

# Southern Discourse

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## A Note from the Editor: Capturing Life in the Center

Christine Cozzens,  
Agnes Scott College



*Christine*

When I “refounded” *Southern Discourse* in 1997, the staff and I hoped to give the publication a distinctive personality. We noticed that photographs were not regularly included in writing center publications, so we decided that photos would be part of our print presence. In those days not everyone used email or knew what a JPEG was, so we often received in the mail an envelope filled with snapshots or a floppy disk. It took a while to develop the right vocabulary for what we wanted to see in the photos. Mug shot-style head shots added nothing to the articles, so we began asking for “action shots”—scenes of life in the center. One writer took the term quite literally and sent us a photo of him surfing—not exactly what we were hoping to publish with his writing center research!

For a long time we used duotone photos that carried through the color of the current volume or academic year, the “Nantucket” palette that changes each year over a four year cycle. Designers assured us that this was the way to go. Recently we reassessed this policy and found our colleagues looking like Martians in the “green” year, shivering from the cold in the “blue” year, and so on. Grayscale may be less trendy, but it does better justice to faces and bodies, so we’re happy with that change.

Whether you write for *Southern Discourse* or not—and I hope you will—think about the “action shots” you might take around your center. What actions—subtle or broad—characterize writing center spaces? In what situations might action of some kind further learning? At Agnes Scott we are fond of taking frustrated tutees on “walking tutorials” around the campus to help them relax and be more creative in their approach to writing. Capturing writing center work with photography might be as instructive as it is useful for *Southern Discourse*. ✨

# Usability and the Work of the Writing Center

Julia Mason, Florida Atlantic University

The 2013 Southeastern Writing Center Association (SWCA) conference calls upon us to reconsider “the work we do.” Below, I consider how the concept of usability might serve to reconceptualize the working relationship between students, tutors, instructors, and administrators, as well as that with stakeholders outside academia. Effective tutoring and the effective administration of writing centers and programs necessarily draw upon a wide range of theories, literacies, and strategies. Such activities, Debra Dew writes, are “quintessentially rhetorical” work in which we “employ our rhetorical training to establish a sound writing enterprise within the local context” (2009, 43, 41). Adopting the language and practices of usability professionals, I argue, can provide an additional strategy to do this work in rhetorically sound and effective ways.

Current discussions of usability in regards to writing centers focus almost exclusively on the design of physical and virtual spaces to facilitate tutor-student interactions. Especially with the advent of online writing tutoring, the study of digital interfaces and the technologies used to facilitate such interactions have received much attention. Stuart Blythe’s article “Writing a Usable Center” is representative of the typical use of usability principles to help writing center practitioners make “informed decisions regarding the implementation of networked computers” (1998, 105). Such approaches productively draw attention to how the “way a technology is configured . . . sends messages to users about what can and cannot be done with that technology.” But the technologies active in a writing center need not be merely thought of as computers sitting on desks. Technologies are situational elements (methods, machines, practices, rules, etc.) that evoke “ways of seeing and ways of being . . . [to] produce possible ways for humans to be in relation to the world” (Hawk 2004, 476). The face-to-face student-tutor conference is a technology in this sense, as is the assignment sheet the student might bring to the session, and even the “no food or drinks allowed” signs that grace many computerized classrooms and writing centers.

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Thinking through the usability of the various elements that comprise writing center ecologies allows us to reconsider the relations that form, or fail to form, due to our administrative and pedagogical choices.

As a teacher of technical and professional writing, I often field questions from students about the status of writers in the workplace, and the relationship between writers and the engineers or other subject matter experts with whom they work. Popular representations of these jobs like those found in the Dilbert cartoons often depict technical and professional writers as outcasts—“glorified typists” who must bribe other employees with home-baked goods to get them to pay attention to their work (Potts 2001, 24). Technical documents often fare poorly in the popular imagination as well. For example, in the film *Die Another Day*, British spy James Bond is handed the manual to his latest top secret



Courtesy of Julia Mason

vehicle by Q, the master of gadgets, who admonishes him with: “Here’s the manual, should be able to shoot through that in a couple of hours” (Die 2002). Bond promptly tosses the manual into the sights of the car’s auto-targeting shotguns, which turn the manual to confetti, afterwards quipping that shooting through the manual “Just took a few seconds, Q” (Die 2002).

These popular representations belie, however, the very real advances that professional writers have made in the workplace in terms of status and centrality, much of which can be attributed to the ascendancy of user-centered design (UCD) practices. UCD, “the idea that the best product-design principles are those that support user needs and expectations,” emerged in the 1980s as a response to system-centered or expert-centered design practices that, in general, ignored the experience of the user in design and development processes (Schneider 2005, 449). Focusing on usability, how “users—that is, real people in actual working situations—interact with products,” worked to “humanize system design” (Porter et al. 2000, 633). This development, I would argue, underscored the value of rhetoricians who, traditionally, have been trained to understand audiences (i.e. users) within situations. Many theoretical approaches active in composition studies, such as activity theory, provide a substantial foundation for understanding the everyday contexts in which users encounter texts, and writers who can compose for these situations are in high demand in the workforce.



“User centeredness has become ubiquitous” in much professional discourse, Robert Johnson argues, and “in technical, professional, and scientific communication . . . the concept of user centeredness has been employed quite fruitfully,” positioning graduates with this focus for a range of professional opportunities (2010, 336). Not only have reports such as those from the National Commission on Writing helped expose how skill in writing is a “ticket to professional opportunity” (“Writing” 2004, 3), the Bureau of Labor Statistics consistently shows “technical writers” (those writers trained most directly in the practices and methods of usability) having greater long-term employment growth than the average worker, and having higher median salaries than “editors,” “media and communication workers,” and other “writers and authors” (“Technical”). The technical communicator’s high relative value outside of the academy compared to other writers speaks to the value placed on UCD. As technical writer Mark Bloom writes, “The technical writer is the end user’s best representative on the development team. . . . [and] is in the best position to know how the user might feel about a specific application feature, an interface device, or even the wording on a dialog box” (2001, 81). The expertise technical writers bring to these teams is rhetorical expertise, not technical expertise.

Just as usability experts have developed their expertise through applying user-centered design, writing centers have developed expertise through student-centered design. It is unsurprising that the “think aloud and question asking protocols” that Blythe associates with usability studies share so much in common with writing center practice (1998, 108). Part of this expertise comes from the contact tutors have with individual students, and through the observation and dialogue that is a familiar part of the writing center experience. As Irene Clark states, writing centers are excellent resources for teacher training because they provide opportunities “to learn through firsthand observation how the writing process actually works” (1988, 347). This benefit need not be merely for professional development on a private scale, however, but can be used to critically reflect on institutions. As a usability expert, the writing tutor is uniquely positioned to develop insight into institutional writing practices—to see, for instance, how students respond to specific writing assignments, or how changes in writing center location or scheduling affect program outcomes.

In a recent issue of *Southern Discourse*, Kathi Griffin describes the value of helping tutors “shift their authority—in relation to a peer rather than a text; to

shift from writer to reader-responder, to position themselves as audience—a shift that seemed to increase their flexibility as both readers and writers” (2010, 3). While this seems a good step in reconfiguring the relationship between the tutor, student, and writing center director, it could productively be applied to the relation between tutor and instructor as well. As usability experts, tutors can develop authority and insight that instructors might highly value—insights into the usability of assignments and pedagogies, of readings and heuristics. The result of this is to turn the writing center into what Brian Gogan et al. call a “research center,” defined at their home institution as an “associative enterprise” that allows “faculty and their associates from varied backgrounds to come together and solve common problems” (2010, 338). Looking at the role that writing centers have played in developing the research expertise of the field of rhetoric and composition, the authors remark that the term “writing research center is nearly interchangeable with the term writing center.” Usability research is thus one way for writing tutors to contribute to both disciplinary and local knowledge about the teaching of writing, and into the effects of the pedagogies, outcomes, texts, and policies that an institution embraces.

