

INDICATIONS OF SINGLE-SESSION IMPROVEMENT IN WRITING CENTER
SESSIONS

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Submitted to the faculty of the University Graduate School
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree
Master of Arts
in the Department of English,
Indiana University

May 2020

Accepted by the Graduate Faculty of Indiana University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this project to the people who have made it possible. To my wife and daughter, who were my motivation to continue moving through all setbacks and hurdles toward completing this degree. You are my “why,” my drive to make the world a better place for you now and tomorrow, and my mantra when I feel like I can no longer keep doing good work. Because you are my better world right now. You are more than I could ever ask for, and I love you.

To my parents, who taught me to value words and learning.

To my two little sisters, one of whom has beaten me to her Masters degree and was sure to let me know it, and the other who lived a short life so filled with jokes and joy. Any time I tell a bad joke (often), I smile because I’m thinking of you.

To my supervisors at the university, who are the best support system I could ever ask for, and without whom I never would have been able to even contemplate completing this project.

To the students and staff I work with every day in the Writing Center, who are the reason I love the work that I do.

And, finally, to my classmates and colleagues, whose incredible example I try every day to live up to.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank, first of all, my wife Kayla Wilder for all her support in this long, long, way too long process. You never wavered in your support for me. Thank you. I would like to thank you daughter, Millie. When I see you pretending to type or write or read “like daddy,” I know that I’m doing the right thing by pursuing lifelong learning. I would like to thank my supervisors, especially Mark Latta and Gay Lynn Crossley. You were patient, kind, and supportive in ways both emotional and practical, and I couldn’t have done it without you. And, finally, a huge thank you to my committee members—especially Dr. Marilee Brooks-Gillies, who was tireless in her support of me throughout this process, through all the setbacks and drafts and reading and revisions. You were all instrumental to the completion of this project, and I couldn’t have done it without you.

Thank you, from the bottom of my heart.

Aaron M. Wilder

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In the complementary fields of Composition and Writing Center Studies, the common goal is to guide writers toward improvement in literate practices. However, the meaning of the word “improvement” has undergone radical shifts across time within both fields. It has of late shifted away from a concrete, product-oriented definition toward a non-concrete, process and person-centered nebula. In short, the field of Writing Studies has become very sure what improvement is not, while less sure what it *is*. Despite this uncertainty, one area of recent agreement appears to be the importance of control that writers hold in navigating within and across literate contexts, often referred to by the slippery term, *agency*. This pilot study seeks to utilize the voices of researchers across a spectrum of fields to more precisely define agency. This definition will be consistent with current scholarship in both Composition and Writing Center Studies and informed by related fields such as linguistics, anthropology, sociology, and philosophy. It will then utilize that definition in constructing a RAD (replicable, aggregable and data-driven) qualitative analysis of post-session interviews between researcher and writer. This method will attempt to determine possibilities and guidelines for future research. Particularly, it will provide a framework for future researchers to measure improvement in writing through a more refined definition of social agency. Through that, it will seek to support previous study which suggests as little as a single session in the Writing Center can demonstrate improvement in students’ perceptions of their own writing.

Marilee Brooks-Gillies, PhD, Chair

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INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

“An abstraction greatly underspecified, often misused, much fetishized.”

-Jean and John Comaroff

This chapter will explore the web of relationships that makes the Writing Center an incredibly complicated, but unexpectedly powerful, space within the writing universe at a particular university (and universities more generally). It will identify stakeholders in writing centers, and encourage those stakeholders to recognize their advantage in allowing writing centers the institutional leverage to develop their role at the university and beyond via supported research. It will, further, identify trends in writing-centered fields moving toward a common understanding of what it means to “improve” as a student writer, finally defining a heretofore largely undefined center of gravity in these fields— Agency. The chapter will then come back full circle, building on previous study in Writing Centers as well as methods borrowed from tangential fields to craft a method for measuring this messy phenomenon of Agency.

Writing Centers are peculiar spaces. Complete strangers come into a writing center looking to work on writing from another context of which the tutor¹ is completely unaware—and will remain unaware if the right conversations don't happen. Then, as quickly as they came, the strangers recede back into the ether of their own lives, perhaps never to return again. The tutor may never know if the conversation was helpful, harmful, or benign—the writer may never know, either. And soon the introductions, the commonalities, the laughs, the tensions and awkwardness, will fall back into the past like so much runoff.

While no shortage of ink has been spilled in developing, discussing and even bickering over best practices for tutoring, writing centers are far more than student services. Perspectives and spaces, dimensions of the tutorial and dimensions of literacy are all vigorously argued in the field.² But while these practices are (mostly) research-based, research is not often considered an integral part of the writing center field by outside observers or supported in meaningful ways. In truth, as Jackie Grutsch McKinney points out in *Strategies for Writing Center Research* (2016), research “has been a part of writing studies scholarship since the inception of the field in the 1960's.” Writing Centers are a rich field full of cross-talk and pedagogical debate. Fantastic, book-length pieces

¹ There is a great deal of discussion about how to address the employees of the writing center who work with peers on their writing. . . and even what to call that interaction. Do we call them tutors who are tutoring? Do we call them consultants who are consulting? Do we call them coaches, facilitators, mentors? In the author's University's Writing Center, despite many attempts to come to consensus about changes to the title, employed peers are called “peer tutors,” often shortened to “tutors.” As a result, that is how they will be referred to in this work.

² See Stephen North “The Idea of a Writing Center” (1984) and “Revisiting the Idea of a Writing Center” (1994), Nancy Grimm's “Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times” (1999), Murial Harris' *Teaching One to One* (1986) and *Talking in the Middle: Why Writers Need Writing Tutors* (1995), Christina Murphy and Steve Sherwood's *St. Martin's Sourcebook for Writing Tutors*, Leigh Ryan and Lisa Zimmerelli's *Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors*, and Stephen B. Kucer's *Dimensions of Literacy: A Conceptual Base for Teaching Reading and Writing in School Settings* for just a few examples.

such as Murial Harris' *Teaching One-to-One* are fixtures in the field, and while the studies upon which its lessons are based skew sharply qualitative, they are nonetheless rigorously researched. Great empirical work, even, such as the RAD (replicable, aggregable, and data-supported) work championed by Richard Haswell (McKinney, 2016), has also helped us discover much about the ways that language, language perceptions, and other topics essential to writing studies function in the university generally and within writing centers particularly.

Great research is emerging from Writing Center Theory specifically in the last few years.³ But in the Writing Center, in the words of Mackiewicz and Kramer Thompson (2015) themselves, the lack of empirical research specifically is still “somewhat surprising.” Much of this dearth of research has to do with the very perception of writing centers as support spaces rather than centers of knowledge-creation. If writing centers are not *thought of* as a place of research, research in writing center spaces is not likely to be supported. This even as numerical data speaks loudest in jockeying for university funding, even as administrators request such numerical data as functions of the job of administering a writing center, and even when it is intrinsically necessary for the center's success in working with writers.

This is the peculiar space of the Writing Center—a place of little privilege often directed by non-tenure-track faculty or staff, sometimes even part-time faculty or staff. A space more often considered a support center than a collaborative, pedagogically-rich learning environment. A space where a lack of connection to research often persists despite the fact that writing centers can be, and are, an important fixture in the larger

³ See Mackiewicz and Kramer Thompson's *Talk About Writing* (2015) and Bromley et al. “Transfer and Dispositions in Writing Centers” (2016) for two quality examples.

study of writing and an invaluable fixture in the education of thousands of students every year.

This shortage of empirical research is not just a problem for Writing Centers. Marginalized, overworked and underpaid administrators (Caswell, McKinney & Jackson, 2016) recognize this issue. But there are more stakeholders in writing centers than those who work directly in them. In particular, composition⁴ faculty and programs across the United States have become increasingly intertwined with Writing Centers.⁵ Research in Composition Theory, Rhetoric, and even Cognitive Psychology has increasingly demonstrated that simply spending time with writing is one of the best approaches to increasing its quality (Cassity 2013). Additional scholarship has argued that engaging in meta-awareness strategies like those found in writing centers can greatly increase students' grasp of their own literacy (Wardle and Downs, 2007), and peer learning has long been understood as a powerful pedagogical tool (Vygotsky, 1978). All of these accepted tools to facilitate writer growth come together in the writing center.

