

# The Transnational Underdog and Institutional Change: Stories from a U.K. Writing Center

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I was raised in the United States as a native speaker of American English. While getting my M.A. in Composition and Rhetoric, I acquired a U.K. passport—unbeknownst to me, I'd been a U.K. citizen from birth. This citizenship made it much more likely that I could work abroad, which appealed to my global curiosity. I later got a job offer to start up and run a writing center at the University of Southampton in England on an internally-funded, two-year grant. I started with only a place in a shared office, with no space to work with students, and quickly learned about the budget hoops and how to hire folks. We held staff meetings in the corridors and tutorials in empty offices to talk with students who seemed, more or less, desperate for our help. At the time of our closing, three semesters later, we were operating on two campuses with permanent office space and a staff of seven tutors and four interns. Though I would love to discuss our approach and the measure of our success—despite eventually being shut down—this article is not about that. This article instead offers a recounting of mistakes made and lessons learned when attempting to effect institutional change as an outsider.

My role in Southampton can be narrated as a learning curve. There were early days where, despite the support I had around me, I dwelt more on the resistance. Chris Anson and Christiane Donahue caution against discussing writing programs abroad only as a lack or absence. They articulate a position that caused me much conflict, given their argument for caution and “an almost anthropological sensitivity” in how we map “our frames, our language, and our assumptions onto writing work outside the U.S.” (23). On the one hand, my Composition-informed approach was new and useful to many instructors and students. It was treated like a breath of fresh air, like a great relief, especially for the students who came for workshops and tutorials. On the other hand, in my desire for sensitivity to other traditions and approaches, I struggled to find a

way to argue for changes as shared goals and not simply outsider criticism.

At first, perhaps predictably, I felt more attuned to what I found lacking. Students could rarely point to who had graded their work because feedback was anonymous for both writer and grader. Without clear rubrics or training, scores varied wildly for what seemed to be very similar work. Instructors appeared to be struggling with cumbersome software and deadlines for providing their feedback. These were some of the norms of that academic writing culture. As time went on, I began to notice that many people were hungry for some ways to fix the broken feedback loop and that they had begun to use specific terms to discuss academic writing. I loved being useful to the many students, staff, and faculty who utilized and valued the writing center. But, I truly struggled to find a productive way to share ideas when they met with resistance, especially with powerful institutional stakeholders.

My training in Composition prepared me well to speak with other Compositionists, especially those based in the U.S. What I didn't know were the often-parallel terms and concepts circulating in the U.K. context, nor did I understand how to position my knowledge as an outsider. Composition discourse *was* new and different to many, but the reaction to that difference was mixed. Many of my colleagues' eyes lit up at the idea that I maybe had a term for something they'd been observing or feeling already. Or, they were excited to hear different strategies to solve a particular issue they wanted to address. In our first conversation, my office neighbor handed me some of his grading to ask for feedback on his feedback—"What do you think about this?" he asked. I was struck by his openness to invite discussion about these practices.

Other times, when I would try to explain the Composition approach under which I was trained, I got a more dismissive response. In a staff meeting with a different department, I was asked to share some thoughts on the efficacy of peer feedback. When I shared my understanding that it can be very effective but needs to be scaffolded properly, I was told, "Well, not every university is blessed with the money that these American behemoths have to play with. There's no way we could devote that kind of time to just talk about *writing* here." In another conversation, an instructor replied to my description of Composition's approach by saying, "Well, *our* students don't need all that attention, they can just sort it out, because they're *British*." Such responses utterly confused me, and at first I was really at a loss for how to counter those assumptions.

In this early phase of my work, I felt the sting of such responses much

more acutely than the supportive traction my ideas were having with many colleagues. Anson and Donahue's call for sensitivity is important, but it didn't help me navigate the real critiques I (and many students, faculty, and staff) felt were clear and compelling. Though many people around me were open to new ideas, I kept hitting a wall when it came to convincing stakeholders with the power to make the center more sustainable. They seemed much more protectionist about what could and should change. I felt that such resistance seemed to deflect from a practical discussion and instead cast the discussion in terms of American versus British, rich versus poor, traditional versus modern. An ability to address this resistance productively, I later realized, was what I was lacking. Before that realization, I was wandering in a fog of ostracism and unfairness, which does not cultivate a productive approach to engaging resistance.