Evoking the language of usability can also be a powerful move in reconfiguring the writing center’s relationship to other parts of the institution and to the broader public. In “Institutional Critique,” James Porter et al.’s Richard Braddock award-winning article, the authors propose a rhetorical methodology for changing the “practices of institutional representatives and to improve the conditions of those affected by and served by institutions” (2000, 611). Engaging in such activism is presented as one way to design institutions that better serve “writers, students, part-time composition teachers, workers, local communities, and those not traditionally served by the university.” Interestingly, the two examples of successful systemic change that the authors focus on both draw upon usability to provide a bridge between the discipline of writing and the public and professional discourses students will enter, discourses to which our institutions are increasingly connected. The first example is that of Mary Dieli, a graduate of the rhetoric Ph.D. program at Carnegie Mellon University, who, as the first usability manager at Microsoft Corporation, was able to insert a “usability process into the [Microsoft] product development model. . . . establishing users and user testing as a more integral part of the software

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## “My Worst Tutorial and How I Handled It”: Tutors Tell Their Stories

Jane Bowman Smith, Ruchi Dadheech, Cayla Eagon, Bethany Geddings, Daniel Selvey, Edward Szeman, and Joanna Tepper, Winthrop University

At a staff meeting last year, several tutors shared stories about their “worst tutorials.” A lively discussion ensued, fostering both their sense of community and their ongoing learning. As I reflected later about this conversation, I realized that my earlier assumptions about what tutors found most difficult in a tutorial were slightly askew. I had assumed that most would identify problems with helping international students—probably with grammar concerns. And while this thread does weave through several of the following stories, other themes emerged, among them anger and resistance; lack of self-confidence in both students and tutors; and feeling overwhelmed with too much to do in too short a time. Gayla Mills reminds us in her article “Preparing for Emotional Sessions” that a student’s positive emotions can help a tutor with the session, “but a tutor, especially a new one, can be thrown off balance when confronted with an emotionally distraught writer” (10). The following stories suggest that this can occur even with experienced tutors.

*Ruchi (four years of tutoring experience):* Imagine a short, slender, Vietnamese student coming into the writing center on a buzzing Tuesday afternoon. She is panicked, her dark brown eyebrows fixed in a straight line. “May I help you?” I ask. She tells me she has an appointment with me. As we walk to a table, she asks me to correct all of her errors, tells me that she is bad at English, and that I must help her fix everything in her hour-long session. “It must be perfect!” she exclaims. I work with her as I would with any international student whose first language is not English—I find four errors she has made repeatedly, and then I teach her the rules so she can apply them to her work.

She takes in all of my information like a sponge, yet she admonishes herself constantly for the errors she sees on her paper; she takes her pen and stabs them with red ink. I am troubled by her anxiety and try to encourage her: It’s OK! If I were trying to speak Vietnamese, surely I would have errors!” However, her frown doesn’t vanish. When we finish reviewing her three pages, we

have corrected all the grammatical errors and reviewed the rules thoroughly. Of our hour session, only thirty minutes have elapsed, but I ask her to sign the report form, signaling the end of our session.

A sudden roar erupts from the girl’s lips. “NO,” she says. “I came here for an hour’s worth of help, and you are not helping me for an hour. I come to the writing center because I am bad at writing, and you will help me! You sit here quietly while I read through my paper again and find errors!” I had never before felt so glued to my chair as I try to explain that we have gone through everything, but she will not accept my words. I agree to wait while she reviews her paper, but as the pen shakes in her hand, she realizes that she cannot find any more errors.

After about a minute, I make her a deal. “Why don’t I teach you some more rules? That way we can use the rest of your thirty minutes, and then next time you can try to apply even more rules to your writing.” Thankfully, she agrees to this, and we talk about prepositions and articles; slowly, her frown disappears, and she is at peace. When the session is finally over, she looks at me, and says, “I am really sorry. I know you did everything right, but I am a perfectionist, and I know that I have anger problems. You like books, right? Can you recommend a book for me to read on anger?” I smile, for I am in luck. I know of a book called *Anger* by Thich Nich Hahn, a Vietnamese writer. As I tell her this, she grins, and I know that I have won her over. She thanks me for my help and ends with one of the best compliments I’ve ever received: “Not only did you help me with my English, but are helping me with my life and finding a good connection to my culture. Thank you. I will get your help again!”

*Bethany (two and 1/2 years of experience) agrees that a student’s anger—in her case demonstrated by passive-aggressive behavior—is very hard to deal with:* Oddly enough, my worst tutorial occurred while I was being observed by students who were learning how to tutor; of course, that made it harder. The session was scheduled for an hour, and we began by checking the student’s formatting of her paper. The professor required *Chicago Manual* style, one that I have not used often. I was nervous, so I got a Prentice Hall Reference Guide to help. The student was not at all receptive. I was genuinely trying, but she did not believe anything that I said. I suggested she introduce her sources before quoting them; she told me “I’m sorry, but that’s redundant.” I have never had a student respond like that, so I was not sure how to react. I told her that I wasn’t going to make her do anything, and then asked if there was another area that

she wanted to address. She told me to just read her paper, so I did. Ignoring my comments and questions, she asked if we could hurry things along. Completely disregarding my presence, she began packing up while I was still reading. I quickly filled out the paperwork and said “I’m glad you came to the writing center. Good luck on your paper, and you can come back anytime!” I knew she paid no attention to what I said, but I wanted to end on a positive note.

*Joanna (one and 1/2 years of experience) elaborates on the problems that can result from a tutor’s lack of self-confidence:* My most nerve-wracking tutorials always involve students coming in and staring at me like I’m speaking a foreign language—and for ESL students, I am. We have a lot of Asian international students at Winthrop, and when I looked at my appointments one morning, I thought I had a session with one of them. These tutorials are often a struggle for both the international student and for me, as a tutor. I find myself wanting to fix all the mistakes in the paper instead of allowing the tutee to make the necessary corrections. I greeted this particular student, believing him to be a recently arrived international student. As I was reading his paper, he explained his background; his family had actually immigrated to the United States several years earlier. However, I still found many of the grammatical and word-choice issues typical of our international students’ work. I did not want him to feel offended or belittled by my explanations of his errors, especially since he had attended high school in America and had probably heard them all before. I was afraid I was going to insult him or say the wrong thing, and I probably made the tutorial worse than it needed to be; I should have simply addressed the paper’s problems in the same way I would have for any other student. I learned a valuable lesson about where to focus the tutorial—by not going off of first impressions and trying too hard not to put my foot in my mouth.

*Edward (two years of experience) wryly suggests that difficulties can also result*

*from an excess of confidence:* When the toughest tutorial of my tutoring life walked in the door, my initial thought was, “She’s a little late.” Her friend then followed her in, asking if I could look at both of their pieces because they were “short” and “for the same class.” “Of course,” I said, thinking, “I can handle this; I’m the greatest tutor ever.” It wasn’t until we sat down that I realized I was working with two ESL students. While their pieces weren’t long, perhaps three

pages each, the problem was that there were three pieces (not two) and only thirty minutes to work on them. I was very pressed for tutoring time, and then I learned that they were also pressed: their papers were due in two hours. Once I got over my shell-shock at the situation I had welcomed, we moved through the papers one at a time. Their styles shifted often, and their English proficiency varied, stretching my ability to categorize errors and offer strategies. The papers were on different topics, despite coming from the same assignment, and I was unfamiliar with much of their supporting content. After a lot of frustration, it ended up being largely a three-person effort, with each of us commenting on and editing all three papers. We ran over by twenty minutes. I was saved only because my shift had ended, and rather than cutting into someone else’s appointment, I sacrificed my lunch. Crisis averted!

*Daniel (two years of experience) agrees that too much work to do in one session is difficult:* The clock sounds and the appointment should begin. Seven minutes pass as I wait, and then she walks

in. Her name eludes me, but the important part of this story is her appearance: disheveled, eyes blood-shot, wild. I knew instantly that this girl had not slept in at least 24 hours. Leading her into the tutorial room, I began talking to her about her project, how it was going, what she liked about it, what she hated. Conversation was a struggle. She truly had been awake for 24 hours and across the table was spread her baker’s dozen worth of notes, quotes and articles in an overwhelming pile. But, while to her this table



Courtesy of Jane Smith



represented final defeat, I set the session into motion. We categorized, outlined, organized and re-organized, inserted and removed information until—with strained smiles on our faces—we had created something worthwhile. I worked with this girl twice more on this project, and each time we seemed to do more than the last. I felt like a success story as I watched her own confidence in her writing abilities emerge. We worked together until her final draft earned her an “A” and me a beautifully phrased “thank you” card; I would call that noteworthy.

*Cayla (two years of experience) also finds the overburdened session difficult, but she suggests the “flip side,” the frustration of not knowing whether or not she has helped a student:* I introduce myself, inviting the student to select a seat in the writing center, and I look at the check-in sheet: freshman, thirty-minute appointment, Writing 101 assignment. I ask her what her concerns are with the paper, and she responds quickly, almost as if she were out of breath, “Well, on my last paper I got an E, and I don’t want another E.” After more questions, I learn that her professor told her to work on specific examples, and that’s what she has tried to do in this paper. The assignment, to write a 4-5 page paper about what it means to be educated, is due tomorrow. Her 2 ½ pages of paper—between the comma splices, sentence fragments, and misspelled words—says something about Martin Luther, cancer patients, and the American Civil War. I resurface from reading her paper and realize my blue ink is now covering every page; we have only fifteen minutes left. Where do I start?