Partly because of this documented connection between peer learning and writing growth, but equally if not more because of the origins of Writing Centers emerging *from* Composition (Osman 2007), the link between the two has always been asymptotically close. Students in a composition course are often asked to write outside the classroom as much or more than they write while attending. Writing centers are a resource for exactly such situations. Students will seek out those services whether their professors this

⁴ While the use of this term has been declining for good reasons in the field, at the author's university this is still the way courses are officially named. The term will be used throughout to refer to writing courses at the author's university, and to avoid confusion, writing courses in general.

⁵ There will be more on the ways the author's University Writing Center is actively intertwined within Composition courses in a subsequent section.

connection or not. And if their students are likely to be studying, writing, or working in writing centers, anyone who is studying, working or writing in any field related to Writing Studies should have at least a working knowledge of research on Writing Centers. This involves not just knowing the writing center director, but an understanding that writing centers are engaging in theoretical, practical, and empirical methods of inquiry to discover and hone best practices of peer learning.

In short, writing centers do exist. Writing takes place there. Even if composition programs or other writing-rich disciplines are not tied to Writing Centers by curriculum,⁶ the writing center is a space for writers within the university system. There are mores, values, and best practices associated with that “community of practice.” It is a space “where unexpected troubles lead to impromptu learning, where time follows rhythms rather than clocks” (Geller, 2007, p. 87), and it is critical to student writers’ growth that their professors have at least a passing knowledge of that space and its implications—implications which only research can uncover.

This pilot study will aim to provide one potential road map to discover some of those implications. In the general lore of Composition Theory and Writing Center Studies, it is supposed that multiple visits are necessary to produce results. Concepts such as Irvin’s “three tutoring threshold” (2014), suggest growth seems to begin not after visiting the center, but only after reaching some discrete number of visits. Given that the collaborative, peer-to-peer discussions happening in the writing center are also happening in many composition courses, this supposition has seemed odd to some practitioners for a

⁶ Many writing centers have a formalized connection to composition courses or other writing-rich courses through curriculum, such as by required visits. The research on required visits is mixed, at best (Osman, 2007), but it works well in the small, private school context of the author’s university.

time. But it was only recently that Bromley et al. (2016) took that assumption to task and found that if we ask our students, they tell a very different story than we've told ourselves. Student perceptions, at least, indicate that both near and far transfer occur as a direct result of single sessions in the Writing Center.

But the question remains—are these writer dispositions, as that study refers to them, indicative of “real improvement, however we want to define it? The type of “real improvement that will translate into more confident and able navigation of texts, across genres, within contexts?

This pilot study begins from the premise that “improvement” within the field of Writing Studies has been coalescing around the slippery idea of “agency.” Given that understanding, it uses a form of conversation analysis to establish whether agency can be measured, quantitatively, in a manner useful for writing center research. The pilot study will look at post-session interviews through the lens of social agency to tie those methods back to the results uncovered by Bromley et al. (2016). In completing this study, the researcher will attempt to demonstrate how a larger study could utilize agency in determining writer improvement.

Agency will be defined as:

A space of culturally-mediated social action that makes resistance, possession and recognition of social place possible. It exists among individuals, groups, systems, non-person actors, and also as a physical place of being. It arises from both previously existing and continually evolving biological, social, political, and cultural dynamics.⁷

The pilot study seeks to help build a bridge between previous study and the field of Writing Studies' focus on agency, and provide a framework to detect improvement in

⁷ Rationale and context for this definition will be provided later in this chapter.

a single writing center session. The hope is that a follow-up study can follow this bridge to demonstrate the value of these and previous results by Bromley et al. and validate the single writing center visit as a means of growth and improvement for writers within the university.

Further, by delving into the actual conversation of writing as a viable medium for measuring improvement in writing, this positions writing center sessions as a key location for future research. Other measures such as the changes made in writing or the reactions to a student's writing by professors manifest in grades are unable to capture the process of improvement as it plays out in real time.

Are writers becoming more capable and agentive writers as a result of their writing center sessions, and are those gains carried over to subsequent sessions? Along with further study, the implications of this work should continue the process of determining how Writing Center Studies should conceive of itself as a field. It should help define the relationship the Writing Center can have with other departments. Since Writing is a shared field between Composition, other writing-rich fields and Writing Center Studies, the types of pedagogically-sound partnerships that might exist between Writing Centers, Writing Programs, Universities, and Composition instructors can be further uncovered by this type of investigation. In all, everyone in the Writing Studies umbrella should be interested in making sure Writing Center sessions can be most effectively utilized in course design and writing instruction.

The Composition/Writing Center Connection and the Gravity of the Author's University Writing Center within the Writing Program

The location of the author's primary experience with writing centers is at a small, private Liberal Arts university in Indianapolis created around Franciscan Catholic teaching. Founded as a women's college by the Sisters of St. Francis, Oldenburg in 1851, it moved to Indianapolis on the property previously owned by James Allison in 1937. In the University lore, the sisters contacted the Indianapolis Archbishop to inform him of their arrival. His reply was that he'll think about allowing them to move their women's college into the area, to which the sisters responded that they weren't asking his permission—they were informing him that they were coming. So he could prepare for them.

The college became open to men in the mid-50's, and became a University in 2009. The University is currently undergoing a decade-long period of intense growth and change. It recently added several graduate programs, an entire medical school, and has evolved drastically from both a visual and operations perspective amid a whole host of large building projects and property acquisitions. This environment of growth and change, situated in the middle of an urban location, within the Franciscan tradition, influences much of what the University Writing Center (UWC) is able and chooses to do.

The UWC can be described quickly enough; its administration reports to the Director of Writing, who oversees the Writing In the Disciplines (WID)⁸ curriculum

⁸ The General Education program at the author's university works based upon a Writing within the Disciplines framework, which seeks to both forefront writing within the composition course, but also follow that writing up with more discipline-specific writing courses. This framework recognizes that a positive trajectory for a student's writing takes far more than one semester to develop in ways that will be readily recognized by non-writing-professionals, and that writing within a particular discipline most often takes far different form than writing that can be covered in a general writing course. WID, therefore, is a partnership between the writing program and the various majors on campus to continue fruitful and

within General Education. Its primary values and practices are community-engagement, one-on-one instruction, shared governance among students and full time administration, and an emphasis on sound and current critical-based theory. As of Fall 2017, the University underwent a drastic shift in its Writing Program— when WID was brought to campus— but, because of the confidence in the Writing Center both within the Writing Program and across the University, much of the shift was created around already-existing writing center frameworks. The Composition program’s (as it was called before the shift to the WID model) model for the last decade or so was to engage the Writing Center as a multi-functional writing and instructional space for students. It can be broken down to two real methods of engagement— the peer tutorial and the Writing Lab. And while the exact details of the relationship between the Writing Program and the Writing Center has shifted quite a bit (toward more involvement from the Writing Center, actually), this framework has remained constant.

The peer tutorial engages students in peer-to-peer conversations around students’ writing, working through their composition assignments as, theoretically, co-equal partners in the learning experience of the tutorial. The Writing Lab, on the other hand, pairs a professional instructor with a student in a for-credit class structure based around tutoring in writing assigned from other classes. This format is almost identical to the Studio Lab approach by Grego and Thompson (1995). The Writing Lab enrolls writers based on a schema of required-to-voluntary course participation based upon writing placement testing, working with primarily freshman in composition courses but including writers across the spectrum of writing comfort levels and class levels.

consistent writing beyond the composition course in ways that will allow student writers to develop more effectively as emerging writers than in a single generalized writing course.

After their first year, structured involvement of the writing center in writing curriculum continues. As is common practice through WID, each major is required by the general education curriculum to include one 200-level writing-intensive course as an introduction to writing within the student's chosen major. In each course designated a writing intensive course, students are required a minimum of two writing center consultations for the semester on pain of grade reduction. They are encouraged to visit more through incentives like bonus points, or the simple joy of their professor's silent appreciation.

Required consultations have mixed results, as we've seen both in peer tutor anecdotes and Writing Center scholarship (Osman 2007). In the experience of the UWC, sessions can run the gamut. Some students are engaged, excited, and even fun. They may become repeat visitors to the center, or even tutors themselves. Other times, however, students are far less engaged, and can wind up trapping a tutor who is doing their absolute best in a tutorial with someone who is the definition of apathy, or even antipathy. Occasionally, though not often, it will even go beyond that to students who did not want to engage with the writing center— but are now required to— venting their frustration on the tutor, questioning the value of their time, work, or worse.⁹

Whatever their undesirable underside, though, the requirement has been generally seen by the stakeholders involved as a positive. In fact, the requirement has begun to expand beyond the composition and writing-intensive courses and into other disciplines

⁹ All of these scenarios have happened in the University Writing Center. On balance, most visits are incredibly pleasant. However, required tutorials have in the past brought in students who confronted tutors with diatribes about their work's worthlessness, or how they "didn't expect to get anything out of this anyhow" after sitting with their back to the tutor and refusing to respond. All of these results are possible with required tutorials!

such as certain Business and Theology courses on campus. Overall, the requirement has been seen as valuable by a large enough population on campus that it is in no danger of disappearing at the university.

