

Can't Fix Anyone: Confronting Our Historical Love Affair with Deficit Thinking

Mark Latta
Marian University

The incorporation of critical theories and emancipatory practices within writing center scholarship has opened up new possibilities for how we approach and theorize our work. However, in the midst of this wakefulness, there is still a need to attend to Stephen North's "Idea of a Writing Center," that it is "our job to produce better writers, not better writing" (438), and the entrenchment of The Idea within the writing center grand narrative (Grutsch McKinney). North's essay generated significant impact when initially published in 1984, and its influence persists.

A recent Google search revealed the phrase or some variation of it is used on hundreds of writing center websites, and North's article is commonly found on course reading lists.

The Idea persists, in part, because of what it provides: a clear description of what a writing center does conveyed in a way that elicits an "immediate attachment made through emotion" (Mattison 5). There are multiple mindsets about The Idea. Some treat it as gospel. Others cannot wait to move beyond it. There are also those represented by Mike Mattison's essay, "Heading East, Leaving North," who feel some uneasiness with the lore but are understandably cautious in letting go.

For those who approach writing center work through the lens of critical theory, there is a desire to move beyond The Idea and onto more student-centered, asset-oriented, and culturally relevant frameworks of practice (Geller et al.; Ladson-Billings; Paris). Despite this, The Idea remains a fixture within the dominant narrative of writing center practices. I argue the staying power of The Idea should cause concern because of its relationship to and replication of *deficit thinking* (Valencia). Additionally, I believe we must recognize our collective and historical reliance upon deficit thinking orientations and attend to the unintended consequences that may have emerged from these origins. Finally, while others in the field may be thinking in similar ways, we need to shift this conversation



toward concrete models that demonstrate what might lie beyond The Idea.

I approach this essay through a perspective similar to that of Harry Denny, John Nordlof, and Lori Salem, who challenge the “claim of neutrality” (72) within writing center practices and claim our “long history of teaching ourselves to speak the language of universality and neutrality” (73) has rendered the needs and realities of working-class students invisible. Just as the language of universality and neutrality has allowed us to overlook and erase particular needs and perspectives, The Idea has encouraged a sense of neutrality that is neither universal nor value neutral (Taylor and Hughes) while simultaneously obscuring other ways of thinking about the nature of our work.

It is within this critical turn that my work is situated. In the lineage of the many scholars who are more fully attending to the ways in which writing centers are complicit in replicating or maintaining asymmetrical power relationships, I suggest that The Idea should be subjected to a critical critique. When examined this way, troubling underlying assumptions are revealed about the ways The Idea encourages writing centers to view writers primarily as individuals in need of continued interventions as well as the way this view is positioned as universal and neutral. While The Idea emerged from a holistic concern for writers and a desire to see writing centers as something more than “fix-it shops” (North, “Idea”; Harris), it may have only altered the target of what is to be fixed: instead of grammar, we fix writers. Rather than attending to the gifts, assets, and natural abilities of writers, The Idea encourages us to find ways to continually make them better and to address the deficits we assume must exist. I hope to challenge the normative and universal power of The Idea by calling attention to the undercurrents of deficit thinking and unexamined power relationships within it.

UNDERSTANDING DEFICIT THINKING

Deficit thinking was conceptualized by education researcher and critical race theorist Richard Valencia as a perspective “to explicate school failure among economically disadvantaged minority students” (2). Valencia argues that perceived individual student deficits such as “limited intellectual abilities, linguistic shortcomings, lack of motivation to learn [or] immoral behavior” (2) are overutilized as the defacto rationale for failure while the institutional role in student success and failure is often ignored or diminished. As opposed to resource pedagogies (Paris) that encourage the use of student home and community literacies within formal learning environments, deficit approaches consider

“the languages, literacies, and cultural ways of being of many students and communities of color as deficiencies to be overcome” (93).