I decide to tackle her thesis first while she continually nods and “mm-hmm’s.” Working on her thesis, however, requires touching on grammar because her sentence fragment keeps me from understanding her point. Then we get to the examples—I really have to practice thinking before I speak: “So, how do you think all of these examples relate to education?” She doesn’t know; she just used them because her professor told her she needed examples. I carefully explain that the ones she chose didn’t relate to each other or to anything else in the paper. She’s still nodding, with wide eyes and red cheeks, trying to absorb all this information. I suggest she focus on one topic, going deep into the topic, and pulling multiple, specific examples from there—“Does that make sense?” More nodding. We’re out of time. She says this tutorial was helpful, and she grabs her scribbled-upon paper to go back to her dorm and finish writing. This is my worst tutorial: when the student leaves and, regardless of how much information we covered, I wonder if she learned anything at all.

Heather Camp, in “Context Matters: Incorporating Tutor Development into the Writing Center,” effectively argues that much center scholarship has been written about what to include in an academic tutor-training course (1-2). Her primary purpose, however, is to demonstrate the importance of training as part of orientation and staff meetings, to establish “a climate of inquiry and learning” (2). Gayla Mills suggests that it helps for tutors to prepare for challenging tutorials:

We can’t respond perfectly to every emotional situation, but we can mentally prepare. We can recall how we felt when struggling with our own writing, listen to the advice of other tutors and teachers, research the basics of handling emotional challenges, and discuss various approaches we might take. (10)

In my course, tutors-in-training spend fifteen weeks in class and being mentored in our writing center. As any student trying to master a new language, they are working to learn the language of tutoring. Acquiring that language, however, comes from immersion in the experience of tutoring, applying what they have learned in myriad situations. Many directors employ reflective journals, e-mail exchanges, blogging, and Facebook discussions of tutorials to further their tutors’ ongoing learning. Perhaps the simplest strategy, however, is to have open discussions of difficult tutorials in staff meetings. Because the spontaneous presentation of a problem and the need for a helpful response imitates an actual tutorial, these discussions capture the immediacy and flexibility needed to tutor well.

Seeing how well this informal discussion worked, I plan to follow Mills’ advice this fall: to have the tutors “identify which scenarios have caused problems at [our] center in the past; experienced tutors will have a better grasp of what’s common, while new tutors may see these issues with fresh eyes and their own strong emotions” (12). I know the discussion will be energetic as the tutors brainstorm possible solutions and potential strategies, encouraging and developing one another’s expertise—and sharing. ✨

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# The Role of the Undergraduate Writing Center Consultant: Creating the “Third Space”

Melissa Unger and Jacqueline Weaver, Duquesne University

## Introduction

Walking into the Duquesne University Writing Center for the first time, a nursing student arrives with a notebook and a prompt for her freshman composition class. Hoping to brainstorm for her rhetorical analysis essay, she meets her consultant and takes a seat. However, as the consultant inquires about the assignment, she begins to feel apprehensive and repeatedly responds, “I don’t know” to questions about her thesis and supporting statements. Despite her confidence as a student, her interest in her major, and an AP English class already on her transcript, she cites difficulties translating her thoughts into paragraphs. For this student and for many others transitioning into college-level writing, the divide between personal understanding and the expectations of academia often seems too vast and can quickly lead to frustration.

This scenario illustrates both a common challenge that students face upon entering the writing center and the specific need that undergraduate consultants meet.

By providing a place to discuss academic writing, undergraduate consultants allow students, specifically underclassmen, to translate from high school to collegiate writing. The idea of “translation”—the student’s shift from merely thinking about his or her words to actually arranging them on the page—highlights a crucial function of the writing center: aiding students in transcribing their ideas. In this article, we discuss the concept of the Third Space to argue that undergraduate consultants are especially well suited to assist students like the one mentioned above in “translating” their ideas into writing. Contributing to existing scholarship by responding to what Elizabeth Moje

et al. labels “knowledges and Discourses,” (41)<sup>1</sup>, we contend that consultants encourage students to converse with their writing and elicit meaning by facilitating a space where “wordmaking” is promoted (Sunstein 20). Highlighting the undergraduate consultant’s role in translation, we first review relevant literature, by applying the concept of the third space to our work as peer-tutors. We then provide a specific example of what a session seen through the lens of the third space might look like. Finally, we extend this conversation to the structure of the writing center, suggesting that the writing center itself is a culture of third spaces.

## Defining the Third Space

When students arrive at the writing center, they often bring Discourses from their first space, their home language. The first space includes knowledge and communication from a student’s background and any non-academic literacy that has allowed the student to advance thus far (Moje et al. 41). First space dialogue is often informal, with students discussing their paper topics in conversational terms. For example, we often hear our students make comments such as, “What I liked about this book was...,” “I think this means...,” or “That part sounds good, but this part needs work...” However, as students transition into collegiate writing, they are faced with Discourses from the second space, what Moje et al. calls the Discourses of their academic disciplines (42). A student may effectively communicate in the Discourses of his or



Courtesy of Melissa Unger

her major or the Discourses of his or her high school English classes, but when it comes to entering into a conversation with the Discourses required for freshman composition, he or she may struggle simply because this Discourse is outside the realm of his or her familiarity, thereby placing it into the second space. This second space consists of a system that functions according to particular standards and has values that are typically not taught in the first space. To converse in this space means to adopt a specific academic literacy, transitioning the conversation away from the informal, and into more

<sup>1</sup> Following Moje et al, we capitalize “Discourses” to emphasize the larger language systems (e.g., personal and academic languages) used in the Writing Center.

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development process.” While this might at first seem a “simple textual change” to the product development timeline, the authors note that this “important political move” paved the way for hiring “as usability designers people with degrees in rhetoric and professional writing,” and making awareness of and research into a text’s audience an “important stage of the writing (or production) process.” In other words, it elevated rhetorical concerns to institutional concerns.

The second example Porter et al. offer of successful institutional critique was the development of the Professional Writing Usability Lab at Purdue University. While having this lab associated with the program was a “key factor in gaining institutional recognition outside the university,” the authors found that it also “attracted institutional respect outside the Department of English” (Porter et al. 2000, 629). As they write, the “existence of the lab signaled that serious work was going on . . . the lab metaphor connected to the dominant scientific paradigm at Purdue, and usability was recognized as a legitimate focus of technology development.” The usability lab then became a “key argumentative lever in securing administrative support for professional writing” and for “changing institutional priorities in the direction of greater support for and recognition of writing at the university” (Porter et al. 2000, 629, 630). Here we can see how the language and practices of usability research served to legitimize the knowledge and concerns of a writing program across various disciplines and constituencies. Embracing usability was an effective rhetorical move that allowed these parties to initiate institutional change.

In Doug Hesse’s 2005 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) chair’s address, “Who Owns Writing?” his concern is not about textual property rights traditionally conceived, but, as he says: “who owns the conditions under which writing is taught? Who owns the content and pedagogy of composition? Who may declare someone proficient or derelict? Who may praise or blame?” (337). Writing tutors are not often considered owners responsible for or in control of the institutional ecologies in which they operate, and, in many cases, tutors may seek to purposefully avoid taking ownership or authority over student writing, and avoid commenting upon the pedagogies they encounter. But the authority that those who work in writing centers develop is based on observations that can be measured against

the ideals and principles we hold about writing instruction. As Porter et al. write, “[w]hile we have field standards as ideals and principles, we yet lack ‘rhetorical strategies’ for getting our standards adopted” (2000, 616). I offer up usability methods as such a strategy that can focus greater attention on the work of the writing center, help rearticulate the relations among students, tutors, instructors, directors, and others within and without the institution, and lead to the adoption of practices more in line with theory and our institutional ecologies. The exact usability standards a program will measure, how these measures are taken, and the rest of the many usability research decisions that need to be made would ideally emerge through a form of “participatory design” established “utilizing dialogue to ensure ethical communication between designers and users” (Salvo 2001, 274). What the examples above show, however, is that invoking usability could be a useful strategy for preserving a student-centered writing center, even while drawing stakeholders into this conversation who otherwise might not regard the writing center as doing serious work. ✨

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## Compass Points: Perhaps Something Political . . .