The second method is similar to the Studio model created by Grego and Thompson (1995). It was imported to the university through Florida State's program in the early 1980s via the university's current Director of Writing. Students are placed in required writing coursework using a diagnostic essay and survey response, and for some scores a one credit course called a Writing Lab is a required addition to the composition course. This course offers students predicted to struggle in their writing course without support a once-weekly one-on-one meeting with a degree-holding writing support instructor. They bring writing from their coursework— typically their writing course— and then collaboratively work through these assignments with that additional support.

Writers whose written responses score a 1 are placed in ENG 099. These students typically struggle with English on a relatively basic level. They have likely just barely met the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) threshold for admission, meaning that they will need significant writing support in a small class environment to prepare them for the general education English courses. This course is offered on an as-needed basis at the university, and typically runs with one or two students every other semester, on average.

Students whose written responses score a 2 struggle with basic writing structures, argumentation, and some sentence-level concerns. They may have trouble creating a satisfactory response in the 70-minute time frame, and show significant anxiety in their ability to write. They fall in the bottom 40% of submissions and are placed in ENG 101, a

developmental writing course. The developmental course is preparation for the only required ENG course at the University, a writing course in the spring titled ENG 112.¹⁰ Students placed in the top approximately 60% of entering writers move directly into Spring ENG 112 courses, though the middle 20%, who could potentially struggle in 112 without support, are required to take an ENG L01 Writing Lab as well to support them during that semester. In addition, students who test into the top 40% of writers are either “highly encouraged” or “encouraged” to take a voluntary Writing Lab. Since these writers who are not required to register for a Writing Lab often only interact with the UWC through required peer tutorials, they represent a ready population for study of writers who visit the center on an at least semi-voluntary basis.

All Writing Labs are credit-bearing courses (1-3 hours). Writers are paired with a part-time writing instructor employed by the Writing Center for weekly consultations where these credentialed staff unaffiliated with the student’s other coursework provide one-on-one support for the writers. The Lab Hour program, as it is called, despite having evolved to be much different than those at most universities, has a very high level of support from the University and recently saw a doubling of Spring enrollment due to a deeper interlacing of its operations within the General Education and Writing Program.

The full-time staff of the Writing Program at the university is comprised of two full-time English faculty members— the Director of Writing and the Writing Center

¹⁰ The number of sections of ENG 101 and ENG 112 differs based on student need, of course. However, most recently, for the Fall 2018 semester there were six sections of ENG 101 and two of ENG 112. In Spring 2019, there were two sections of ENG 101 offered for those who failed to complete or register for the course in Fall, and ten offered ENG 112 sections. It should be noted that this class of incoming students is the largest in the university’s history, and approximately forty students were unable to register for their required ENG 112 course due to scheduling conflicts. Worthy of note, also, is that this enrollment pattern along with the General Education Requirements led to over 100 students registered in the Writing Lab.

Director— and one full-time staff (myself, Assistant Director of the Writing Center). Two other faculty— an Assistant Professor of Communications Studies specializing in Digital Rhetoric, and an Assistant Professor of English Education who also offers courses in Creative Writing, are considered members of the Writing Program as well, though their time is split between other departments and programs (Communication and Education, respectively), and their presence at Writing Program meetings is optional and less frequent. Out of the half-dozen or so adjunct Composition faculty, many are also employed part-time by the UWC as Writing Lab Instructors, which often functions as a recruitment tool for future Writing Program instructors. The Writing Center represents a majority at most meetings of Writing Faculty, a majority of the Writing Program Steering Committee, and by far the vast majority of the discussions about theoretical and pedagogical concerns surrounding composition involve the University Writing Center in a pivotal manner.¹¹

At the author's university, as in many places, the writing center is located within the Writing Program. But that does not mean it is solely relegated under the designs of the Writing Program— in fact, it transcends the program, branching out even beyond the WID curriculum. While WID functions only within undergraduate majors, the UWC reaches explicitly into the Medical School, the Doctoral Nursing Program, and master programs in History and Sociology and Education and Business and more. The Writing Center also works within the greater Indianapolis community, creating the first

¹¹ The UWC recognizes that its place as a pivotal point within the Writing Program is unique among Writing Centers, and the researcher in turn recognizes that this context is integral for the transfer of this study to other contexts.

Community Writing Center in the Midwest at Flanner House¹² at the epicenter of the Near-Northwest neighborhood in Indianapolis.. And, it has recently expanded upon that model, opening up another Community Writing Center within Riverside High School.¹³ In these ways, the Writing Center is not only subsumed under the Writing Program, but also *leads* the program in expanding its mission, and *leads* the University itself, which has more and more in recent years adopted a stance of community-engagement similar to that of the Writing Center.¹⁴

This structure of intertwining and independence defines the UWC relationship to the Writing Program, General Education, the English Department, and the University writ-large. Through time, the interests of the Writing Program and the Writing Center have grown more and more closely aligned. This is true of many universities, but in particular at the university discussed here, the mission of the University has grown more closely aligned to that of the Writing Center as time has passed. This means it is of crucial interest at the author's institution— as is true at other institutions— that other stakeholders are aware of Writing Center Scholarship, and the ways that their programs and writing centers can most effectively interact to address writer literacy in ways that are demonstrably productive.

¹² Flanner House a wrap-around services organization for the primarily African American community on the Near Northwest side of Indianapolis with a long history as an organization.

¹³ Riverside High School is a majority-minority public charter that serves a relatively high percentage of low-income students. It is located just a quarter mile from the university. The UWC's intent is to provide one-on-one peer tutoring services there for three years, before training Riverside High School students to run their own Writing Center through a dual credit college course in Peer Learning. After Riverside High School peer tutors are trained, the UWC will reduce its role to training tutors through dual enrollment coursework and providing advisory council.

¹⁴To clarify, this movement may be driven by the writing center, or may be a co-occurring movement based around the efforts of some within the administration, some within the faculty, and some staff across the university. The reason is unclear— but what is clear is that the UWC is considered one of, if not the, epicenter of community-engaged practice on campus thanks in large part to efforts by the Director.

Literature Review

In his Annual Report, 1873, Charles W. Eliot addressed a crisis facing his Harvard University. And, while we may not know anything about the collegial politics of 1873, his day-to-day pressures and stressors, or— really— anything beyond his name, we’ll recognize his “crisis” as if it were our own. The young men (and only men, at this time) that Eliot was confronted with daily demonstrated, in his own words, “Bad spelling, incorrectness as well as inelegance of expression in writing, ignorance of the simplest rules of punctuation, and almost entire want of familiarity with English literature” (Otte and Mlynarczyk, 2010). And these ghastly errors were making his faculty uncomfortable. Eliot had to find some way to teach these ruffians to write— and at the American university, the answer is a backshift in curriculum.

And so, from this O.G. “Millenials are killing X” crisis the First Year Composition course was born. It began as a drill-and-skill session of rewriting grammar lessons, but as time and knowledge have slowly emerged from this experiment, Composition has worked hard to distance itself both pedagogically and politically from its disreputable birth.