In our rush to generate “arguments for writing centers (and writing center pedagogies) not connected to remedial students” (Denny, Nordlof, and Salem 72), we sought out concepts that provided universal appeal. The Idea helped accomplish this. After all, who wouldn’t want to become a better writer through a collaborative model based on reader feedback? However, this approach fails to consider its underlying assumptions. Namely, it assumes that every student can be made better without recognizing that better is narrowly defined through the lens of white, middle-class markers that have become the basis for and are replicated by academic discourse (Gee; Grimm; Young). The Idea is treated as neutral and innocuous without questioning what is meant or implied by *better*. Better for whom, and in what way?

When we say “our job is to produce better writers, not better writing,” what do the writers we work with hear? This statement connects the identity of the student who struggles in written academic discourse to “internal deficits or deficiencies” (Valencia 2) and makes clear that the cultural and class-based markers within their writing are viewed as problems in need of remedies. It is this identity link that situates The Idea as a stance primarily concerned with seeing and uncovering problems instead of discovering internal and cultural strengths: a better-intended, kinder, and gentler way of seeing people by what they lack rather than what they have.

Valencia utilizes deficit thinking as a lens that clarifies the entrenched systemic inequalities for students of color as well as the tendency to position communities of color and lower socioeconomic status as culturally deficient (Yosso). There is value in applying this critical critique toward our work in writing centers, particularly in identifying barriers to student success that are structural, or external, rather than situated internally within the student (Grimm). However, considering the deep entrenchment of “making better writers,” how often are we examining structural barriers as opposed to focusing on the individual writer? Despite our best intentions and laudable efforts to incorporate more collaborative approaches, the weight of The Idea often encourages us to situate writers through a deficit perspective that asks, “What is wrong with the student?” or, “What do we need to give to the student?” rather than, “How might the learning environment, the way of teaching, the assignment, or the culture of schooling conflict with the student’s forms of cultural and community knowledge?”

The Idea contains an underlying message: the writer needs to be fixed, and it is our job—as the location and provider of knowledge—to provide that remedy. The Idea situates a deficiency within an individual: an individual lacks something. Like all forms of deficit thinking, The Idea tends to reduce our imagination of education to what Paulo Freire refers to as the “banking concept” (72): that education is simply knowledge passively “deposited” into the learner’s mind. It is this elimination of other possibilities of how we might approach our work that we must also confront. Even though The Idea has been consistently challenged, alternatives remain undertheorized.

MOVING BEYOND DEFICIT THINKING AND THE IDEA: ASSETS, GIFTS, AND FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE

Critiques of The Idea are not new. Concerns abound within the literature: it has crowded out other ways of thinking (Boquet and Lerner), it assumes a universalism in approaching individual writers (Grimm), or it essentializes writing center work through a “romantic idealization” (North, “Revisiting” 9) of collaborative learning. Yet, The Idea persists. Perhaps what is needed is not just additional critique or theorizing but, rather, discussion and examination of models that attempt to replace The Idea.

If The Idea risks emerging from a core of deficit thinking, then what does one do in response to this realization? And how might that response look when implemented? What might it mean to intentionally resist deficit thinking and attend to the ways in which the writing center master narrative has emerged from this space? What might it look like if, instead of deficits, we were motivated and directed by student assets and gifts? If we are to move beyond The Idea, we need to build models that showcase what this transformation toward a resource approach—an asset and gift orientation—might look like.

The Marian University Writing Center attempted to generate one possible model through careful attention to the ways we approach our work. Ours is not *the* way but, rather, *a* way. At the heart of our approach is the intentional development of a stance—a way of thinking and seeing—through which we orient our practices. We begin with recognition that all that we do is influenced and guided by the stance through which we approach our work. Moving beyond deeply entrenched and dominant modes of deficit thinking requires constant reflexivity (Pillow) and self-interrogation. If we hope to attend to the structural barriers to student success, we must learn to see these barriers. Therefore, our stance attends to the development of critical consciousness by situating peer

tutoring as a collaborative, humanizing, and participatory endeavor that “seek[s] to honor the multiple forms of knowledge, creativity, and solidarity that arise from marginalized experiences” (Campano et al. 6-7).

