

## The Writing Center is Not a Place

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Perhaps the most important thing we learned during the year of keeping a remote writing center open is that “center” doesn’t mean, and has maybe never meant, exactly what we thought it did. Center, the year 2020 taught us, means something more like the cluster of values and commitments we orbit, or a nerve center, or a center of gravity. Or sometimes, a heart.

Losing our physical space for a full year was a little like catapulting a structure we’d built on solid ground into the air and hoping it wouldn’t in liftoff suddenly disintegrate, fly apart. And it didn’t. In many ways, it became stronger—paradoxically, more solid. Once we no longer had the physical space of the Writing Center to rely on as proxy for community, we needed suddenly to focus, to redouble our efforts to secure the bonds we have with each other, to sharpen our sense of common purpose, commitment, the full reach of our work with the students who had also lost their academic, social, and economic foundations. And we needed to do it at a moment when the coordinates by which we understood centeredness, comfort, human interaction, connection, and community itself were shifting beyond recognition. We were not, to put a finer point on it, only losing the candy bowl and the tea pot.

Others have written eloquently about the sometimes-deceptive physical space of the writing center. Consider Jackie Grutsch McKinney’s account of how we use the physical space to communicate a sense of welcome that might only be superficial: “I, for one, wonder about this recipe: (1) take a space; (2) add a coffee pot, posters, couches, and plants; (3) relish your friendly, non-threatening, comfortable center [....] I’ve seen far too many uncomfortable people in writing centers to believe this is all it takes to make a space ‘comfortable’” (24). We use the physical

space to communicate comfort, welcoming, and openness, but that can mean we come to lean on those visual, spatial, and haptic cues. We let the space of the writing center be the space of the writing center. And then when we lost the former, we needed urgently to rebuild the latter. But to rebuild the latter meant returning to something other than our physical foundations. It meant asking, *what does it mean to do this work right now?*

We could name many things we did to keep the center open and functional: we expanded our hours so that students across different time zones could participate; we never closed, even during campus eviction, so that students could experience continuity across at least one campus service. In the remote fall of 2020, we held a series of trainings about Zoom presence, boundary setting in virtual spaces, wellness and anxiety, and other concerns as they cropped up. None of these are spectacular. What we did that changed things permanently for us is to use the moment of fracture to redefine for ourselves, and for the college as a whole, what communication and support for that communication look like on a college campus. This redefinition and expansion in turn opened up our community, strengthened our bonds with different constituencies across campuses, and brought some essential anti-racist, anti-ableist, decolonial aspects of literacy work to the very surface of our practice.

We see the moves we made as replicable, scalable, and available to all of our colleagues at other institutions. Relationships with other institutions have also become even more important as we moved into virtual space. Uprooted from the affordances and limitations of our physical, geographical, and even financial space, we were able to recognize the vital network of collaboration between communication nerve centers on campuses across the country, to hear the echoes of our voices talking about communication, community, and connection coming from places that no longer seemed so distant.

### **1. WRITING ISN'T JUST SOMETHING WE DON'T HAVE TO DO ALONE; IT IS A WAY *NOT TO BE LONELY*.**

This is not a new idea, that writing is collaborative; it wasn't new even when Kenneth Bruffee wrote his groundbreaking essay on collaborative learning in 1984. Bruffee's point, that collaboration re-externalizes the "internalized conversation" we've learned from the basic acts of communication by which we develop our ability to write and speak, played out in real time during the pandemic. Students in near-total isolation came to their writing to say something to an audience they needed to imagine, and, in doing so, managed to "create referential connections between symbolic structures and reality," where perhaps those seemed even more tenuous, and "by

doing so maintain[ed] community growth and coherence” (Bruffee 650).

This runs like a *leitmotif* through the literature on writing centers: when writing we are “entering into a conversation” (Graff and Birkenstein xvi). In *Writing Communities*, Steve Parks makes the more expansive point about the way writing can form the connective tissues of the worlds around us: our communities, our families, our multiple identities. Sometimes words are enough, Maggie Nelson ventures in *The Argonauts*, because hollowed out and insufficient though they may be, we have them. What would it mean, she asks, “to punish what can be said for what, by definition, it cannot be?” What we do have is what can be said: “words are good enough.” She ends with an image of the “songs of care” we all have for each other, where that song—the “singing line” (3) that connects all of us, as Teju Cole puts it—is sometimes all we have (324).

We saw something of that more visceral need to be heard, cared for, sung to in the virtual year of the pandemic, when students would make appointments with the Writing Center simply to have their words be heard by someone else. It isn’t an easy thing to trace, the singing line, but if you look at our WC Online records you begin to see it: students making appointments “just to talk,” or because “they didn’t know how else to make friends,” or because they’d been “reading their drafts alone in their rooms.” The premise here is not, or is only very thinly, that they wanted to “work on their writing,” develop a professional community, or join a disciplinary conversation. Mostly, they wanted to make a connection and words, for that purpose, were good enough.