But if we know anything about literacy “crises,” it’s that they are both perpetual and cyclical. Time, change, and youth, as it turns out, seem to be what make crusty faculty uncomfortable, not the misapplication of “will” and “shall.” So of course this wasn’t the only literacy “crisis” that brought about a backshift in the Composition requirement. Basic Writing— a further backshift in the first year requirement for open-admission universities— sprung from a similar discomfort-inducing “crisis” beginning at the close of WWII and continuing through the Reagan administration. Thousands of GI’s

were returning from war and going to college, and their writing was *ghastly*, according to the people who invented the word “oops” and the phrase “hot diggity dog” (Otte and Mlynarczyk 2010).¹⁵

Writing Centers themselves share a similar origin story, and a similar movement from the early focus on drilling grammar and spelling to more holistic and research-backed interventions as time and knowledge developed. As Elizabeth Boquet states in her 1999 article “‘Our Little Secret’: A History of Writing Center Pre- to Post-Open Admissions,” the history of Writing Centers could, and by many accounts should, be seen as a means of reproducing existing racial, ethnic, sexuality, gender-based etc. hierarchies:

If we accept that contemporary writing centers grew out of early methods, then we have strong support for a reading of writing centers as producing and sustaining hegemonic institutional discourses. Such a reading leads us to theories like that of Grimm’s regulatory model, which constructs the writing center as an institutional site concerned with controlling the production of literacy. (Boquet. 1999, p. 466)

In fact, According to Boquet writing centers’ history is uniquely cloudy. Unlike Composition and Basic Writing, writing centers are institutions not marked by course designations or credit-bearing, institutional record the way that First Year Composition has historically been. Writing Centers developed in the in-between spaces bridging courses and students, writers and communities, and institutions and their fringes, so where they come from has as much or more to do with their definition and ethos as about a clear and clean historical record. Denny, Nordlof and Salem as recently as 2018 brought

¹⁵ After the golden age of neologisms of the 1830's and 40's in what linguists call the Jacksonian Era- which saw neologisms like "twirk" (yes, ,that twerk), absquatulate, catiwampus, and other bizarrely fun words- the 1920's-30's was a second hotbed of American neologisms and language experimentation that is still very much with us today. The reference here calls attention to that most of the tenured professorial ilk would have been prime language-inventing age (15-25) during this linguistically-robust time.

centers to task on this disparity between their self-definition and history in a scathing reminder of their connection to remediation:

As we worked to contextualize our project in the history of writing center scholarship, we encountered something of a paradox: working class students are everywhere and nowhere. on the one hand, our review of *The Writing Center Journal* archives uncovered not a single article devoted to working-class students (or to socioeconomic status in general) since the journal began in 1980... Yet a review of writing center histories suggests working-class students were the very reason the current writing center movement was launched in the first place. (2018)

The authors continue to suggest that this allergy to working-class-ness as subject— despite prolific scholarship by writing center administrators in race, ethnicity, gender, sex, language, sexuality, and dozens of other social concerns— is “not an accident” (2018). It, rather, correlates directly to Writing Centers’ desire to professionalize and self-define away from that connection to remediation, and therefore the economically disenfranchised. Denny, Nordlof and Salem claim that “a connection between working class students and writing centers was troubling for the nascent writing centers movement because it seemed to connect writing centers to remediation,” and in this haste to self-define as a place for *all*, the center explicitly moved away from the very “poor (in both senses) students that birthed them in the first place” (2018). In a quest for embracing universality and professionalism, Writing Centers, the authors argue, have become exactly what the scholarship regularly attempts to define us away from— gatekeepers that have paradoxically shunned our very charge (even if a misguided, institutionalized one) as institutions fostering egalitarianism and equality.

There are, of course, others who argue the opposite is true— that Writing Centers are freeing and liberating spaces. The very year after Boquet wrote her history of Writing Centers, John Trimbur wrote that:

...in a sense, of course, social justice and the democratization of higher education have always been parts of the mission of writing centers, from the GI Bill of the postwar period to open admissions in the 1970s to the latest struggles to defend access in the CUNY schools and elsewhere. (2000, p. 30)

In this definition of Writing Centers, the hegemony-preserving pre-GI Bill centers of grammar instruction simply were not writing centers, because they don't fit the current definition of a writing center. That definition, of course, is quite conveniently a space "which attempts to wrest authority out of the hands of the institution and place it in the hands of the students" (Boquet, 1999).

Many Writing Center visions exist somewhere in between, and often this seemingly hypocritical duality and in-betweenness describe writing centers better than anything else— certainly in their practice, if not their self-conception. To see this duality, look no further than the seminal Writing Center work of the past century, Stephen North's (1984) "The Idea of a Writing Center." The disparity in this piece between its goals and its uses in practice epitomizes this liminality more effectively than any PowerPoint could. North's peer learning model of co-equal partners conversing about writing is great. The method of tutor and student sitting side-by-side engaging around a document is the gold standard of the WC day-to-day. But by a million times the most famous line in the piece— the phrase that donned (and, sadly, still dons) the walls of writing centers across the US—is inherently deficit-oriented. The phrase— the most famous and celebrated in all writing-centerdom is a not-so-subtle hegemony-preserving construction of the writer and the center, with historic roots in the very status-quo-reifying centers that Boquet (1999) references. In saying "we make better writers, not just better papers" (North, 1984), our centers *assume fault in the writer*. Not in the institution.

Not in the invisible systems of power that intertwine within language. Not racism or classism or even writing centers themselves. Not any other of the infinite problematic factors that lead to and pass judgement on writers' decisions. This is on the writer to get better; not even just to better navigate an inexorably broken system, but to *heal their faults*. And the implication is that the writer must heal their faults to comfort the professorial, Eliotine class who wield the all-important gate-keeping power of grades.

Despite this glaring issue with this tagline, a scathing piece to the field that was the “just let it goooo already” of the Writing Centers world by Boquet and Lerner in *College English* (2008), and even something of a recall notice by North himself in 1994,¹⁶ North's 1984 work remains a favorite of novice tutors and even many well-meaning directors. Hegemonic ideas of language, as Hartwell's 1985 meta-study on “Grammar, Grammars and the Teaching of Grammar” demonstrated, are difficult if not impossible to eradicate. This is even true for writing professionals, and despite mountains of evidence against their efficacy or even existence.¹⁷

For example, as a writing center administrator the author was a part of removing that ubiquitous, innocuously harmful little tagline of “We make better writers, not just better papers” from the University Writing Center mission statement. It was replaced

¹⁶ “Rethinking the Idea of a Writing Center”

¹⁷ Hartwell's “Grammar, Grammars and the Teaching of Grammar,” is a seminal work in Writing and Rhetoric that takes on the controversial question of direct and contextless grammar instruction, coming to the conclusion through analysis of multiple studies that direct instruction in grammar is at best useless and at worst harmful because it necessarily takes the place of other instruction that could be beneficial. Interestingly, this wealth of studies, all demonstrating no effect, does not seem to deter grammar pedants. Haswell goes on to parse the word “Grammar” into five semantically-distinct words within the same lexical item, naming them Grammar 1— the automatically patterned grammar-in-use that computational linguistics attempts to study; Grammar 2— the empirical study of Grammar 1; Grammar 3— “Linguistic etiquette” of grammar pedants; Grammar 4— “School grammar” that is learned and relearned again and again despite its known shortcomings; Grammar 5— Descriptive grammar (rather than prescriptive as in grammars 3 and 4) utilized rhetorically to craft more intentional written discourse.

with a statement based on Moll et al. (1992) “Funds of Knowledge for Teaching” that forefronts the power of “non-standard” knowledge, ways of knowing, and literacies. Yet, after one reading of North’s “Idea of a Writing Center” in the tutor-training course (with a strong caveat, repeated emphasis on its problems, and conscious replacement with funds-of-knowledge-backed phrasing) the Director of the center and the author of this study decided to pull North from the course reading list entirely. It was growing tiresome. Because every conversation with a tutor about writing center pedagogy and practice they would unironically and excitedly say they’re looking forward to “making better writers, not better papers.”

It got even worse. Even in the following years— among novice tutors who have *never read North*— that phrase continued to pop up like a surprisingly resilient infestation of ants building their granular little “better writer” homes in every “funds of knowledge” picnic. The phrase seems to hang in the air of writing centers. It is in every single conference presentation, slipped into every well-meaning article from 1985-2010 (and many beyond), and passed down in slips-of-the-tongue from more experienced tutors to new novices. Even after the phrase was scrubbed Soviet-style from the walls and the public communique and even the language of everyday use, tutors hear it whispered from the knots in the woodwork and it will roar back into use.

Because the truth is, the statement “We make better writers, not just better papers” sounds *fantastic*. It almost begs to be put on a poster above an ocean sunset or a grinning, pencil-wielding lab-coat. It makes me think of billboards and \$1,000-per-table scholarship dinners. Who doesn’t want to be a better writer? The author certainly does.

You, the reader, probably do. Your boss probably does. Isn't it natural that's what we should want for the writers who visit our center, too?

It isn't until a tutor has read thoroughly and processed deeply the lessons in "The Standard English Fairytale" (Greenfield, 2011), "'Whispers of Coming and Going': Lessons from Fannie" (DiPardo, 1992), "As Soon as She Opened Her Mouth," (Purcell-Gates, 2008), read Nancy Grimm and Elizabeth Boquet and Shor and Lazure and Denny and Delpit and Lu, and perhaps even Tannen and Ashanti-Young and Otte and Ortner and Kucer and McKinney and more that a tutor begins to recognize the problems with that phrase. As Jackie Grutsch McKinney (2016) points out, writing centers are by their very nature as educational, peer-learning spaces awash with novices. Novices that will, not through malice but through their very novice-ness, work counter to the liberatory aims of the Writing Center without or despite training.