### THE MEETING

I had been in the job for a couple of months, and the writing feedback I regularly encountered on student work was driving me crazy. It was often sparse and unproductive. After one student, while crying, showed me feedback on her draft—which went out of its way to demean the writer's intelligence while also offering zero constructive feedback—I dashed off to a meeting of program heads where I had been invited to speak on my approach and give details about the writing center. Near the end of the talk, as I took some questions, someone made a joke about how I have my work cut out for me because the students just can't write to save their lives. Please understand my response in the context of how I felt marginalized like the very students I was working with every day—students who would never be invited to speak in such a meeting.

“Well, in my experience, the only thing that's really abysmally written is the feedback from instructors,” I said, and I shared examples, including the session I'd just had. Though others around the table sighed sympathetically, two instructors chuckled even more, and those laughs were all I really registered. I read the chuckles as smug self-righteousness and sort of snapped. I sharpened my voice and said the following, while *literally* shaking my finger: “You apparently don't care that you're hemorrhaging goodwill from your students because of your failure to teach anything of use to them and making them feel stupid. But your students are not stupid, and when they ask their friends who go to schools that DO actually teach them something, and treat them fairly, word will get out and eventually there will be no one left to come and give you a paycheck.” There was a pause. No one responded. All of the air had left the room for a moment. Then, the chair of the meeting thanked me effusively

for offering my time and said I was “pushing on an open door” with my ideas. I told them I needed to leave to see some more students and walked out. I felt an immediate rush of anxiety and failure, so much that I was shaking.

I knew my behavior would be seen as that of an arrogant American coming to shake my finger at this other way of doing things, because that’s exactly what I’d done. I was fixating on the conflict, and that could only produce such an outburst. This was *my* lack: I had no real transnational rhetorical literacy that could help me navigate such interactions toward better outcomes. My office neighbor cheered, “It’s about bloody time someone actually spoke up in these meetings. Good on you!” He asked if I believed in what I said, and I told him I did, but not how I approached it. He replied, “Then just wait and see what happens. You took a risk by telling them the truth, and they’ll either respect you for it, or they were never gonna buy in anyway.”

So, I resigned myself to the consequences of my actions and embraced the honesty of what I said. I didn’t speak about it with anyone else, and I went back to work. A couple of weeks later, the Dean found me in the corridor and said she heard about the meeting and believed I had some very good ideas. She asked whether I would be willing to meet with a few more people to discuss making changes. I was grateful for any possible future chances to encourage better engagement with the issues I raised. So, I joined those meetings and many more in the future across the university. I also took the opportunity to reflect deeply on what had caused my outburst so that I could refine my approach to voicing controversial perspectives. In the aftermath of that tense meeting, after the stress and conflict and honesty, I felt like I had finally arrived at the first hint of what my job *really* required.

## **MAKING CHANGE**

I was not hired because things were working perfectly; I was hired to offer the approach I outlined in my interview to make positive changes for many stakeholders involved in student writing. My background, my approach, and my American identity made me an outsider. So, I was hired to make change as an outsider, but I was not given the authority or support to make lasting, structural changes. Navigating resistance, I eventually found out, was a central part of my position. It was so to a degree I did not expect. Being that this was transnational work, I believe I was often operating as a stand-in for my colleagues’ assumptions about the United States. Their conflicted views on the U.S. became their conflicted views about me. Their conflicted history with academic writing became their conflicted interactions with me. Similarly, my limited

knowledge of other discourses, my narrow focus on resistance, and my underdog positioning clouded my ability to respond and reframe discussions. Then, just add to the mix resource scarcity and professional pressure in layers of trepidation and uncertainty and you have a recipe for miscommunication for all parties. These many layers, from the very beginning of my role, weighed on me heavily. I believe the promise of transnational work—the richness of diverse ideas, the energy of change—comes through strongest when these layers can be properly parsed.

Learning how to work with, through, and around biased assumptions required a kind of rhetorical literacy that helped me to make sense of whether the recalcitrance, or even the support, I encountered was about personal agendas, professional conduct, institutional frustration, nationalist expectations, conflicting ideologies, linguistic differences, or whatever else. That kind of literacy—interpersonal, linguistic, institutional, ideological, etc.—is certainly similar in many ways to domestic Composition work, but transnational writing work adds these extra layers of distance and imbrication wrought by the blessings and baggage of national borders. To do the work well, one must cultivate an ability to reframe discussion away from simplistic nationalist narratives and other types of resistance. If I could do the above described meeting differently, I would know to be prepared for a cynical response from some colleagues and simply ask why they felt students couldn't write. By opening up the dialogue a bit, I could then disagree and point out that I believed the students *could* write and that instructors *could* be of great help to them. Making institutional change requires conflict and engagement and frustration—there is no way around that. It's an underdog story. But the work can be so wonderful that the dog gets right into your heart.

