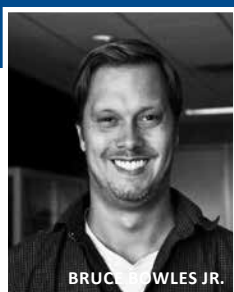


Coffee's for Closers!: The Pressures of Marketing a New Writing Center

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One of the most memorable scenes in the film *Glengarry Glen Ross* occurs when Blake, a slick and successful salesman, is brought in to motivate the low-performing salesmen of Premiere Properties. As he is about to begin speaking to them, he admonishes the elderly, struggling salesman Shelley Levene for pouring a cup of coffee while he is talking, bellowing, “Put. That coffee. Down. Coffee’s

for closers only.” Blake then goes on to drive home a sales mantra repeatedly—ABC (Always Be Closing)—as he berates the staff for their poor sales performances.

Obviously, writing center work is not equivalent to high-pressure sales. Nevertheless, writing center directors can experience immense pressure to “close,” to get students to give the writing center a try. There might not be quotas and a looming termination if numbers do not improve, but—rather quickly—stakeholders around a campus may notice if students are not visiting the writing center. As I began my career as a writing center director, although my administration was supportive, I was painfully aware that growing the University Writing Center (UWC) and improving the numbers would play an integral role in influencing the funding and support for the UWC moving forward as well as my own professional advancement. The pressure was daunting, and I must profess that the character of Blake became an imaginary adversary in my head. Every day it seemed as if he was shouting at me: “ALWAYS BE CLOSING! Your career depends on it!”

The scholarship on early-career directors suggests that I am not alone. Nicole Caswell, Jackie Grutsch McKinney, and Rebecca Jackson found marketing a writing center to be one of the twelve most common tasks for the nine early-career directors they studied. Anne Ellen Geller and Harry Denny, studying fourteen early-career directors, also noticed that this drive was strong and resulted in immense pressure. For participants in their study,

“Nuts-and-bolts writing center direction and measurable—or at least noticeable—writing center growth appeared the means to the most rewards institutionally...” (111). While not always viewed as primary tasks for directors, marketing and growing a writing center play a pivotal role in their labor. Their work is manifested and highly visible in the physical spaces they lead and manage, tethering their identities to these spaces. From an institutional perspective, the two are oftentimes essentially one and the same. Tangible results become highly desirable as they can help a writing center, and its director, gain recognition from peers and administrators.

Yet, marketing a center receives limited attention in scholarship and is often relegated to WCenter and/or personal discussions amongst directors. As a result, directors are left with an exhausting everyday task that—while potentially rewarded institutionally—is frequently not a part of their formal preparation and is commonly seen as separate from their scholarly endeavors. Early-career directors are often placed in a quintessential “Catch-22.” Administrative success frequently comes at the expense of scholarly success and vice versa, yet both are essential for professional advancement, especially for those on the tenure track.

EMBRACING THE CHALLENGE WITH A PERSONAL APPROACH

As I embarked on my first year as Director of the UWC at Texas A&M University—Central Texas, I favored administration. Because the UWC opened a year before my arrival, it was not overly busy and many students did not know of the service. This placed the need to invest in, and establish personal connections with, the student body at the forefront of my mind. Interestingly, my experiences as a tutor led me to the primary mechanism for marketing the UWC—classroom visits. Like many tutors, I had given classroom presentations promoting the writing centers where I worked. I’d always been struck by how frequently the students I saw in those presentations eventually came to the writing center. I realized that hands-on strategies can provide opportunities to frame the work of writing centers in an in-depth fashion and persuade students to take the time to improve their writing. Classroom visits offer a personal touch that is critical to establishing a commitment between a writing center and its clients.

Stephen North long ago advocated for such visits, noting how, “The standard presentation, a ten-minute affair, gives students a person, a name, and a face to remember the Center by” (441). Though scholars have continued to advocate for their importance,

other than Holly Ryan and Danielle Kane’s recent empirical study, the effects of these presentations have rarely been studied. In their study, Ryan and Kane tested the effectiveness of three different classroom intervention types in relation to a control group that received no intervention. Based on survey results, students who received either a demonstration or a presentation were the most likely to indicate they would visit the writing center in the future. Additionally, students who received a demonstration visited the writing center at a 20% rate in comparison to a 12% rate for the control group, leading Ryan and Kane to believe classroom visits were a useful allocation of a writing center’s time and resources. Furthermore, they contend that classroom visits “forge a connection” which aids in “lessening any anxiety or confusion students might have about tutoring” (146). This forging of connections was vital in my choice to primarily use classroom visits. I wanted students to connect the UWC with faces, not a particular space.