Of course, this put pressure on our Writing and Speaking Partners, who were themselves alone in their rooms, or not alone—caring for a mother in chemotherapy, sharing a bedroom with younger siblings, in the kitchen or on the fire escape, ill themselves—and being called on to listen and read in a situation with suddenly much higher stakes. People experienced the pandemic unevenly, we know. Less easy to express is the way people experienced (and continue to experience) the “ethical loneliness” of “being abandoned by humanity or by those who have power over one’s life’s possibilities” in wildly different ways and degrees (Rankine 23).<sup>1</sup>

This recognition showed us in no uncertain ways why we need to think more about the wellness of our own student staff, physical and mental, intellectual and emotional, because our student consultants are sometimes holding only a thin tissue of words as barrier against an ethical loneliness, the dimensions of which for any

individual person they can barely fathom. And hasn't it always been a little like this? Shouldn't we address this? "As we consider if wellness and self-care interventions are 'enough,'" write Genie Giaimo and Yanar Hashlamon, "we must consider the material conditions under which we labor, the ways in which we support marginalized workers, and the ways we ethically incorporate wellness and self-care into writing centers" (1). Perhaps we stayed busy in 2020 because our students learned that even the thinnest tissue of words can help make suffering visible, audible, and thus open to response, connection. Perhaps even saying out loud to our students, "this is secondary trauma, this is compassion fatigue" helped, affirmed the things they were feeling, depathologized the exhaustion. And yet, words are not good enough.

## **2. ORAL COMMUNICATION AND SUPPORT FOR SPEAKING ARE NOT ANCILLARY TO WHAT WE DO.**

Our incipient Speaking Partner program had been up and running for only seven months, the new Speaking Partners only freshly trained when campus was evacuated. But the pandemic year showed us Speaking Partners could do work that would have been impossible before we started theorizing the need for extensive oral communication support in our Center.

The Speaking Partner program is designed to problematize, theorize, and support *class discussion* on a discussion-intensive small liberal arts campus (an epistemological problem not unique to SLACs, but also relevant in discussion sections at R1 institutions), where "class participation" is a major part of explicit curricular expectations, and being good at talking in a certain way and for certain reasons is a major part of the "hidden curriculum" (Gable). While support for public speaking is the remit of many writing centers, the explicit move to helping students practice class discussion: raising their hands, speaking up in class, asking questions, writing in the Zoom chat, or figuring out how and when to enter the stream of conversation, has been the most important feature of our new program and has seeded other discussions about our normative expectations for the classroom on campus.

The shift resulted in the most sustained collaboration between the Writing Center and the faculty to date. We introduced a (now-annual) seminar on oral communication to help prepare our Speaking Partners to work with students on asking questions in class, tracking discussion, shifting the flow of a conversation, disagreeing, and finding ways to speak out loud in classes that tacitly assumed an exclusionary neurotypicality and monolingualism. Every Friday, a different faculty member from a different discipline gave a seminar

session on oral communication in their own field as it might be related to challenges arising from remote learning, class discussion, and speaking and listening in the pandemic; in the spring, we did the same with visual rhetoric.

This intensive collaboration meant that our colleagues found themselves in the position of helping *build* our program, which made them instant stakeholders and community members. In turn they asked for those students to be embedded in their courses, to help facilitate Zoom discussions, and to meet with students one-to-one, build syllabi, and assess the inclusiveness of their virtual classrooms. The immediate crisis of the pandemic required a collaborative response, and that collaborative response in turn showed all of us our shared concerns around speaking and listening—concerns that run far deeper than anything immediate to a virtual classroom or Zoom room.

Central to our Speaking Partner program is a mission we want to suggest is common to *all* writing and communication centers in ways not always apparent (or legible to administrators): not speaking, but *listening*. During the year of remote learning we saw clearly how listening—now so much harder—needed far more support than speaking. How can I learn from and with you, we heard our students and colleagues asking—and we asked ourselves—if I can't easily talk to you? Are you listening? Is typing the same as talking? What gets lost in the awkward pauses of Zoom class discussions? When we spent those 15 minutes in that breakout room “together” were we really hearing each other? Yes and no. What *was* real about it was the talking and listening that happened. We saw each other; we heard each other. Our ideas shaped each other's thinking; our questions took each of us in new directions. This mutuality is not dependent on physical proximity.

But the loneliness we feel when the Zoom call ends and we're alone with our laptops in our childhood bedrooms is real. Listening suddenly became not only something we do as a matter of course in our learning, but something we needed to draw students' attention to, something we needed to model—something we needed to promise *still existed*. What we learned above all else about our writing center is that it represented the promise that someone was there to listen.