This is the world that writing centers call home— a liminal space between radical and liberatory principles and hegemonic practices; between institutional power and powerlessness; in a space of professionalized theoretical and pedagogical aims, a lack of resources to fulfill those aims, high turnover, novice staff that will act counter to liberatory aims, and all from the basement of the leakiest building on campus.¹⁸ It's the world that Writing Centers must navigate in pedagogy and practice, tutor training and even the monotony of mission statements and public communique.

Andrea Lunsford's "Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of a Writing Center" (1991) plays delicately within this liminal space when she points out the ways that even the liberation-minded writing center "often masquerades as democracy when it in fact

¹⁸ The UWC recently moved out of the basement and into a highly-prized space on campus, but prior to this move had been relegated to various leaky basements for nearly three decades.

practices the same old authoritarian control. It thus stands open to abuse and can, in fact, lead to poor teaching and poor learning” (pp. 71). Going one step further, Peter Carino advocates for dropping the pipe-dream of egalitarianism and recognizing that Writing Centers live in increasingly authoritarian frameworks (Universities). He goes even further, saying tutors may have knowledge not available to writers who visit the center and should recognize that. Carino (2003) argues that not only is a minimalist, Socratic tutoring style (Brooks 1991) misleading, it is *unethical* to withhold knowledge in the interest of pedagogical or methodological vagaries. As in all things where Writing Centers are concerned, both Lunsford and Carino argue that tutors must embrace the liminal space of the Writing Center with all its uncertainties and power relationships.

That’s where critical theorists like Nancy Grimm, Elizabeth Boquet, Anne Ellen Geller, and more re-enter the conversation. Rather than recognizing authoritarianism around the Writing Center and saying “eh, well, if ya can’t beat ‘em,” critical theorists think strategically about how to burn those authoritarian structures to the ground through the work of Writing Centers. Critical theorists craft a feminist, anti-racist, anti-hegemonic etc. pedagogy, practice of and practices for Writing Centers. “Chief among the lessons we learned...” says Grimm in her 2011 piece, “was the need to look more closely at ourselves instead of others, particularly to examine the extent to which *our* writing center was based on assumptions about language and literacy, and learning that privileged white mainstream students” (p. 75). This isn’t new territory for Grimm, who, in her 1996 work, advocates for not only being frank with ourselves about what we are doing as centers but re-evaluating the regulatory practices that we engage in:

Conforming to regulatory power isn’t necessarily a bad practice, but when we pretend that this regulatory power is liberating or culture-neutral, we

miss opportunities for honest and critical engagement that might eventually change practices and create a more equitable distribution of power. (Grimm, 1996, p. 8)

The space on the edge of institutional power is a complicated one, for sure. But despite all its problematic arrangements, it isn't all bad for a liberatory writing center theory and pedagogy. Tutors may be caught between the rock of professors who may grade based on Grammar 3 and 4 (Hartwell 1985)¹⁹— despite its shady and racially-charged foundation (Greenfield 2011)— and the hard place of a funds-of-knowledge, descriptive linguistic philosophy based on Grammars 1, 2 and 5 (Hartwell 1985).²⁰ But the shifting, liminal space of the writing center and the discomfort that this creates also portends visibility of these typically-invisible hegemonic forces. As Boquet wrote in “Our Little Secret”:

This has certainly been true of the university's relationship to the writing center, a symbiosis highlighting the degree to which institutional power becomes most vulnerable at the very point at which it becomes most visible. Nowhere in our field has this tension been more apparent than in the writing center, a space where the consolidation of power shifts as the idea of the writing center metamorphoses from being one whose identity rests on method to one whose identity rests on site, and back again. (Boquet, 1999, p. 465)

According to Boquet, despite their authoritarian, faculty-comfort-driven history, Writing Centers have a unique opportunity to actually leverage change. In recent decades, a slew of critical writing center theorists have highlighted what Nancy Grimm's “The Regulatory Role of the Writing Center: Coming to Terms with a Loss of Innocence” (1996) refers to as the issue of locating problems in the individual rather than in the system. These theorists see the writing center as both an opportunity and necessity.

¹⁹ Grammar 3: Grammatical Etiquette. . . Grammar 4: School Grammar

²⁰ Grammar 5: Descriptive grammar with aims to make intentional decisions in rhetoric

Denny (2005, p. 272) in “Queering the Writing Center” calls attention to the ways that, if writing centers are not actively engaged in pro-queer activism, they are instead passively a part of its oppression. Queer writers have “learned how to survive in a society marked by racism, sexism, class-bias, nationalism and homophobia, students marked as other have sophisticated tools, yet writing center staff usually do not mentor them on ways to manipulate these devices for use in the academy” (Denny 2005, p. 272). These tools that queer, nonwhite, non-male etc. students possess are not inherently valued in the academy, and if the writing center does not actively seek out these tools they will not be developed, and students marked as other will continue to be othered. But if these tools *are* developed intentionally as ways to navigate the academy, these critical, pro-queer practices embodied in Queer Theory are exactly the type of tools that can reshape the academy to reduce the “other” status of queer students, staff and faculty. As tutors and staff, writers and faculty, privileged and non-privileged populations, “both populations need to negotiate beyond the familiar and... communicate the unseen and unknown” in order to demonstrate real collaboration in the terms that Lunsford describes (Denny, 2005; Lunsford, 1991). If queer students are to fully engage in a collaborative endeavor, we as writing center faculty/staff must first make concerted efforts to allow our spaces to become queer, become black, become female, and become disabled. We must make intentional efforts to become intersectional and intentional spaces of agency and communities of practice (Geller, 2007) for all marginalized writers within the space, as opposed to allowing outsider status and guarded partial-participation that inevitably results in “passing” rather than real collaborative engagement (Grimm, 1996).

Critical writing center theorists of all stripes have come to similar conclusions about Writing Centers and intersectional power (Geller et al., 2007; Grimm, 1996, 2009, 2011; Diab, 2012, 2013; Boquet, 2002; Rihn, 2013), in line with current Composition Theory scholarship informed by sociolinguistics, critical race theory and feminist pedagogies (Tannen, 1990; Gee, 2008; Lu, 1994; Horner, 1992; Shor, 2009; Young et al., 2014). These theories and pedagogies examine the unequal distribution of power through various discourse communities or “Discourses” (Gee, 2008), linguistic systems, racial power structures etc. Mary Louise Pratt (1991) in particular took this view of unequal power and formulated the model of the “Contact Zone,” an interactive space where two populations of vastly unequal power interact.

The Contact Zone is a productive lens for viewing the Writing Center. Tutors, after all, have much more institutional power than the writers they work with due to their official role as employees of the university and the perception that creates. In this view, the writing center consultation is a site of competing narratives, the “ethnography” of the tutor, who is interpreting the writer through their lens of power, and the competing counter-narrative or “autoethnography” of the writer attempting to speak in the language of the powerful.

Pratt’s model is a helpful, if highly binary, construction for conversations about Writing Centers, tutors, writers, and power. But not all takes on the contact zone suggest that binaries are necessary. Min-Zahn Lu, in “Professing Multiculturalism: The Politics of Style in the Contact Zone” (1994), sees multiple interacting zones of power, both professor and student, student-to-student, and interlacing student-professor-student power dynamics. She proposes that to react through this lens, we conduct the exercise of

flipping the power dynamics and read writers' work as if they are works of literature— a power dynamic where reading is done with respect, rather than assumptions of deficit. This application of the contact zone legitimizes the language of those who visit our centers and our classrooms and allows for the enacting of agency in ways that are impossible in deficit-oriented practices. It ascribes *inherent value* to a writer's text, and therefore the writer, by imagining they were in a position of institutional power rather than one of powerlessness.

In Lu's classroom, the value of her students' words in the eyes of their classmates changed demonstrably with this new lens. Students in her class began speaking of their classmates' work differently, asking different questions of their peers, and even advocating for language difference through a change in the classroom Discourse. Students saw the lack in English of a "can" that demonstrates ability versus a "can" that demonstrates will, and began using their ESL peer's "can able" workaround, previously deemed a deficit, to demonstrate ability without will in their classroom conversations.