During my first two years as director, the UWC has engaged in an extensive campaign that places classroom visits at the center of our marketing efforts. I email faculty members at the beginning of each semester with a request to speak for about ten minutes in class. Faculty are supportive, and I (or a UWC tutor) visit roughly 55-60 classes during the first weeks of each semester. A&M—Central Texas has approximately 2,700 students and offers roughly 340 face-to-face courses a semester (not all involving extensive writing). Thus, the UWC is able to reach a considerable number of the student population through these presentations.

THE RHETORIC OF MARKETING A WRITING CENTER

Unfortunately, advice on developing content for such presentations tends to rely more on anecdote and lore than scholarship. However, Muriel Harris—drawing on the work of George Lakoff and others—provides two key marketing and rhetorical strategies: creating an effective frame and employing the “you approach.” Regarding the first strategy, Harris recognizes the lack of such frames in our marketing, contending, “As yet, we writing center professionals have not identified universally applicable positive frames that are powerful and memorable” (52). Frames serve to encapsulate a plethora of ideas and values into concise language that can evoke those ideas and values without explicitly stating them. For instance, the phrase “Yes We Can!” will evoke a wide variety of optimistic ideas and values in only three words. Our frame is two words: *practice audience*.

After two PowerPoint slides introduce the UWC and its mission

statement, the third slide focuses on the frame of providing a practice audience. The slide includes a quote from North emphasizing the benefits of having someone who will listen to a writer and ask questions to “draw them out” (440). Alongside this quote, a description of the UWC notes, “By providing a practice audience for students’ ideas and writing, our tutors highlight the ways in which they read and interpret students’ texts, offering guidance and support throughout the various stages of the writing process.” This frame for the UWC’s work is emphasized throughout the presentation and thus becomes tethered to the idea of a practice audience, one that can provide in-depth feedback as to how a student’s work is perceived by a reader. Practice audience resonates as an uncomplicated reminder of the UWC’s mission and services, providing a simple, yet powerful, concept that is easy to remember.

The slogan used to promote the UWC—“For writers of all ability levels and all stages of the writing process!”—relies on employing the “you approach” when we present. This strategy focuses on how the UWC can assist you, rather than focusing on what we will not do. The “you approach” moves beyond audience awareness and actually focuses on phrasing messages to highlight what an audience will gain and/or how they will benefit. The audience, in essence, should be the focal point of messages and even sentences, not the rhetor.

The first part of the slogan, “For writers of all ability levels,” is addressed through success stories relating to students who have used the UWC frequently. When presenting, my tutors or I tell the stories of two students in an effort to allow other students to identify with their fellow classmates and envision how they, too, can benefit from the UWC’s services. Kenneth Burke emphasizes the role of identification in rhetoric, clarifying that “a speaker persuades an audience by the use of stylistic identification...to establish rapport between himself and his audience” (46). The “you approach” and identification go hand-in-hand. Students in our audience can identify with the successful students in our narratives. The message becomes you can achieve growth and success like other students who have worked in the UWC. Anecdotally, this strategy has proven successful—a student originally motivated to give the UWC a try as a result of the initial success stories became a success story himself.

The second part of our slogan, “and all stages of the writing process,” encourages students to use the UWC throughout their writing projects. Again, we focus on the various ways the

UWC can help you, a student, with brainstorming, organization, documentation, and—towards the end of the writing process—proofreading/editing skills. Even proofreading/editing skills are phrased in a positive fashion. The focus is on strategies tutors can use to help *you* learn to proofread and edit your own work. Thus, a negative (“We do not proofread papers!”) is turned into a positive (“We can help you proofread your work more effectively!”).

Employing these rhetorical strategies, our classroom visits have had a tremendous impact. Overall consultations for the 2016-2017 academic year (the first year the personal marketing strategies were employed) increased by 130%; the 2017-2018 academic year saw an additional 64% increase over the prior year and, during the two years the personal marketing strategies have been used, consultations have increased 276%. Our classroom presentations have brought visibility and awareness for the UWC along with a greater understanding of the services it provides.

Although I am proud of the UWC’s growth, it is the quality of instruction our staff provides—and the endless stream of compliments and praise the staff receives via surveys—of which I am most proud. However, I am also aware of how interconnected our instructional successes are with our marketing campaign. In “Counting Beans and Making Beans Count,” Neal Lerner comments on how “college administrators often want numbers, digits, results” (2). He uses his own assessments of his writing center to suggest quantitative measures that can move beyond merely counting the number of students a writing center serves.