Pamela B. Childers



Pamela B. Childers

“I believed I had been elected to use my judgment, not to be a weathervane swiveling in whatever direction the popular wind pointed. But that still meant I had an obligation to listen to my constituents before I voted.” Bill Bradley, *We Can All Do Better*

Throughout the many years I have written this column, I have avoided political issues, and even mentioning Congress would be a leap for someone who has always been told not to discuss politics or religion. But, I am going to break that rule today. I am sure we all have those personal, professional and political concerns for 2013, and how we approach them would declare us optimists or pessimists. I choose to try to connect some of them in positive ways, even though many of our elected officials may choose to forget the people they represent.

Let's start with something political that connects to writing centers. In former US Senator Bill Bradley's *New American Story* (2007), he emphasizes the importance of listening. Bradley states, “you learn something deeper than what you learn from laws or speeches or newspapers or blue-ribbon-panel reports because when you listen to people's stories, you can see it if they get tears in their eyes or they smile” (xiii). How many of us have had that experience working with a writer or having someone listen to what we have written? Here is a political figure talking about something we value in writing centers—learning to listen rather than talking because that's how we learn what our clients need, what underlies what they are really saying, and when to enter the conversation with them. Bradley learned the value of listening at Princeton, as a Rhodes scholar, while playing basketball with

the New York Knicks, as 12-year US Senator from New Jersey, and in his life beyond politics in the world of finance and on Sirius praising humanitarian deeds. He models what I would like to be as a scholar, author and humanitarian. His newest book, *We Can All Do Better* (2012), is an answer to Lincoln's question in his second State of the Union address, “Can we all do better?” Amazon describes Bradley's book as “perhaps the best guide imaginable, with his firsthand knowledge of governments' inner-workings, the country's diversity, and the untapped potential of the American people.” So, I would like to borrow Bradley's words in response to Lincoln's challenge and agree that we can all do better in 2013.

Professionally, connecting writing centers in relation to this challenge influences some of the research, presentations, and writing I plan to do in 2013. Too often we get caught up in our own little worlds without realizing the impact our actions can have globally. For instance, one of my former students is now creating a program that will bring smart, talented and motivated university graduates into K-12 schools to teach in a European country where writing is not valued. Another just returned from studying Holy Land archaeology in Israel, and a third, who completed his MBA several years ago, is managing a thriving, ecologically focused company. Have we interacted with colleagues at other institutions throughout the world to find out if we have common concerns we can work on or ways that we can help one another? Do we ask our tutors, consultants, peers and students what we can do better for them or challenge them and ourselves to do more? What effect can we have on the quality of education for students long before they enter our doors? Can we learn from those we mentor or reevaluate what we are doing as teachers of writing? Can we “let go” so others can apply their ideas, whether they succeed or fail? Do we go to conferences like CCCC to make our own presentations, get our names listed in the program and a free meal or two, or do we go to learn from the work of others? Wouldn't it be good to say we did both? How many of us have stopped to listen to someone we didn't know only to discover they were doing similar research or asking questions that would make a difference in our work? What I love about these experiences is that I am introduced to new research and challenged to rethink other ideas, old and new. Also, through CCCC and other conferences, regionally, nationally and internationally, we have the opportunity to develop the important partnerships we all need to make among colleagues across the disciplines and academic levels. In the special issue on WAC in Secondary Schools that I coauthored and

edited with science teacher Michael Lowry for *Across the Disciplines* ([http://wac.colostate.edu/atd/second\\_educ/intro.cfm](http://wac.colostate.edu/atd/second_educ/intro.cfm)), the articles are written by teachers around the world who have taught me so much I didn't know. Each of us has a connection to another academic level or discipline that we could develop into a collaborative project, presentation or article for publication. Again, if we "listen" to the stories of others, we can learn how we personally and professionally can do better.

Being a table leader at the Advanced Placement English Language and Composition readings each June enables me to see the quality of writing high school students are capable of composing in preparation for college writing. By talking with (not *at* or *to*) other readers on both the secondary and postsecondary levels, I learn what students are doing well and how we, in our writing centers and classrooms, can make a difference. For example, Sylvia who teaches high school in Tampa, Florida, amazes me each year with her stories of how she makes a difference with her students by using new books, involving her classes in creating innovative writing activities, and overcoming the challenges of the educational system to improve her teaching and student learning.

Finally, what impact are we having on our students once they leave us? Often we don't know, but can't we all do better in teaching them to be independent thinkers who value asking questions to follow their passions. While I was attending the 2012 IWCA Conference in San Diego, I received an email from Shawn, a high school student from my honors junior English class in New Jersey. I had not heard from him since he graduated in 1985. He wrote, "What I learned was never on an exam nor was it written in an essay. . . I learned that I enjoyed being challenged academically and intellectually. That has stayed with me for nearly 30 years. I suspect it will always be there. I want to thank you for that." Suddenly, the conference took on a different meaning for me. I was there meeting with another former student who now directs a graduate writing center, yet I probably had little influence on her career choice and her success. How many students have we all failed to influence in positive ways? Yet, here was Shawn who has such an impact on people throughout the world as a professor in Duke's Department of Psychiatry and a research physiologist in the Division of Medical Research at the Durham VA Medical Center. I am often reminded of the words of Schindler in the movie *Schindler's List*, when he says, "I wish I could have done more." Can we do better by challenging

more of our students?

As we consider what we can do, let us not forget our own personal growth as human beings, working with colleagues at all academic levels throughout the world to learn from one another. Collaborative writing, reading and communicating are the best ways to challenge our own growth intellectually and spiritually. However, all of us need to give ourselves permission to play as well—with words, music, the arts, physical activity, volunteerism. We all have passions we need to fulfill and places we need to go, internally and externally. We are more valuable in our professional lives if we expand our personal horizons; trying something new, failing and learning from those failures as well as our successes make us much more valuable in our profession as well. So, in the spring of 2013, let us strive to improve professionally and personally because as Bradley says, "We can all do better." Besides wanting good health, the joy of family and friends, peace in the world, and a sustainable environment, we have many opportunities to do better in our work, for our profession and country, and for ourselves. ✨

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# Back to the Center: Exploring Compositions through Creative Collaborations

Russell Carpenter and Landon Berry,  
Eastern Kentucky University

Since opening in 2010, the Noel Studio for Academic Creativity at Eastern Kentucky University (EKU) has undergone a number of exciting changes that have allowed us to envision, structure, and shape our space and the activities that take place within it. The Noel Studio's collaborative mission and vision yield unique opportunities that extend beyond traditional writing center work and support the idea that creative and critical thinking can facilitate important rhetorical and composition practices among students. Some of the most exciting initiatives and developments for the program occurred in 2012, including several that highlight creativity as a part of our growth. Here, we'll highlight several initiatives that take us "back to the center."

During the fall 2012 semester, students brought over 284 projects identified as creative, digital, or visual. Interestingly, 96% of students reported feeling more confident employing critical and creative thinking as a result of the consultation. While post-consultation surveys yield favorable results at times, this data point is significant for our program, one that was implemented to develop "informed, critical and creative thinkers who communicate effectively" (Quality Enhancement at EKU). Creative thinking, as outlined in the QEP, transcends nearly all activities that take place in the space.

## The Noel Studio's Minor in Applied Creativity (ACT)

In fall 2012, the Noel Studio offered its first course--CRE 101 Introduction to Applied Creative Thinking--as part of the minor in ACT. After over one year of planning, this course was scheduled with capacity enrollment of students from across the disciplines. The goal of the minor was to embed creative thinking into the university curriculum as an extension of the Quality Enhancement Program (QEP). CRE 101, taught in the Noel Studio, serves as an introduction to creative thinking and its applications. Traditionally, writing centers have employed invention processes to inform consultations and

inspire students to consider multiple perspectives in their writing. This course, however, provides an avenue through which students explore perspectives, create artifacts, and investigate invention strategies. It aligns closely with the Noel Studio's "studio pedagogy" (see Carpenter, Valley, Napier, Apostel) and extends Doorley and Witthoft's "design thinking" taught at Stanford University's Design School (d.school).

The Noel Studio became a credit-bearing program with the addition of the Minor in ACT, intended to develop creative-thinking skills in students from across the curriculum. As of fall 2012, however, the Noel Studio offers four courses in the minor:

CRE 101 Introduction to Creative Thinking (3 hrs.)

CRE 300 Pedagogy of Creativity Studies (3 hrs.)

CRE 400 Creative Projects (3 hrs.)

CRE 490 Creativity Independent Study (1-3 hrs.)