What's interesting in this incredible set of developments within Lu's work is that none of these changes could possibly be measured in a student's written products. Most would argue these changes in the classroom dynamic demonstrate fantastic moments of learning within a writing class, and a real-world example of how changing structures rather than just writers can look in small-scale practice. But none of these drastic movements would be noticeable in student writing. They were, rather, evidenced in the ways that students spoke *about* writing and language, and the agency over language choices that the lens of the contact zone was able to reveal and advance. The value of the improvement Lu presents in her article is not in students being able to reproduce sentence

structures that are pleasant for their professor. It was not that they became “better” writers at all. The change witnessed by Lu and celebrated as writing improvement was observable in the ways students think and speak about their writing.

This movement is consistent with the movement of the field. The field has been moving away from the skill-and-drill practice of Eliot’s Harvard Composition Program for decades, but often it is less clear what the field is moving toward than what it is moving from. In this documented movement away from grammatical ability as the purpose of the writing classroom, we must recognize that in order for the classroom to not be a rudderless mess, it must be a move toward *something* we deem valuable. But what?

Lu’s article provides a hint. In this case, it is a movement toward students understanding and navigating confidently all the external factors in their language use. Students in Lu’s class navigate through various Discourses, not only those of power, and even actively shift their classroom Discourse to intentionally include those linguistic practices once considered “other.” Lu’s class interacts by intentionally navigating a language system that includes multiple modes, home languages, and yes, even that mythical beast of so-called “Standard English.”

Education theory, as we can see in Moll et al. (1992), has been moving in this direction as well. In fact, educational theorists had a foothold in this area all the way back in the 1900s via the Russian theorist Lev Vygotsky. He proposed a theoretical framework that translates in English to the “Zone of Proximal Development” (ZPD), which gained popularity in the U.S. through the 1980s after its translation into English in 1978. Mackiewicz and Kramer (2015) even summarize Vygotsky’s impact on the field via the

ZPD, describing it as a key insight about working within the context of where a writer *is* and the utmost bound of what they can grasp and achieve with your help. Most revealing in their focus, however, is their emphasis that:

...learning occurs through the mediation of external support and leads to internal conscious control of performance, also called internalization, a metaphor for the processes through which individuals move, typically through inner speech, to control of their own understanding and performance. (Mackiewicz and Kramer, 2015)

The comparison to what Lu values does not stop with a focus on speech and control. Internalization, according to Harry Daniels' *Vygotsky and Pedagogy*, is only possible if learners are active agents of their own learning. Under situations where learners are trusted as agents in their own learning like peer learning models (Writing Centers, for instance), students who navigate this context more confidently assist students who are a bit more touch-and-go. This means that Vygotsky not only values the ways that students speak about their subjects and the agentive actions they take within them, but even more so sees the classroom similarly to Lu, as a web of power imbalances that can work together for the benefit of all if they are actively arranged to do so. Diverse learning groups mean that students will get more out of their lessons because students more advanced in skills can teach, and learn from teaching. Simultaneously, students less advanced in these same skills can learn more effectively because they are engaging with someone with whom they identify, rather than a figure of distant authority. Thus, peer learning, according to Vygotsky, increases the agency of both the tutor and the tutee.

Vygotsky isn't the only theorist in education theory, composition, or even writing centers who is focused on agency. Going back to Grimm's 1996 "The Regulatory Role of the Writing Center: Coming to Terms with a Loss of Innocence," Grimm moves from

telling us the ways we fall short to the ways to be better if our goal is truly liberatory.

And in a shocking (not for Grimm, just generally speaking) display of self-awareness, she follows her own advice and looks inward, to her own past actions and their hegemony-reifying fallout. She links her own interactions with a student that did “not exhibit agency as a writer” to the end result of the student “considering dropping out” and “[feeling] out of place at the university” (p. 10). She refers to the moment an African American student knuckles under to his professor’s linguistic discomfort as having “sold out” (p. 12). These two stories highlight agency across that foggy paddock between writing course and the Writing Center. They demonstrate institutional and personal agency in conflict— from “compliance” on one end to resistance on the other.

But each of these authors bring us toward an understanding writing and educational “improvement” in a very particular way. They show. They don’t tell us, really, anything about what this foggy paddock of learning across and within power imbalance *actually is*. As has often been the case in writing, fluctuations in agency are *felt*, but not often referenced as agency, and even less often defined. For instance, Grimm, in an unsatisfying non-definition, slapdashedly says agency “most likely [emerges] from the conflicts between [compliance and resistance]... but that is a subject of another essay” (1996, p. 9).²¹

Grimm advocates for confident navigation across the university, including the writing center and classroom as institutional spaces, and among teachers and tutors. Agency permeates her piece whenever she refers to student outcomes in a liberatory pedagogy or refers to tutors as “change agents” (p. 17), and couches this idea in an

²¹ I guess I should thank Dr. Grimm for the invitation, but I sure could've saved a couple dozen pages if she'd just gone for it!

inherently social concept of agency where movement in institutions, as much as of individuals, is necessary for change. In Grimm's 1996 work, agency is not just the art on the wall. It's the air in the gallery. It's the gallery itself.

Agency is the focal point of other writing scholarship. In fact, the 2011 edition of *College Composition and Communication* made agency its focus. Kathleen Blake Yancey, in the "Letter from the Editor," kicks the issue off with the question, "how might we define agency?" ("From the Editor," p. 4). The lead author of the issue, Marilyn B. Cooper, pulls no punches in beginning that discussion by telling her readers all the ways they've failed in that discussion for far too long. "Agency has been a problem— and not only in the fields of rhetoric and composition— for a long time" (2011, p. 420). She defines agency not as "epiphenomena," or things that exist outside of a person that can be "possessed," but "as part of the systems in which [persons] originate" and "emergent from the processes of living in the world" (p. 421). By doing this, she situates agency in a sociocultural/rhetorical place rather than a personal one, and embeds it firmly in writing class and writing center consultation as a measure of how students grow and thrive among a system— or actively work to change it.

Cooper's work here is admirable, but ultimately still falls short of a truly defining this term that has become a center of gravity for our work and scholarship. We now have agency defined broadly as one of two distinct phenomena (again, defined against what it is not, rather than what it is). This is a persistent problem within writing studies, and the problem is, the field's current tacit and unexamined definition of "improvement" and "agency" is not a non-issue. The misuse of these terms has led to huge branches of Writing Center Theory dedicated to problematic practices. Jeff Brooks' "Minimalist

tutoring: Making the student do all the work” seems to revel in deficit orientation of the writer. Riffing on North’s (in)famous phrase, Brooks claims that “we sit down with imperfect papers, but our job is to improve their writers” (1991, p. 128). The inherent assumption here is flaw in both the paper and the writer— but somehow the tutor, the center, and most especially Brooks himself, avoid his scorn. This stands in stark contrast to Grimm’s look inward.

But the real root of this deficit orientation is not in the way that Brooks relates to North’s work. It is much deeper, and comes just one page later when he says that “we need to make the student the primary agent in the writing center session” (1991, p. 129). Putting aside the problematic phrasing and reality of trying to “make” anyone a primary agent, this definition of agency is a billboard of fallacies, from a false dichotomy to the broken window fallacy to the fallacy of composition. But more importantly, this fallacious definition where agency *is* an epiphenomenon possessed by the writer leads to a set of incredibly problematic practices that have pervaded the field as “best practices” for decades. This fallacious definition in the course of less than a page cascades into multiple problematic ideas, assumptions and statements simply not based on the evidence we’ve examined so far. There are value-positioning statements like “The primary value of the writing center tutor to the student is as a living human body who is willing to sit patiently and *help the student spend time with the paper*” (1991, p. 129) that assume writers are somehow incapable of spending time with their paper without hand-holding, and that assume any effort on the tutor’s part is only a secondary effect. There are assumptions based in the value of writers’ words and actions themselves, like “The most common difficulty for student writers is *paying attention to their writing*” (1991, p. 129).

There are assumptions about writers' relationships to language and their own writing. These assumptions lead directly to incredibly deleterious ideas about approaching situations when writers are unaware of or resist Grammar 3 expectations, like "When there are sentence-level problems, *make* the student find and (if possible) correct them" (emphasis mine) (1991, p. 131). Each sentence of Brooks' work appears to focus on a different type of institutional power in the hands of a tutor being utilized as a cudgel to "make" or, sometimes more softly but with the same meaning, "help," the writer to do things in exactly the prescribed manner that brings the tutor and the institution the most comfort. While Brooks says that "our message to students should be: 'Your paper has value as a piece of writing. It is worth reading and thinking about like any other piece of writing,'" you would probably struggle to remember a time that you demonstrated the value in a piece of writing by refusing to take any part in engaging with it or, as Brooks *quite literally advocates for*, refusing to be near it, read it yourself, or even physically touch it (1991, p. 130). Brooks even provides a formula for passive-aggressively responding to writer resistance to this institutional force, which he titles "Defensive Minimalist Tutoring" (1991, p. 132).