Yet, while finding more and better ways to assess the work a writing center does is crucial, pragmatically speaking, usage statistics still matter immensely. For certain audiences—upper-level administrators in particular—usage statistics demonstrate that students are taking advantage of the resources a writing center provides and that institutional funds are well-spent. Effective marketing not only ensures that these numbers are compelling (which can aid in funding arguments) but also promotes greater understanding of a writing center’s services. Furthermore, engaging students with a writing center is the first step towards allowing them to take advantage of the numerous quality services a writing center provides. Thus, concerns about marketing and quantity are not inherently antithetical to quality; rather, they bring students to a writing center to experience quality one-to-one peer tutoring, which creates stronger usage statistics that can enhance arguments for greater funding to improve quality.

Rather than adversarial, the relationship can be viewed more as reciprocal.

ADDRESSING THE EVERYDAY/INTELLECTUAL DILEMMA

Geller and Denny's research on early-career directors unearthed a tension between the everyday and the intellectual. Intriguingly, they discovered that "Across interviews, it was clear that some of the most everyday responsibilities were the toughest for WCPs to learn" (101). Their study further highlighted how many of these early-career directors were engaging with the everyday and the scholarly as distinct and separate entities. Frequently, these early-career directors were either pursuing publication outside of writing center venues (believing other venues are more valued intellectually) or were foregoing scholarly pursuits in favor of everyday tasks. Essentially, Geller and Denny worry about the opportunities for professional advancement, for both those on the tenure track and those with non-tenure track positions, when directors become fixated on everyday tasks. Moreover, they acknowledge concern over the discipline's status if disciplinary knowledge is not being published through conventional channels.

Considering that early-career directors frequently struggle with learning and accomplishing the everyday elements of the job, while simultaneously grappling with finding the time for scholarship, one approach to this dilemma may be engaging more frequently in scholarship regarding our everyday labor. My own experiences closely resembled those of the participants in Geller and Denny's study: the everyday elements of directing a writing center were those for which I felt my studies had least prepared me. I possessed disciplinary knowledge but was not always confident in enacting it in a pragmatic fashion. Struggling to learn (and succeed at) this everyday labor can lead early-career directors to view it as distinct from the intellectual training they have received. It can become divorced from intellectual pursuits in their minds and be viewed, instead, through a managerial lens.

However, these everyday tasks (e.g. marketing, budgeting, recruiting and training tutors, etc.) do not exist in a vacuum separate from our intellectual training and pursuits; my own marketing endeavors were informed by the mentors I had/have, rhetorical theory, and disciplinary and interdisciplinary research (especially marketing). In essence, there is a plethora of intellectual and scholarly activity surrounding everyday labor. Yet, like many early-career directors, I had to learn much of this everyday work "on-the-fly," without the benefit of a wealth of scholarship to draw upon for these tasks.

Articulating the intellectual rationales behind the everyday choices we make, disseminating research as to their effectiveness (or lack thereof), and promoting ongoing, published conversations about the seemingly banal can aid early-career directors both in their everyday tasks and in their scholarly pursuits. They can learn from the experiences, theories, and research that have aided those already in the field, and draw upon their own everyday labor to contribute to these scholarly conversations. Nevertheless, Caswell et al. caution against the genre of writing center scholarship they refer to as the advice narrative, arguing, “When we propagate advice narratives, we forward a very narrow viewpoint, one that often comes with minimal evidence” (8). Such a warning is indeed warranted, yet advice narratives do not necessarily have to be dissociated from evidence and/or theoretical explanations.

Moving away from mere advice narratives requires less focus on what a director does and, instead, greater attention to the theoretical justifications, past scholarship—both disciplinary and interdisciplinary—that supports such practices, and evidence of successes and/or failures. Rather than treating the everyday as separate from the intellectual, scholarship pertaining to the everyday labor we perform can provide intellectual analysis and scholarly merit behind the difficult—and nuanced—decisions we make. This scholarship can aid early-career directors while demonstrating, and making more visible for our own field and others, the intellectual activity behind these crucial everyday tasks. Pragmatic and managerial tasks are indeed intellectual endeavors worthy of scholarly, not just informal, discussion.

As I reflect on my first two years as a director, everyday labor has dominated my career thus far. I have spent a lot of time getting to know the students at my new institution, speaking with faculty about a host of concerns, and marketing the UWC. I frequently come home late and exhausted after a day full of classroom presentations along with the numerous other obligations I have. (You probably know the feeling all too well!) And yet, it is the moments after the marketing surge, when I take a brief break to watch as the UWC tutors are busy working with students, engaged in discussions of writing and literacy, which make this everyday labor well worth it and remind me that taking the time to intellectualize the everyday has quite an impact.

Regardless of whether the everyday is fused with the intellectual, though, the pressures of the everyday will persist. This labor dominates a director’s time and is a continual source of

tremendous pressure. And I know, for me personally, while Blake’s imaginary voice has somewhat dissipated in my head, he is still there, subtly reminding me of the necessity—and urgency—of these tasks, imploring me to “always be closing.” Somehow, I’m left with a strange intuition that his voice will never fully disappear.



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