and prompted by the conference—so many possibilities. But, this time, unlike other departures, there's also a note of loss. A shadow of something, "something heavy," as the song warns. It's a feeling that will follow me all the way back to Ohio.

After any writing center conference, I bring my backpack to the office and empty out all the notes; ideally they would all be contained in one notebook, but they never are. Instead, I have a stack of notecards, conference program pages, hotel stationery pads, occasional napkins—random items that together create my conference experience. In this collage, there are several jottings about English 242, which is the peer tutoring course I teach every spring. The structure of the course was especially on my mind in Denver as we had just finished our hiring process and had selected the students who would be in the class. One of my scribbles reminded me that after hearing the presentation by Gita DasBender entitled "Metacognitive Opportunities for Enhancing Tutor Knowledge of Multilingual Writers and Writing," I wanted to think about framing the course around threshold concepts. I also reminded myself that I wanted to start off by reading *The Bat-Poet*, by Randall Jarrell, which was a

title suggested by a previous conference talk by Chris Anson—I wanted to use it along with Isabelle Thompson’s “Scaffolding in the Writing Center.” The two texts, to me, seem to be a productive pairing that will allow the class to talk about ways of responding to writers, and I was pushed to that insight by Kathy Rose and Jill Grauman’s Denver presentation, “Boundaries of Directiveness.”

Granted, both Jarrell’s and Thompson’s texts have been in previous versions of English 242, but they had never opened the course. *The Bat-Poet* was positioned in the second or third week, and Thompson’s article was in the last third of the course. It was a work that we built towards rather than began with. Now, I wanted it to be the starting point. Such a change, though, means that something else must be moved, or eliminated.

I have chosen to get rid of Stephen North.

Or rather, his work, specifically “The Idea of a Writing Center.” No doubt I am a bit late to the party in some ways. Elizabeth Boquet and Neal Lerner have articulated some of the difficulties that our field has experienced given the prevalence of North’s work, but his “Idea” essay is a piece that has always been on my syllabus. It has been the opening salvo for incoming advisors, the introduction to the course and to writing center work—and it is not neutral. We know that the piece was written out of frustration, and the emotion comes through in the work. Partly, I believe, my attachment to the essay has been due to how well that emotion transfers over to the students. There’s always a little charge when you see them light up with indignation, and they echo North’s words—we’re not a “fix-it” shop! That phrase is spit from their lips in class and onto the pages in their journals. Some are ready to storm an English department meeting, raising signs and slogans to drive home the point. They also continue to cite the essay in future work logs after the class, critiquing faculty who send students to the Writing Center without fully realizing the value that we can have—we create “better writers, not better writing.” The essay attaches them to the work of a writing center in a way that no others do, and there is some value in creating that connection.

Yet I am attuned to Boquet and Lerner’s claims of the “imbalance” of the field given our reliance upon this work. The reliance has, in their argument, given us research “dominated by lore and speculation” rather than “richly textured accounts that

are concerned with the full scope of literacy studies” (185-186). Also, I am aware that not that many faculty are calling for us to focus on grammar anymore. Some are, yes, but more and more faculty come to college teaching with a solid understanding of writing center work (and more and more young faculty have worked in writing centers at some point). Writing centers are ubiquitous nowadays; students come up to me and tell me of their high school centers and how they appreciate being able to continue their writing conversations (or to continue working as a writing advisor). To give incoming advisors North’s anger can be counterproductive. As Boquet and Lerner say, the righteousness of the article “became an ossifying force for the assumptions inherent in writing center work” (183). Perhaps I’ve known that for awhile.