Clearly, defining improvement and agency is not just a side-bar to our journey. It is of critical importance to our field, with huge ramifications for theory, pedagogy, practice. More importantly, it matters to the writers we interact with on a daily basis.

Defining Agency among Uncertainty and the Writing Center

Now we've discussed the ways that fields interested in writing have attempted to move away from "improvement" as a hegemonic focus on grammatical ability and

spelling. We've discussed the move toward a critically-minded focus on helping students navigate their writing contexts. We've sifted through the ways that this discussion within the field has increasingly gravitated toward the word "agency." And, to complicate the discussion, we've discussed the field's challenges when utilizing an ineffective definition of agency.. So, this emphasis on agency, along with calls within writing center studies for more RAD research, creates a new problem. How, exactly, do we measure an intangible like "confident navigation"? How do we measure something that is not an epiphenomenon able to be dissected in isolation, but intricate, messy, tangled-up in the knots we call being extant? If our concept of "improvement" and thus our definition of doing our jobs well hinges on this indefinite, how can we communicate to numbers-obsessed admins that we are doing that? Now that we have this rigorously-researched theoretical framework, how do we know it's working? How do we communicate its success?

That "improvement" in our field is so entrenched within biopsychosociolinguistic²² processes that don't translate well into numbers plays a big role in the "relative lack of empirical research" that Jo Mackiewicz and Isabelle Kramer Thompson refer to in *Talk About Writing* (2015). It's true that we're burned out. It's true that we're often not expected to, or even discouraged from doing research. It's all true.

²² Bio- biological. Physiological, non-neurological processes and states, and their influence on cognition, retention, and other cognitive processes, are being understood more and more as time goes on, and our understanding of our physiology and its relationship to learning deepens.
Psycho- psychological. Psychologists have been key partners in our growing understanding of learning theory as it relates to writing, as in Cassity (2013).
Socio- Sociological. Most of the 1990's in the composition field was nothing but Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae writing letters about the role of sociology in teaching writing back and forth to each other, using journals as their post office because they couldn't be bothered to go out and buy stamps.
Linguistic- Language. Writing utilizes language, and our understandings about writing and its teaching are necessarily tied to linguistic knowledge. When it is not, we get the schoolmarmy focus on Grammar 3 that Hartwell disses roundly.

But despite it all, Writing Center research exists. It exists in relatively large quantities, given that its field is only a few decades old in its present form. But much of it focuses heavily on anecdotal or self-reported findings. That the business of Writing Centers so intricately intertwines with the business of being made of atoms and breathing does mean that the business of Writing Centers is incredibly context-specific. Shoe-horning large-scale findings from a 40k student land grant foot into a size 3k student private catholic shoe doesn't always work well. But it's not impossible, or always a bad idea if done gracefully and without cutting off parts of the foot.²³

Mackiewicz and Kramer Thompson's clarion call for more empirical research still stands. There are many researchers currently overcoming the systemic pressures against writing centers and engaging in RAD research, but this work needs to continue. And, in order to continue answering these difficult questions, writing center researchers will need to branch out into other disciplines like linguistics, anthropology, aesthetics, robotics, biology, neuroscience and more.

Linguistics has particular promise. Linguistic agency identifies actors within generative sentence structures (among other, more important marks of its existence) and unfortunately spawned that favorite hammer of the pedants, the "passive voice." Lucky for us, agency was a linguistic concept far before it became a favorite tool of learning theory— and certainly before grammar pedants Columbed it— so there is plenty of precedent for writing scholarship to borrow from. In fact, many studies already use linguistic tools to study writing centers to good effect (Bell, Arnold and Haddock, 2009; Cantey, Hemsoth and Barcenas, 2014).

²³ See Brothers Grimm's original Cinderella if this seems like an odd statement. It's still odd because the story is odd, but at least the oddness isn't confined to this essay.

Since linguistic agency is such an old topic and many of its outcomes are relatively understood, all things considered, you might assume linguists would be unified on what agency is and how to identify it— but you’d assume wrong. As with everything in language, the truth is a bit more slippery than the pedants would have you believe. Agency, contrary to its pop culture, daytime façade, is a nighttime shape-shifter. It has morphed many times through theoretical frameworks within generative linguistics itself. And, after the social dimension is added through sociolinguistics and in other social sciences, it begins to change its skin even more often.. It is, as Jean and John Comaroff have claimed, “that abstraction greatly underspecified, often misused, much fetishized these days by social scientists” (1997, p. 37).

In order to avoid falling into that trap of underspecification, misuse or fetishization, it is necessary to take a quick but deep dive into several theoretical models of agency to determine how it can be best defined for our field. Theoretical models range widely. Within the field of linguistics, a 3000 foot view provides us two key frameworks. One is the information-communicative models of language that Chomsky and Saussure have offered as a function of grammatical structures. On the other end of the scale, we have the “language as social action” model that most sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists espouse, which refers to agency as wrapped up in interactions with others (Schieffelin, 1990). Even within the “language as social action” understanding of agency, theorists have split takes on the concept. A few formative concepts of agency arise from the various theoretical frameworks of Davidson, Bourdieu, de Certeau, Ortner, and Giddens (Ahearn, 2001; Lamsil, 2012).

As a starting point, Donald Davidson’s essay titled simply “Agency” poses the question of what events in a man’s life “reveal,” “mark,” and “distinguish” agency, versus “mere happenings in his history” (1980).²⁴ This implies consciousness (and apparently manhood) as a necessity. Only determined and dedicated actions are the products of agency. Agency isn’t scaled back slightly— this is a zero-sum game. Either you’re an agent, or you’re not. This definition of agency contradicts Cooper’s assertion that agency is not something that a person can possess or not possess (2011, p. 421). But beyond that, there are other issues. This definition asks us to further define the term “consciousness.” Is this term as black and white as Davidson implies? If during the same ride home that you have taken hundreds or thousands of times you “zone out” for a while and suddenly realize you’re pulling into the carport, have you been an agent of these actions, or were the complex motor and mental movements of your self through the world one of those “mere happenings of your history?” If you cause an accident during this period of semi-consciousness are you blameless for what happens during these “mere happenings”?

The short answer is, “no.” The long answer is “no” and also “yes.” Or perhaps “maybe.” Fields from philosophy to cognitive psychology to neuroscience have demonstrated time and again that even when we are most fully “conscious” we’re ignoring exponentially more information than we are processing. This happens for a whole universe of reasons, some understood and some not, but it is a stone cold fact that

²⁴ Please forgive the blatant sexism here which seems to claim that women can apparently not be agents— I am paraphrasing Davidson quite directly, here. Women, obviously, have exactly as much agency as men except what systemic sexism denies them. In further iterations of the third person singular designated for unknown or non-binary gender I will break from the APA Style Guide to use the third person singular “they” favored by the most recent AP Style Guide

it happens. This is called selective attention, and it is a key survival strategy that allows us to function in the world, but can sometimes create some either problematic or curious gaps in our perception.²⁵ Even our most reasoned decisions are made based on a tiny percentage of the information potentially available to us. The “10% of your brain” myth isn’t just laughable because it’s untrue. It’s laughable because even when our brains are running at full blast, we’re still mostly on autopilot with the world rushing past us. Does this mean that no decisions are our own, according to Davidson’s supposition? That there is no such thing as agentic behavior... and no agents? Given the evidence available, agency under this definition becomes diluted to meaninglessness— and that’s not exactly what we’re after.