These courses are housed in the Noel Studio, establishing the foundations for creative thinking and opportunities for students to hone skills that they will integrate into other areas of their study. For the Noel Studio, Matthew Newcomb's "situational creativity" (607)--an argument for spaces of experiment, innovation, and creativity as habit of mind in the composition process--is just one compelling example of the potential for creativity to enhance the composing process. Faculty members from across campus, however, can propose courses to fill the discipline-specific requirements of the minor. To date, such courses focus on creativity and leadership, creative problem solving, and creative pedagogy. These courses teach discipline-specific subjects through a creative lens, extending concepts learned in CRE 101. As part of the minor's development, though, the Noel Studio has also considered research and program opportunities for students.

## Playing Games in the Noel Studio

Creating Game Designers and Players

Gaming in writing center spaces is not necessarily a new concept. Some writing centers--like the one at Michigan State University, for example--offer a regular game night. The minor, as a programmatic component of the Noel Studio, explores the academic nature of play and gaming. As a milestone project in the CRE 101 course, students designed high- and low-tech games. The key to game design, in this case, was to not only envision and design a game

that would teach an aspect of creative thinking but to demonstrate the game and then have other students in the course play it. The games tested students' design skills and allowed them to refine their creative thinking. However, the games did not have to be complex or perfect. Students designed "low-resolution prototypes" (see Tim Brown's "Tales of Creativity and Play") or "rough drafts" or "rough cuts" (see "Rough Cuts") of their games--resembling what you might see from students in a design studio. That is, students could use freely available technologies or standard office supplies to design their games. Through the experience, students learn about design processes. Learning happens as a byproduct of play through building prototypes as Brown discusses. We see play as a powerful way for students to learn, learning by doing in a space that was designed to facilitate creativity. Thus, students quickly create multiple "low-resolution prototypes" (Brown). Students get ideas out into the world and have their creative thinking advanced as a result, as Brown discusses. Thus, complex ideas go from concept to design quite quickly, an approach that has value in students' invention processes.

### Creating a Space for Play

In their discussion of video games, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman argue that "the goal of successful game design is the creation of meaningful play" (33). During the fall 2012 semester, Landon Berry, a Graduate Assistant in the MA program in Rhetoric and Composition within the Department of English, piloted a research study with Russell Carpenter that used video games to explore critical and creative thinking skills in undergraduate students.

Taking place in the Noel Studio's Discovery Classroom, the study involved Carpenter's CRE 101 class spread over two meetings. The study asked students to critically and creatively engage with *Resident Evil 5* for the Xbox 360, a game that Landon has studied while a graduate student at ECU. The class was divided into two groups: Group A being the control group, and Group B being the experimental group,



Figure 2: CRE 101 Students Playing the Games Designed in the Noel Studio Greenhouse

## The Noel Studio by the Numbers

**Director:** Dr. Russell Carpenter (since 2009)

**Consultants:** 35

**Operating Schedule:** Consultations: M-R 9am - 9pm, F 9am - 3pm, Sun 3pm - 9pm; Desk: M-R 8am - 1am, F 8am - 6pm, Sat 11am - 6pm, Sun 11am - 1am

**Consultations in 2011 - 2012 AY:** 4,995



Figure 3: A CRE 101 Board Game Ready to Play in the Greenhouse

which received a card game, designed by Landon, that worked with the video game to teach Richard Paul and Linda Elder's Intellectual Standards. Both groups participated in a discussion about play during gameplay that helped them to identify key aural, visual, and tactile elements in the game and how the experience of those elements helped to

influence critical and creative thinking on the part of the

player. The Noel Studio's Discovery Classroom--a flexible learning space that houses hundreds of related workshops, seminars, and interactive sessions per year--served an important role in the research study, providing the students with a gameplay experience that was projected onto two walls from three different projectors and heard from surround-sound speakers. As players, students began to consider how games are created and the related multimodal--written, oral, visual, aural, and nonverbal--elements that compose them. The research process led to an engaging discussion about creativity, how video games encourage (or do not) creativity, and how we might employ play as a creative strategy. This research project also opened up conversations about creativity and the design of multimodal artifacts such as video games (and even low-tech board games). The Noel Studio became a space where students experienced games and began to analyze them as texts to be produced and consumed.

"Back to the Center" continued on page 20

# What's the Point? To Gingle the Understanding . . . Or Not

Peter M. Carriere, Georgia College and State University

In my last column I wrote about a book called *Reflections on Style* written by a Mr. John Constable in “M.dcc.xxxiv,” which, if you’ve forgotten your roman numerals, is 1734. I have decided to return to that entertaining tome to see if I could find more of his wonderful insights and anticipations concerning current student attitudes about writing. I wasn’t disappointed.

Because Mr. Constable wanted to make his work more interesting, he wrote it in the style of a Socratic dialogue—even to the point of using Greek characters. So on page two, Cleander says to Eudoxus, “Would you then have an author always creep for fear of soaring too high?” Now this is an easy question to answer: I have actually read several creepy authors myself. And you probably have, too. But perhaps he only meant go slowly like some of my students who creep from sentence to sentence in paranoid fear of making a grammatical error, thus never even coming close to “soaring too high”—or soaring at all, for that matter.

Cleander goes on to observe that “none are less pleasing than your artificial authors.” I’m not sure what he means by “artificial author,” and if you find out, let me know. In fact, Cleander himself thought it might be a bit obtuse, so in order to make his meaning clear, he adds, “in the same sense . . . no one smells worse than he that is always perfumed,” which certainly cleared it up for me. But I don’t agree. I can think of lots of things that smell worse than “he (or she, for that matter) that is always perfumed.”



Peter Carriere

But I really think Cleander’s main point is that we should take a linguistic chance now and then, rather than, according to him, “creep sneakily along

for fear of out-walking . . . rules.” I have never crept sneakily along. Have you? My students (not the ones mentioned above—a different group altogether) certainly don’t creep sneakily along, even when they’re texting in class. The last point Cleander makes about the matter is that the sneaky creepy types “always lie flat, for fear of a fall,” which I definitely agree with. I always lie flat. I wouldn’t lie any other way. And sometimes I even fall flat!

Forty pages farther on, Eudoxus, not to be accused of creeping sneakily along and never soaring, gets into a discussion of hard, thick skulls versus thin, soft skulls. “There is sometimes a sharp wit under a thick and hard skull,” he observes, adding that “Nicholas Richardi, who was counted a very great wit, had a vast head, and so thick a skull that with one blow he would break peach-stones upon it. Yet this will not make a hard skull pass for a commendation.” I don’t agree at all. Someone who can break peach stones with his head truly deserves a commendation. But those with thin, soft skulls don’t deserve commendation, either: “and though a thin, soft skull,[sic] is as little a compliment, yet I have heard of a very tender one that inclosed [sic] a sharp and solid wit.” According to Eudoxus, then, a medium skull is best, and I’ve always thought so. Haven’t you? But being ugly is worse. Citing the case of Emperor Caracalla, he says, “because he was ugly, [he] endeavored to make himself terrible . . . with dreadful words.” He’s wrong here, of course. I have lots of non-ugly students who use dreadful words. These students aren’t terrible . . . and, well, they don’t deserve commendations, either!

Most of Constable’s book concerns discussions of extremes in writing, not surprising since the 18th century decried extremism and strove for balance, or *concordia discors*, at all cost. Hence a section in which the linguistic extremes of Callicrates are compared to those of Feltham. A few, followed by astute observations, will suffice, although Constable allotted a page for each.

Callicrates:

“I find the satisfaction of a prospect, musick [sic], or perfume, is not thinner for being beaten.”

OBSERVATION: I’ve always felt that beating perfume never alters its effect.

“It is better to have a fire kindled without than within me.”

OBSERVATION: I disagree. We could die from a fire without!



“The musician had a nearer cut to the soul, and could neck a passion at a stroke.”

OBSERVATION: I disagree. Some of my students can neck a passion without any strokes.

“Pleasing retrospections and comfortable presages, [sic] are admirable opiates.”

OBSERVATION: Not so. They bore my students.

Feltham:

“When the guard of circumspection is over, we lie spread to the shot of general danger.”

OBSERVATION: I always lie spread to the shot of danger. Don't you?

“To convert discontentment into a dimpling joy.”

OBSERVATION: I'm always ready for a dimpling joy. Or any other kind, for that matter.

“To undress the brain, and make him fling off all those phanatique toys, which gingle about his understanding.

OBSERVATION: “I'll leave my brain dressed in order to keep those phanatique toys I gingle about (though no one else has ever ginged about them).”

“Some calamities challenge the tribute of a bleeding eye.”

OBSERVATION: I think a bleeding eye would BE the calamity!!