To develop this stance, training and enculturation are based upon an assemblage of frameworks that develop critical consciousness and frame collaborative learning around resource, or asset-oriented, perspectives. Within our training course, peer tutors are immersed in the theories of critical literacy (Perry) so they may learn to intentionally interrogate and expose asymmetrical power relationships. We also incorporate the concept of *funds of knowledge* (Moll et al.), an understanding that each writer we work with carries within them “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills” (133). These collaborative, resource-oriented approaches are motivated by a desire to uncover each writer’s unique funds of knowledge so that we may engage in an authentic discussion of the writer’s personal and cultural knowledges as well as the institution’s goals, expectations, and forms of power over individual writers. Finally, our stance is augmented by deep examinations of theoretical concepts related to power, identity, privilege, and collaboration: culturally sustaining pedagogy (Ladson-Billings), critical race theory (Bell), critical service learning (Mitchell), and the gift inquiry of desire-based frameworks (Tuck).

What does this stance look like when put into practice? When one of our peer tutors sits down with a writer, the main objective is relational and collaborative. We attempt to discover writers’ various cultural, family, and community forms of knowledge (their funds of knowledge) so we may connect these funds to the task at hand. Additionally, we strive to use each interaction as an opportunity to model our stance and help develop the writer’s critical consciousness.

From the writer’s perspective, this process may present itself at first as typical conversation starters (“How are you?” “What brings you into the center today?”), but as we linger more deliberately using an appreciative inquiry approach (Chilisa) rather than shifting attention toward the text, the conversation often takes on a sense of realness and relevance. We are more attentive to the ways institutions tend to overlook the legitimacy of various cultural and individual forms of knowledge and work to center conversations on these marginalized perspectives. Before looking over a draft together, peer tutors will ask questions such as,

“Which activities would you rather be doing right now? Why?”

“What would you rather be writing about?”

“What frustrates you about this assignment? Tell me more.”

“Tell me about a time when writing or reading made you feel happy.”

“Has reading or writing been used to belittle or embarrass you?”

“What do you wish your professor knew about you?”

We use this collaborative space to openly explore the strengths, assets, and frustrations of the writer. We do this to activate the writer’s background knowledge and experience so that these funds of knowledge become the basis for the rhetorical inquiry at hand. We refer to the enactment and embodiment of this stance as the *critical collaborative writing process* (Latta and Wilder; see fig. 1), a recursive endeavor of mutual appreciation and collaborative knowledge generation.

This model reminds us to remain attentive and appreciative of the writer and writer’s knowledge as well as the text. Rather than assuming what constitutes making writers better, we apply our stance and the critical collaborative process to listen to how writers might define “better” and then implement a variety of directive and non-directive approaches to work toward that mutually determined goal. The critical collaborative writing process attempts to connect ideas of improvement to specific situations, cultural contexts, and an informed decision-making process of the writer.



FIGURE 1. Critical Collaborative Writing Process (Latta, Mark and Aaron Wilder.

Critical Collaborative Writing Process. Marian University, Aug. 2017, www.marian.edu/docs/default-source/about-marian-documents/educational-resources/writing-process-guide.pdf?sfvrsn=0. Accessed 19 February 2019.)

Ours is just one example of what might come after The Idea. Certainly, there are others. I recognize that the Idea builds upon and interacts with many existing practices commonly adopted within many writing centers. While there is more that can be said about the development and enactment of our stance, I hope this brief examination shines a light on its features of intentionally interrogating deficit thinking, focusing on reflexivity and appreciation, and embodying a stance informed by critical theory and humanizing inquiry. By building upon frameworks that accentuate resources, gifts, and strengths of writers, the Marian University Writing Center attempts to confront its history with deficit thinking. We recognize that we cannot fix anyone. Instead, we try to listen and share in the labor of humanizing collaboration.

Resource and gift-oriented approaches to the collaborative support of student writing are not new, but their operationalization seems under-represented within writing center literature. Perhaps it is time for us to change that and build models of practice that more intentionally move beyond The Idea as they demonstrate asset-based approaches such as those found within *The Everyday Writing Center* (Geller et al.) and Grutsch McKinney's *Peripheral Visions*. To build these models, we must first ask ourselves: is the stance through which we approach our work one that prefers to see deficits or one that prefers to recognize strengths? Once we begin to ask this question, perhaps then we may more effectively generate new practices that challenge deficit-based thinking.



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