But it’s taken this last conference for me to acknowledge where I am and where we are as a field, as well as to acknowledge the possible ineffectiveness of the article. What I might have known in theory has now been placed into practice. My syllabus has changed. Those changes I can trace directly to specific conference presentations, as well as to conversations with other directors. Mark Hall shared his syllabus with me, based on a conversation in Denver, and he highlighted his use of Laurel Johnson Black’s work for writing center advisors. Now her writing is another addition for my course, and hers is a richly textured account of conversations between writers and readers. It, and Thompson’s work, is indicative of valuable research, research that can help incoming advisors understand and appreciate the intricacies of their sessions. Through such work, the class can, I believe, move “beyond mere assertion of identity,” as Boquet and Lerner urge us to do (185).<sup>1</sup>

Of course, the break in the relationship is not easy, and I want to acknowledge again the difficulty and suggest at least one possible reason. When Boquet and Lerner lay out the “imbalance” in our research, they call on “those who are directly involved in writing center work—directors, tutors, or researchers” to counteract it (185). For me, that’s a spurious parallel structure. The advisors (tutors) in our writing center are undergraduates, and none of them is majoring in writing studies (we don’t have such a major). Writing centers are not in their futures. The students are, instead, biology majors on their way to being physical therapists, marine scientists, or doctors; political science majors on their way to being lawyers; history

majors on their way to being museum directors; English majors on their way to being high school teachers. They are transients in this field—incredibly valuable, insightful, compassionate, and dedicated transients, but visitors nonetheless. So too with many writing center administrators, at least if we can judge from the emails on WCenter that pop up and tell us that someone else has just been “given responsibility for the writing center.” Ours is not usually a long-term field.

So perhaps we have had this long attachment to North given how transient the writing center field can be. What better place to start than “The Idea of a Writing Center”? It’s understandable. It’s a shot of adrenaline to the heart, an immediate attachment made through emotion and catchy slogans. It’s a shorthand that cuts to why many of us enjoy the work. If someone asked why I like Bob Dylan, I could have them listen to *Blood on the Tracks*; or if they asked why I watch college basketball, I could have them watch the last five minutes of the 1983 championship game between North Carolina State and Houston; or if they asked why I am drawn to Salvador Dali, I could show them *The Persistence of Memory*. None of those examples would articulate exactly why I like what I do, in the same way that reading North does not give a clear picture of the work done in writing centers. But, the examples can be explanatory in an immediate, visceral way.

Losing that emotional entrance worries me. Will the incoming advisors, these students passing through our field, now see their roles in the Writing Center as less of a calling and more of a, well, job? Will an immediate dive into something like Thompson’s research put them off? (Students have found it a dense, difficult piece.) The change in approach will certainly mean that I need to work harder, and more deliberately, to help the advisors establish a sense of themselves as advisors. Perhaps, though, we can accomplish more deliberate research in our center, with a new focus. Again, that is not the primary importance for the advisors, but they might feel better equipped (and more eager) to undertake such projects.

This essay, however, is not another call for more critical research in our field. We have those. Rather, this is my admission (confession) of how I have introduced the field to my advisors, and my desire to change. What do I want them to begin with? What first steps do I want them to take into the world of writing centers? What first impression do I want them to have? Those are always questions that I ask when preparing for the course,

but previously, I always came back to North's article. Somehow, my time in Denver was the tipping point for me. The conference, and the conversations there, freed me. I have been unlocked from whatever obligation I thought I had to North's work. To North's idea. We can have other starting points.

For the first time in fifteen years, North's article will not be on my syllabus. Heading east that day from Denver, I realized I was leaving North. I needed a new direction. My class and I do not need to begin with frustration, with anger, with ire. We can instead dive straight into the research on the conversations.<sup>2</sup> To return to Bob Seger's song, in my class this semester, we are heading out of the fog. We are moving away from North, away from an identity claimed through frustration and ideals. We are, instead, starting with the talk, with research that targets specifically the words exchanged by writers and readers in a one-to-one setting. That's what I got out of Denver.

## NOTES

1. There is perhaps an interesting conversation to be had at some point as to whether or not the writing center field was guilty of the same emphasis on identity that Richard Rorty claims the Left has in *Achieving Our Country*, and whether we can notice the distinction between agent and spectator in our roles. His is a provocative argument, but one that needs much more space for unpacking.

2. And as Boquet and Lerner remind us, that was probably North's original idea anyway, given his other 1984 article, "Writing Center Research: Testing Our Assumptions."



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