One more gem. Eudoxus asserts that “wherever you find the words hobble, you may conclude the notion was lame.” I absolutely agree, which is why, in reflection upon this work and so many others, I can only ask, what's the point? ✨

“The Role of the Undergraduate Writing Center” continued from page 8

formal terms, where dialogue might resemble, “The literary elements I want to explore are...” or “My thesis seems well developed, but I need to include more evidence in my body paragraphs...” By integrating “knowledges and Discourses drawn from different spaces” into dialogue with students’ writing, consultants help students recognize their abilities to combine what they already know with what they are learning, in order to create cohesive works (Moje et al. 41). Translating this idea into practical use, the writing center, as a third space, brings prior knowledge and new Discourses into communication with one another. The third space of the writing center allows students to utilize the literacies and strategies they have developed in their first space as a frame of reference for entering the second space, thus facilitating the adoption of the unknown through what is already understood. Ashley writes, “What might look like diametrically opposed literacies and Discourses—think five paragraph essay versus hip-hop lyrics; lab reports versus text messages or Facebook posts; think research project versus church sermons—might be productively brought together to generate new knowledge and literacy forms” (5). The third space theory suggests, therefore, that student success is a matter of making students aware of the prior knowledge that they possess and how they can build upon these existing skills to progress in their specific disciplines.

Thus, consultants find themselves “situated at the interstices” as they help mesh students’ home and academic languages and foster confidence in students’ writing (Ashley 8). Many beginning writers enter their introductory writing classes unaware of the specific proficiencies that they possess in the informal conversation of their personal lives, their first space. Students are capable of observing, critiquing, evaluating, and proposing new ideas within the non-academic environment from which they come. However, when placed in the seemingly foreign environment of the college classroom, the second space, these students easily become overwhelmed with the highly formalized expectations of their professors. The writing center, therefore, seeks to facilitate what Edward Soja, whose study of cultural geography first examined the third space, describes as “A creative recombination and extension, one that builds on a first place perspective that is focused on the ‘real’ material world—and a second place perspective that interprets this reality through ‘imagined representations’ of spatiality” (5). Through the informal dialogue of the writing center session, students begin to formulate their first space ideas

“The Role of the Undergraduate Writing Center” continued on page 17

## Popcorn and Newsreels: Feeling Stupid?

Karl Fornes, University of  
South Carolina Aiken

“Hooray for the printed page!” a colleague’s Facebook status cheered, a link to the article “Don’t Burn Your Books—Print Is Here to Stay” hovered below. In the article, Nicholas Carr cites declining sales of e-book readers and slowing sales of e-books as evidence that the death of the printed book has been greatly exaggerated. He then suggests that folks purchase “disposable” works such as the supermarket romance as an e-book. “Weightier fare,” he claims is the province of the printed book.



Karl Fornes

I recognized Carr as the author of the oft-cited article “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” in which he admits he has become increasingly unable to sustain concentration on written text. He blames years of computer use and internet browsing. Carr speaks with developmental psychologists, neuroscientists, sociologists, computer scientists, and others to assert that the nature of our interaction with online text requires our brains to adapt such that long-term concentration becomes difficult, if not impossible. What’s more, Carr claims, the “hyperlinks, blinking ads, and other digital gewgaws” have infiltrated other media with those annoying text scrolls on television and article abstracts in magazines. Carr has since written a book on the subject, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Minds*.

I passed around Carr’s article in our National Writing Project Summer Institute, and participants nodded in approval, lamenting their students’ reading skills. Fists were raised and shaken, “Darn you, Google! Just look at what you have wrought!” Other colleagues had similar reactions.

I then distributed the article to students enrolled in a topics class I teach, Writing in a Digital World. “Whatever,” one student responded with an indifferent wave of her hand. “Why not just ignore the stuff? You’re only

distracted if you allow yourself to be distracted.” Other students simply discounted Carr’s assertions as the ramblings of a hopeless Luddite: “He better get used to it,” was the general response.

Well, what is it? On one hand, like Carr, I have found it more and more difficult to stay focused on longer texts. On the other hand, I’m old. And most of my colleagues are old. Was this a generational thing? Was I allowing myself to be distracted? I installed the Readability (<http://readability.com>) plug-in to the Firefox Web browser and began using the “reader” option in the Safari browser to reduce distractions. No more distractions. But reading on the computer still didn’t feel right.

The fall 2012 semester provided an opportunity to test Carr’s hypothesis.

I required Malcolm Gladwell’s *What the Dog Saw* as the reader for my English 101 class. As I was preparing the course Web site, I perused Gladwell’s own Web site. To my surprise, among the many New Yorker articles he has posted, the site included every chapter of *What the Dog Saw*. I announced as much during the first day of class but strongly urged students to use the printed book. “There will be reading quizzes,” I warned. I noted Carr’s article and my experience and promised doom for all those who ignored my advice.

I was true to my word. After almost every chapter, students completed a five-question multiple-choice quiz. The first four questions were simple identification of important details, figures, and concepts from the chapter. Nothing new there. But I changed gears for the fifth question. I wanted to know if those who read on the computer were able to grasp the overall meaning of the chapter. The fifth question, thus, asked students to choose the best option out of four possible thesis statements for the chapter. I then asked students whether or not they actually read the chapter; if they did, did they read it from the book, as a printed version of the online material, or directly on the computer? Obviously, the final question was not graded. The students completed six quizzes over the course of the semester.

Overall, I’m pleased to report that the vast majority of the students (66.4%) claimed that they read from the book. A disappointing 23.2% admitted that they didn’t bother to read the chapter at all, and only 10.3% reported that they read the chapter on the computer. Interestingly, not a single student claimed

to have printed the chapter from Gladwell's Web site.

But here is the good (actually, bad) stuff. The average score for those who said they read the chapter from the book was 3.79/5. Those who said they read the chapter on the computer, however, did only slightly better (2.79/5) than those who admitted to not having read the chapter (2.44/5).

The real eye-opener, though, came from the fifth question. Although many students had trouble identifying the thesis, only 42.1% of the students who said they read the chapter on the computer answered question five correctly. By comparison, 46.5% of the students who claimed they didn't read the chapter at all answered correctly. In other words, students were better off guessing at the thesis based on clues in the quiz than they were actually reading the chapter on the computer.

To be fair, my little experiment is certainly not statistically significant; furthermore, there are far too many confounding variables to draw any definite conclusions. I'm not ready to claim that reading anything online is making anyone stupid (except, perhaps, comments on YouTube videos). That said, you won't find me ordering an e-textbook for my class anytime soon.

(For the record, I printed both articles from their respective Web sites. However, I have Carr's book *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Minds* on my iPad. Oh, the irony, eh? And the best part is I just can't get around to reading it. Go figure.) ✨

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"The Role of the Undergraduate Writing Center" continued from page 15  
within the expectations of the second space, allowing for the generation of "new alternatives" to the prompts placed before them (Soja 5). By viewing the writing center as a space that is both *real* and *imagined*, students are able to utilize this service as both a means to develop their writing, and as a means to explore new Discourses through dialogue with others who can call attention to their present understanding.

#### **An Example: Applying the Lens of the Third Space**

In order to highlight the shift in students' writing from the first to second space, we observed the trends of beginning writers and synthesized their writing samples into a fictitious example that demonstrates the third space. Freshmen at Duquesne University are often asked to write rhetorical analysis essays as their first papers. The first space of the rhetorical analysis can be viewed as the personal response students bring to the assignment. Then, in the second space, students are asked to analyze examples of logos, pathos, and ethos in their reading. Finally, when viewing this assignment through the lens of the third space, students are asked to evaluate their initial reaction, using the new vocabulary of their discipline. The following example demonstrates the first space language that a student might use in the draft of an introductory paragraph:

*The Great Gatsby is an interesting book because it has a lot of emotion. There is a lot of sadness surrounding Gatsby's death, and I was really upset at how some characters, like Tom and Daisy, turned against Gatsby. A lot of dramatic moments kept me interested, like the part with the car accident. Many people can relate to the problems in the book because they can identify with the feeling of exclusion.*

In this example, the student switches between personal feelings, generalized statements, and unfocused ideas. Specifically, the student stresses his or her own first space reaction to the novel over the second space analysis expected of him or her. By working with a tutor, the student would spend time "translating" his introduction into second space terminology in order to bring his own reflection into dialogue with his class terms. When asked questions such as "What is the main idea you want readers to take away from this paragraph?" and "How can you apply the terms you discussed in class to expand on what you have already written?" the student might then revise his initial "The Role of the Undergraduate Writing Center" continued on page 18



“The Role of the Undergraduate Writing Center” continued from page 17 paragraph to produce a sample that more effectively transitions into second space language:

*In his classic novel The Great Gatsby, Fitzgerald uses pathos to draw readers into the story of the downfall of the American dream. Using pathos, Fitzgerald appeals to readers’ emotions, making the story vivid. This emotional appeal helps readers understand Fitzgerald’s message about corruption and greed and can be seen in Gatsby’s ultimate death and when looking at other parts of the story. Using familiar emotions, like the hurt of exclusion and the sadness of death, Fitzgerald uses pathos to connect with his readers.*

Although this paragraph demonstrates the need for continued development, the student has begun to use second space terminology, to respond in the analytical style expected, and to focus his or her essay. Comparing these paragraphs, we can see how, in working with the consultant, the student reinterprets his first space observations within the language of the discipline. By encouraging the use of academic terms, the tutor has led the student to craft an introduction that is more concise and specific, while retaining the student’s voice. Without the chance to dialogue with a consultant, the student may not have realized that he or she *had* the ideas for this paper, but had yet to figure out a way to translate them onto the page. Differing from Carol Severino’s writes idea that “contact zones”—much like the intimidating space of the classroom—are places where “cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other” (2). However, the writing center functions to avoid this clash, as it provides a non-threatening environment for students to rehearse their ideas before being graded. With “peers” working together to facilitate “wordmaking” in this shared location, third space Discourses allow both the student and the undergraduate consultant to “pull” each other into new realms of possibility (Sunstein 20). Utilizing students’ confidence and proficiencies of the first space, consultants seek to avoid the assumption that non-academic knowledge must act as a disadvantage to students; rather, the consultants promote a space in which the second space of academia can be harmoniously absorbed into students’ first space understanding.

### **The Unique Role of the Undergraduate Writing Consultant**

Undergraduate tutors combine the first and second spaces by providing students the opportunity to bring these spaces into dialogue with one another. From personal experience, many of our beginning writers exhibit

feelings of uncertainty. Freshmen and sophomores frequently come to the writing center committed to their schoolwork, but frustrated with writing assignments. Unfamiliar with citation styles or paragraph structures, they often describe feeling as though writing is “not their thing” or that they “just don’t get” the assignment. However, the same qualities that distinguish inexperienced writers also reinforce the importance of the undergraduate consultant. Undergraduate consultants can provide a “listening ear” to these concerns, as many of these consultants have taken the same introductory courses as freshmen and sophomores. Additionally, the undergraduate consultant has recently experienced the same transition into college, and can easily identify and address the specific concerns of first-year writers. Although undergraduate consultants are knowledgeable figures within the writing center, they are closer in age to the student and can physically embody the informality of the first space. Establishing the “tutor as peer,” Ben Rafoth explains that beginning writers often take comfort in expressing their concerns and taking risks in their writing because the undergraduate consultant is a “person of safety”; students know that they will not be graded or judged based on the session (Rafoth qtd. in Thonus 60). Asking, “If the writer’s paper seems to lack [...] deeper thought, who better to hear it from than a peer?”, Rafoth underscores the idea that undergraduate consultants have “been there, done that” and are able to guide students with probing questions to help them think more deeply about their analysis (Rafoth qtd. in Thonus 60). By providing the student with a replicable process that can be used when approaching an unfamiliar assignment, undergraduate consultants work to bridge the gap between students’ informal language and the language of their academic discipline (Moje et al. 42). These consultants lead by example to show students how to make their home language work within academia by not only offering the chance to converse about their writing, but also by acting as an example of a student who has learned how to function in his or her discipline.

Undergraduate consultants in particular take on an important role in the process of translation, especially for students new to collegiate writing. Muriel Harris suggests that “[The writing center] introduces into the educational setting a middle person, the tutor, who inhabits a world somewhere between student and teacher” (28). Because consultants understand the formalities of college writing, yet do not have the “authority” to tell students how something *must* be done, writing center patrons feel free to develop at their own pace in this non-threatening environment. A sense of mutual understanding develops

when working with an undergraduate consultant because these consultants have recently been in the students' position and have successfully transitioned into college writing themselves. Without the "authority" to give a grade, the consultant's suggestions can be taken for what they are: suggestions intended to facilitate learning.

Considering the emotional and academic needs of freshmen writers, undergraduate consultants are crucial to the writing center staff, as they help students articulate their ideas within the expectations of collegiate writing. As the writing center exists to "make better writers, not better writing" (North 438), writing center professionals can attest to the notion that strong writing often comes from confident writers (Bishop 32). Confidence often builds as a student gains access into his or her discipline and comes to see him or herself as *owning* the language needed to converse in that discipline. Thus, undergraduate consultants fill a unique role within the writing center culture because of the "students helping students" model that they embody. Working with freshman and sophomore students as they transition into a new style of writing, undergraduate consultants act not quite as educators, but also not quite as peers. In our writing center at Duquesne, for example, students fill out surveys at the end of each session and often report that undergraduate consultants understand assignments from both the student and tutor perspective, and can thereby help the student integrate his or her own voice into each essay.

As a space dedicated to extending the classroom without the pressure of assessment, the writing center is situated in a liminal place within the university. Therefore, because of their unique location, undergraduate consultants have a distinct *identity*, one which professor Hannah Ashley believes allows them to "literally translate for each other" in a "bilingual setting" (8). *Bilingual* not in the sense that the writing center translates texts into different languages, but in the way that it aids in shifting language from informal ideas to formal written words, the writing center reflects a culture of transition and navigation (Moje et al. 44). Students rely on the writing center to help them create written works that meet academic standards while still conveying their personal ideas. Not quite the library, the classroom, or the dormitory, the writing center acts as an *extension* of students' education, allowing them to take what they have learned through their coursework and research, and put this knowledge into their own words. Viewed in this context, the writing center is a "third space" that helps students to develop academic literacy. Therefore, when a student arrives at the

writing center with an implicit understanding of his or her subject area but struggles to show his or her knowledge on paper, the consultant helps the student to form a bridge between what he or she knows and how the information is expressed

### **The Writing Center as a Culture of Third Spaces**

Although the function of the third space is most clearly illustrated when observing the interaction of the undergraduate consultant and the beginning writer, we suggest that the writing center itself is a culture of third spaces. Adding a new dimension into the conversation, the "third space cycle" that occurs as students of all academic levels interact within the writing center leads to the emergence of "co-learning", as it is through interactions at the writing center that all parties enter into new Discourses (Mick 42). For beginning writers, the writing center creates a third space in which they can develop skills for collegiate writing. For more experienced writers—especially for the undergraduate consultants themselves—the third space operates through a more content-specific dialogue, as the graduate consultants demonstrate the expectations of a specific discipline (Mick 42). As many of the undergraduate consultants employed at the writing center are English majors, interactions with English graduate students allow them to form a third space understanding of the expectations that they will face in the next level of their education. In addition, however, the graduate consultants establish a third space within the writing center in terms of their professional development, as they observe the specific needs of students and determine ways to better teach both the skills and content of their discipline. Through this third space cycle of development, the writing center emerges as a space in which both students and consultants can build upon their existing knowledge in order to transition to a greater level of understanding.

### **Conclusion**

Despite arriving at the writing center apprehensive about their papers, inexperienced writers often leave with a better understanding of how to take what they already know and transition into the academic language appropriate for their discipline. By entering into the liminal position of the third space, students expand their own ideas by conversing with and building off of the Discourses of others who are navigating within the same "in-between" space. Viewing the writing center as a third space, we note the importance and interdependence of having consultants from a variety of different academic

"The Role of the Undergraduate Writing Center" continued on page 21

“Back to the Center” continued from page 13

### Reciprocity between the Minor and Consultations

The Noel Studio’s day-to-day consultations are interactive, visual, and social. Students and consultants work side-by-side with the goal of the student leaving with ideas and future directions for his or her project. Getting there, though, often requires that the consultant and student engage a creative process to explore concepts, structures, or trajectories. A creative process also entails collaboration, design thinking, and hands-on learning. In some ways, the minor in ACT serves as a provisional testing ground for the creative pedagogies employed in consultations. That is, it is a place and space where the instructor and an interested, willing group of students can hone their skills in a safe, inspiring environment, taking place alongside consultations. It is an immediate extension of the consultations that take place in the Noel Studio spaces and an academic curriculum that contributes to the intellectual development of the program.

The long-term vision is to continue to tighten the link between the minor and the consultations. For example, students taking the CRE 101 course or who have declared the minor can be encouraged to apply for consulting positions as juniors or seniors or even desk positions as freshmen or sophomores.