### **3. SUPPORT FOR VISUAL RHETORIC RESTORES SOMETHING THAT SUPREMACIST LOGICS ELIDE.**

And finally, the move to remote learning underscored the importance of visual modalities in our work. We've reopened this spring

as the Center for Speaking, Writing, and the Image, supporting the image-saturated way we read, the “talk-like” way we write, and the things for which there are no words.<sup>2</sup> Zoom was a weird proving-ground for this, but it was a proving-ground nonetheless. Suddenly the little-boxed classroom was a visual image the students needed to read differently than their 3D spaces.

But why haven’t we always been reading images in our writing centers (some have—we have not)? The answer, as Birgit Brander Rasmussen puts it, is a long and violent history of settler colonialism that determined not only the fate of bodies and lands, but also languages and rhetorics:

Europe and its descendants in the Americas developed a ‘possessive investment’ in writing as a marker of reason and civilization. Its purported absence in areas where Europe established colonies often served as justification for conquest. Indigenous forms of writing eventually came to be defined as pictures or mnemonic aids, while alphabetic script, by contrast, has become nearly synonymous with ‘writing.’ However, such a narrow understanding of writing diminishes the literary diversity of colonial American and perpetuates the legacies of cultural imperialism. (19-20)

Moving to a virtual environment, where students both enjoyed the chat and seemed to see the emoji-potential of that chat as “cheating” (as if the cute laugh-cry face is any less complex than the words it attempts to shorthand), or merely having a laugh, and where we were always looking and reading and speaking all at the same time, made this history of rhetorical subordination something we simply couldn’t ignore. There was never “just writing” in acts of communication; Zoom feels a little like at once the frightening isolation of the future and the multiliterate, rhetorically saturated deep end of history.

#### **4. CODA: AND YET, THE WRITING CENTER IS A PLACE.**

While Pomona College, a small residential liberal arts college in Southern California, has its own character, what we’ve learned and done extends beyond the local. Above all else, what we’ve learned is that when you strip away the physical space of a writing center, you have the opportunity to see more clearly the network in which it exists and to strengthen the intellectual and emotional collaborations on which it was built. Leaving behind the physical space, strengthening our network by bringing into our ambit images and oral culture, listening and reading, and by bringing in our colleagues from other disciplines, staff members with stories to tell, poetry and aimless conversation, slow reading and silence, we cre-

ated a space where we could rethink the nature of communication in the absence of physical presence, *including* the history-laden colonial walls of our own institution. Throughout his examination of language, expression, and colonial dispossession, *Poetics of Relation*, Édouard Glissant enjoins us again and again to see that “expanse...leap and variance,” “the knowledge in motion of beings,” the “open circle” make possible a new poetics of relation (207), forms of communication not hierarchical but conterminous, touching, but not colonizing, relational, but not binary. Our program, compelled to leap by COVID-19, opened its circle even wider, re-considered its expanse, turned toward the poetics not of page, or of place, but of relation.

All that we did we continue to do, and all of what we learned remains true, but we can see other things as true now, also. There are things about the physical space we do need, things we couldn't see so clearly before and value all the more for not having noticed the first time around. We can be alone together in our virtual spaces for many things, but as Roland Barthes writes so beautifully in *How to Live Together*, we might find that we need each other as night falls: being together, he writes: “perhaps simply a way of confronting the sadness of the night together”; “the community,” he muses, “prepares to brave the night” (129).

The physical space represents a place where we can *find each other* when everything feels scattered and far flung, and that has real value. Our space is modest, but we now know we can't underestimate the value of being able to point to a space down the path, or on a map, where a student can go and encounter other humans ready and willing to help, to talk, to listen. Re-encountering Stephen North's evocation of the writing center as a “the castoff, windowless classroom (or in some cases, literally closet), the battered desks, the old textbooks, a phone (maybe),” we find we read it differently (433). Yes, a marginalized, under-funded space in many cases (and perhaps an embattled space everywhere, if the existence of “space committees” on the campuses at which we have worked are any indication), but still a place we can point to and say there. *Someone is there who will listen to you.*

The someone matters, we know. The listening matters the most. But now we want to add that the *there* matters a little, also. Something, in this uncertain time, is still there.

## NOTES

1. Claudia Rankine uses the term throughout *Just Us: An American Conversation* (2020). She is quoting Jill Stauffer in *Ethical Loneliness: The Injustice of Not Being*

Heard (2015). It is the loneliness of social abandonment, of being left to silence.

2. On “talk-like” writing see for example: <https://www.niemanlab.org/2011/06/is-twitter-writing-or-is-it-speech-why-we-need-a-new-paradigm-for-our-social-media-platforms/>

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