Often, when I read articles on transnational writing studies work, the delicate balance between caution and assertion isn't present in a way that resonates with my experience. Methodologically speaking, I believe we need to tell more stories about how we build allies, adapt our methods, and make critical changes while also appreciating many different approaches. I own the mistake of my poor responses, and unpacking them seems essential to me, yet such discussions are often absent from many articles I read on transnational work. Bruce Horner raises concerns that the ways we understand difference can limit how we respond to it, and this can “preclude [a] kind of working ‘with’ difference” (334). Some readers might find my criticisms and mistakes as indicative of the colonial, arrogant American imposing an outsider approach. However, in my experience, the matrix of power in an institution is not so clear-cut

or linear. And the local itself is not so simple, or stable. Composition did not invent supportive feedback, or the idea of peer learning, or the writing process—though there is a flourishing discourse devoted to describing and developing ways to work with writers that I think is valuable when considered alongside local conditions. It’s up to all parties to resist the easy, polarizing narratives that obscure shared goals—that’s what precludes working with differences.

Engaging in the work of transnational writing program administration, according to Horner, is ideological, and we should not shy away from depicting the struggle “in the day-to-day decisions, teaching practices, and representations” of WPAs, teachers, and students (340). I share the story of my failure to remain composed in a meeting as a way to let others hopefully avoid such confrontation. It’s a cautionary tale. I am grateful that after this meeting I went on to collaborate with many of those at the table in different ways. I am glad I challenged the status quo, even if I am embarrassed by my approach. Future meetings were much more productive. Navigating those ethical, rhetorical, and theoretical concerns is actually a major part of day-to-day transnational work. It is also no secret that this is a major component of all writing center work. I would like to conclude by showing how some of these concerns filtered down into day-to-day tips for doing the work.

## GETTING TO WORK

**First, embrace mistakes.** In one of my first workshops, I spent nearly an hour on various activities designed to get students talking, writing, and reflecting about their revision practices. It turned out that “revision” in UK English more or less meant exam prep. I felt foolish and flustered, and the students were so confused; I swear I could feel the room cringe. Much like my tense meeting depicted above, this was a moment I wanted to erase, and my instinct was to see it as a frustrating lack of the “right” term and understanding. But, on reflection, I reframed the language of Composition as connected and in conversation with many other discourses. Running from such realizations is the wrong reaction. Face the mistakes and take all you can learn from them.

**Second, make arguments, not enemies.** Early caution in my work gave way to the fact that writing program administrators and writing center directors *are* agents of change—even, and especially, transnationally. We work to build innovative, more thoughtful pedagogies to support the development of more articulate writers, and this work will always—and rightfully—face challenges. Even resistant colleagues were most often simply hungry for help that worked, but one’s approach is crucial. The simplest rhetorical move

of leading with questions can find common ground or places of specific critique in response to a shared observation, which is the better place to offer changes.

**Third, re-frame to writing.** I found the best success when arguing not about what works in the United States, but about what I have learned about writing from my studies and experience. It is necessary to deflect such categorizations. If I think of writing as a cultural and practical thread in the fabric of any institution, I can feel authoritative in my role of changing any different context as long as I navigate with negotiation. Approach a meeting by first asking what colleagues are seeing and what different outcomes they are hoping to achieve. Then, ground the conversation in knowledge about how writers might work best as demonstrated through research and experience. Lastly, collaboratively and creatively plan new practices to take the work a step forward.

My extra citizenship gave me better access to the interesting puzzle of similarity and difference that is transnational work. What on some levels feels so locally contextualized, and therefore distant, in another light is quite global, and therefore close. Languages, disciplines, curricula, histories, and pedagogical approaches clothe the constantly shifting interactions of institutional work. Transnational work invites a kind of resistance couched in phrases like *this isn't how we do things*, but isn't that always what one hears when they want to make change? Often, what looks like an opaque misunderstanding is, in another light, a shared goal being expressed differently. The writing center community needs more messy accounts of learning what productive engagement with difference might look like. Narratives of institutional navigation should be more visible to develop strategies for change that connect across contexts.



### **WORKS CITED**

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