Furthermore, we envision offering more research and scholarly opportunities



Figure 4: A Student Discusses a Web App Created in CRE 101

for students in the Noel Studio through the minor. This reciprocal relationship, in particular, provides students an opportunity to contribute to the space and program on an intimate ongoing basis whereas they might not have seen themselves contributing otherwise. Thus, the space becomes research and scholarship oriented, which provides additional opportunities for undergraduate and graduate research. In turn, we learn and grow from these experiences.

Landon’s discussion of his research with the CRE 101 students is

just one example of the potential scholarship that can take place when such a program exists.

### Initiatives that Promote Creativity

The Noel Studio commonly hosts events--building on Geoffrey Sirc’s concept of the “Happening”--in the space for students from across the disciplines. During the fall 2012 semester, students in the CRE 101 course, in collaboration with consultants, planned and facilitated Creativity Week, a week dedicated to creative thinking on campus. Each day, students were encouraged to take part in stations, workshops, and games that promote creativity. For example, the Invention Space featured a poem on the large dry-erase boards that students could add to as they passed by or before or after consultations. This station encouraged such creative concepts as collaboration, brainstorming, and rapid-fire thinking. Another station offered students the opportunity to compose structures using LEGOs, emphasizing the concept of hands-on, visual thinking. While we might not usually associate these activities with writing center work, they encourage students to communicate original ideas openly, showcase the space as a safe and supportive environment, promote multimodal thinking and communication, and expand students’ thinking about their own communication--design processes.

### Why Creativity Matters for Writing Centers

Creativity matters. Writing centers provide the ideal space for academic innovations, experimentation, and experiences that promote students’ growth as writers and thinkers. But how can we get there? One way is through integrating creativity into our spaces and pedagogical practices. In the Noel Studio, we incorporate manipulatives--hands-on academic artifacts that encourage creativity--into the Invention Space. Creativity can also enhance the work taking place in consultations. The following creative strategies are readily applicable for writing centers of a variety of shapes and sizes:

**Play:** Play encourages exploration without risk of failure. In writing centers, we encourage students to share ideas freely without passing judgment. Play places the student and consultant at eye level with one another. Furthermore, play entails moving the consultation beyond the page and incorporating the manipulatives available around you. It might mean consultants engaging students through games, intellectual or as resources available in the writing



center, that help the student think through ideas or consider multiple lines of thinking about a subject (see Shifting Perspective).

**Shifting Perspective:** Writing centers are spaces of invention for students and consultants. Creative lenses prompt students to shift perspective about the design of their writing projects. Students learn to think in different ways about how and why they write along with the subject matter.

**Collaboration:** The writing center is a space for students to meet with other students. Small-group work can lead to big ideas, fostering strategies for managing and developing group dynamics on writing projects or expanding previously undeveloped concepts.

**Brainstorming:** Writing centers provide an ideal space for students to find their way through brainstorming--visual or verbal iterations of the invention process. At this stage, all ideas have merit, and we can teach students to let those ideas live on by deferring judgment as Brown says.

Creativity is part of the students' intellectual growth as a writer; it is part of the experience we want students to have in the Noel Studio. These creative approaches encourage students to feel comfortable expressing their ideas and sharing their questions and concerns with our consultants or displaying them visually on the screen or dry-erase board. In the Noel Studio, the composition process might look at lot like play. If students are comfortable and if we have established a true peer-to-peer relationship that comes from playful exploration, students are more likely to find their project's true context and purpose. The first step, though, is often breaking down barriers to communication, and the creative process can serve that profound role in our spaces. ✨

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"The Role of the Undergraduate Writing Center" continued from page 19 levels. Specifically for freshman and sophomore writers, the undergraduate consultant is vital in facilitating the transition from high school to collegiate writing. Therefore, writing center professionals might consider a discussion of this theory to illustrate a method of approaching challenging sessions when training undergraduate consultants. If further researched, observing the writing development of a specific first-year writer under the direction of an undergraduate consultant might provide more concrete examples of practical implications for the third space. Additionally, research on other students who can benefit from the liminal position of the writing center, such as ELLs, adult students, and students with disabilities, may reveal new opportunities for the third space theory to meet their specific needs. As a culture of third space, the writing center continues to guide students in their writing development by providing a means through which they can navigate the realm of academia within their existing knowledge. ✨

Works Cited continued on page 23

## Letter from the President

Laura Benton, Caldwell Community  
College and Technical Institute



Hello, SWCA friends!

I'm excited about the new year and the possibilities it provides. There are many new additions to the SWCA board this year. It is really great to have so many new, intelligent, and dedicated writing center enthusiasts on the board. It's sure to be an eventful year.

I'd like to welcome the newly elected board members:

Secretary: Daniel White (Mississippi College)

At-Large Representative: Karen Keaton-Jackson (North Carolina Central University)

Community College Representative: Suzanne Previte (Volunteer St. Community College), second term

Secondary School Representative: Kathy Palacio (Monsignor Edward Pace High School)

Outreach Coordinator: Caty Chapman (Middle Tennessee State University)

I'm also excited about the new 2013-2015 state representatives:

Florida: Karen Langbehn (University of South Florida)

Georgia: Eliot Rendleman (Columbus State University)

Mississippi: Brad Campbell (Mississippi State University)

North Carolina: Brandy L. Grabow (North Carolina State University)

South Carolina: Graham Stowe (University of South Carolina)

Tennessee: Stacia Watkins (Lipscomb University), second term

### New Conference Resolution

As I look forward to 2013, I immediately think about the upcoming SWCA conference. Writing center conferences have shaped my career and keep me excited about the work we do because colleagues are always doing creative and exciting things.

I come home from conferences excited, revived, determined and, when I get back to work, overwhelmed by all of the things that didn't get done while I

was gone. Unfortunately, motivation wears off. I can't count the number of conferences I've been to and people I've met that are doing something I want to be doing better within my center, within the classroom, or with my career. Whether you attend the SWCA conference or not (and, of course, I hope you do!), the new year gives the convenient excuse to carefully consider what we want to work on for the coming year, to make a commitment to improving or changing for the better. This year, I'm making writing center resolutions. Not that I need an excuse to apply this concept to writing center work, but it never hurts and I'm more likely to follow through when there is a larger goal.

This year, I'm making monthly conference resolutions as a way to challenge myself to do the things I say (and genuinely believe) I want to accomplish, alter, and avoid.

January—Make travel plans early in the month. Check.

February—Communicate conference expectations (pre-conference) and reflections (post-conference) with my staff. Attend sessions on topics writing consultants would like to know more about and report back.

March—Using conference materials and identified topics, compose a list of manageable research and creative projects to be completed during consultants' free time. (Be ok with the fact that these projects probably won't get completed until the summer.)

April—Follow-up with colleagues about interesting conference topics before the semester is over and I've forgotten why I wanted to send those emails in the first place.

May—After the semester is over, revisit March's special projects list. Set realistic goals. Decide which projects are better suited for collaboration and which should be independent.

June—Get updates on projects. Make sure a final product—for tutor training, publicity, online resources—is a component of each project.

July—Honor Puritan Jonathan Edwards, who wrote 70+ resolutions but didn't specify this activity to the new year, by coming up with at least one new resolution for the new semester.

August—Ask each writing consultant to set a resolution for the semester that will positively impact the writing center in general and/or their writing consultations.

September—Interact more with writers in the center. Ask for suggestions about what we do. Listen.

October—Determine faculty whose students don't usually visit the writing center and pay them a visit.

November and December—For the Babylonians, New Year's resolutions were not about looking forward. Instead, the resolutions focused on starting with a clean slate by settling debts and righting wrongs. In the spirit of the Babylon, this month's resolution will be to complete all the work-related tasks I started this year and to start 2014 ready for new projects.

I encourage you to look at the opportunity of this year in your writing center and career. Together I know we will take advantage the motivation of the year's conference and the opportunity to make changes and start fresh. What do you want for your writing center this year?

I wish you a healthy, prosperous, and motivated 2013.

Warmly,



### SWCA Mission Statement

The Southeastern Writing Center Association (SWCA) was founded in 1981 to advance literacy; to further the theoretical, practical, and political concerns of writing center professionals; and to serve as a forum for the writing concerns of students, faculty, staff, and writing professionals from both academic and nonacademic communities in the Southeastern region of the United States. A member of the International Writing Center Association (IWCA), an NCTE Assembly, the SWCA includes in its designated region North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, Florida, Georgia, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Kentucky, Puerto Rico, and the American Virgin Islands. Membership in the SWCA is open to directors and staff of writing centers and others interested in writing centers from public and private secondary schools, community colleges, colleges and universities, and to individuals and institutions from beyond the Southeastern region.

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# Southern Discourse



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The Noel Studio, Home to the Minor in Applied Creative Thinking. See “Back to the Center” on page 12.