Marilyn Cooper, on the other hand, suggests that “neither conscious intention nor free will” is necessary for discussions of agency (2011, p. 421). This, of course, strikes again directly at Davidson’s take. Others who have criticized Davidson’s perspective on agency point out that it “ignores or only gives lip service to the social nature of agency” (Ahearn 2001), something that Nancy Grimm’s tacit non-definition of agency seems to suggest is absolutely necessary to understand it (1996). Anthony Giddens, remarking on Wittgenstein’s like conflation of agency and free will, writes that philosophically asocial understandings of agency have “not led towards any sort of concern with social change, with power relations, or with conflict in society” (1979, p. 50). Davidson’s asocial (and blatantly ableist) take on agency ignores that in any social action there is tension, conflict,

²⁵ There is a great video by Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons on “The Invisible Gorilla” http://www.theinvisiblegorilla.com/gorilla_experiment.html that demonstrates this fact beautifully. You are asked to view the video and try to notice how many times the people in the video pass the ball. But during the course of the video a person in a gorilla costume walks right into the middle of the action, thumps their chest, and walks out. The vast majority of people fail to even process that the gorilla was there at all in a single viewing.

misunderstanding, and many interrelated micro-decisions. Many times, someone goes to work when they are seemingly too tired to get up, they spend money on daycare that they would rather reserve for whiskey and rocks glasses, or they may even end up lying in a hospital cot when they would rather be playing red rover in the sun with their children. These are all decisions made in the tension between the human will and the biological, psychological and social constraints of the world. All this, of course, means that while free will may be an aspect of agency, it is meaningless without the biological, psychological and social systems surrounding it.²⁶

Another group of scholars equate agency with psychological resistance, as is sometimes the case in resistance narratives (Goddard 2000). Pratt's concept of the contact zone makes it very easy to conflate them within writing-related fields in particular. But to conflate agency and psychological resistance is not a fair reading of Pratt, and leads to entirely removing agency from oppressed communities when they are not actively engaging in resistant behavior. Much like the scalar rather than black-and-white relationship that agency has with consciousness, agency is restricted by oppression, but not quashed by it. As we saw with Grimm's account of her African American student, knuckling under can be, and often is, as well-weighed method of navigating social situations confidently as engaging in active resistance. Roubroeks, Ham and Midden argue that resistance within a contact zone such as the classroom can be a *sign* of students taking agency, but not wholly representative of it (2011). As such, resistance is something to keep in mind for our eventual definition of agency, but not the end-all and be-all.

²⁶ Based on these conclusions by scholars, agency will be viewed as inherently social in this piece. The concepts of *social agency* and *agency*, often parsed, will be referred to only as *agency* in this piece.

So far, the ability to make decisions and the ability to resist the decisions of others in society are two aspects of agency. But, Foucault, as he is bound to do eventually, enters the philosophical fray to say “don’t forget about *power!*” Foucault suggests that because “power is everywhere,” there is no room in the world for actual agentic behavior (*History of Sexuality*, 1978, p. 93). To Foucault, even resistance “is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (1978, p. 95). This framework is further clarified by O’Hara, who theorizes that Foucault’s concept of agency proposes “a matter of plurality, mobility and conflict” (1992, p. 66). This understanding of agency allows for the sociopolitical, relations-of-power, and most importantly shared agency of organizations, systems, and collectives. Agency becomes no longer the sole domain of individuals— sentiments that will be echoed later in Anthony Giddens’ “Structuration Theory.”

There is, of course, a challenge to Foucault’s theory of agency. Davidson, previously, proposed a view of agency that was criticized for its asociality, and its construction as a zero-sum game— either action is agentic, or it is not. Foucault would never be criticized for creating any asocial frameworks, but in the end, his theory suffers from the same fatal flaw— the zero-sum game. An action is either agentic, or it is not. And in the world of Foucault, the answer is always “not.” While the plural, mobile, and relational aspects of Foucault’s concept of agency are helpful, to suggest that such an important sociolinguistic phenomenon simply does not exist in any useful context seems a bit too much to swallow.

After Foucault’s introduction of power into our discussion, though, a potential answer seems to be coming closer. Agency, we can now say, is a scalar phenomenon

shared among persons, groups, and organizations that incorporates but is not solely resistance, and is not exterior to power, but bound up within it. The question then becomes how to massage a definition that allows for agentic behavior in a scalar manner, but incorporates what we've learned so far about resistance, decision-making, and power among societies.

Three social scientists from similar field areas can prove useful in coming to some more nuanced conclusions about the relationships between persons, people, and power. The competing-and-supporting understandings of agency espoused by Practice Theory (Ortner, 1995), Structuration Theory (Giddens, 2011) and Agency/Habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) are summed up by Ahearn in rather simple terms: Practice theory focuses on Marxist understandings of individuals and society, and “the social influences on agency; human actions are central, but they are never considered in isolation from the social structures that shape them” (“Language and Agency,” 2001, p. 117). In Structuration Theory, similarly, “people’s actions are shaped (in both constraining and enabling ways) by the very social structures that those actions then serve to reinforce or reconfigure” (Ahearn 2001, p. 117). The key attribute of Structuration Theory is the idea of both “constraining *and* enabling” aspects of society and social power’s influence on agency. “Thus, agency can be considered the socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (Ahearn 2001, p. 118). Finally, Bourdieu’s concept of agency/habitus distinguishes between conscious behavior and that which has been engrained by consistent habit within the social framework. The drive home, spoken of earlier, is the self-and-time-ingrained manner of navigating the social framework consistently. Somehow, we all could argue, we don’t stop at the red lights— the red lights stop us. We don’t take the necessary left

and right curves and turns to get from work to home or home to work—the turns and curves *take us* home. There is never a question of driving through the woods accidentally because we know the direction of our home relative to work. We will *always* take the roads, even as they turn and wind and meander, without thinking. Even if, weighted against the foreign-seeming possibility of a straight line, the roads inconvenience us, they will always win. The behavior and even understanding of what a commute *is* is “conditioned by the ‘structuring structures’ from which [it emerges]. These practices and their outcomes— whether intended or unintended— then reproduce or reconfigure the habitus” (Ahearn, 2001, p. 118). The roads, streetlights, other drivers etc. condition the behavior until it can be done unconsciously and— look at that! You’re in the carport again.

Agency is, then, perhaps best described so far as a factor in decision-making and resistance among social groups, wherein power and social interaction can be both a constraining and an enabling force that can, given enough time and iteration within those structuring structures, become ingrained as habitus. This seems a very worthwhile definition given what is within the text. But there is something *unsaid* in these texts as well— and what goes unsaid is often where the most difficult and surprising questions reside.

These theoretical frameworks, while harboring some minor differences, are essentially quite similar in a couple very important unstated assumptions— number and species. They’re all from the perspective of solitary humans or individual humans within organizations of humans, and exclude all other matter in the universe and ways of conceiving of humans. They assume, even in instances of collectivity and social agency,

the importance of the solitary human mind. Perhaps in a collective, of course— but always viewing cognition or action itself as an individual human phenomenon.

Current cognitive experiments are looking to challenge these time-honored assumptions. In a 2005 experiment by Froese and DeJaegher, subjects were asked to navigate a digital environment populated by digital “trees” and “bushes” and “rocks,” along with one other digital subject. Their task was to see if the subjects could solve a very complex problem: without being able to see, and only knowing that they were contacting another object by vibrations, could the subjects determine the difference between the other subject and a tree or bush? Without any constraints it’s deceptively simple. If an object moves, it’s either the other subject or a sentient rock.²⁷

But there was a wrinkle. Froese and DeJaegher gave each subject a “shadow” that followed them everywhere they went. Suddenly there were a total of four moving objects in the digital environment and only two subjects. Now, the riddle was not so simple.

Amazingly, the subjects were incredibly accurate. “Thus, what at first appears to be a behavioral capacity of the individual agent emerges out of a combination of the internal dynamics as well as the interaction process” (DeJaegher and Froese, 2005, p. 454). In other words, the subjects didn’t solve this problem because they were each individually extra clever, though that certainly helps. They solved it because they were interacting. Without the agency of the other person, the individual was unable to navigate the situation as effectively. They’d have been bumping into shadows like “oops, my bad,

²⁷ While this study may seem esoteric to Writing Centers, it is incredibly pertinent. Placing two people into a space- digital or face-to-face- and asking them to collaboratively solve a complex problem with lots of unknown variables and pitfalls is as good a synopsis of the one-on-one side-by-side, text-focused tutoring process outlined by North in 1984 (the good parts of North's article) as I've seen in Writing Center literature. Given a few slightly different contexts, it could belong in *The Writing Center Journal*.

bro.” Agency in this case must be *interactive* and collective. And perhaps (or likely) it may also be collective in many other situations that are outwardly invisible.

As Froese and DeJaegher tell us in their literature review, their experiment continues to pile on evidence of a phenomenon called social cognition or *interactionalism*, which has been the rather controversial hypothesis of some experts in robotics and biological cognition modeling for some time. The evidence isn’t trivial, either; there is a large “cognitive gap” between insect-level intelligence like that of a cockroach— which has been achievable in robotics modeling of the human brain through the “brain-bound” or “internalist” frameworks, the tacit position of every scholar we’ve studied up to now— and anything beyond. This “brain-bound” framework assumes all cognition comes from internal processes. To rephrase, the “cognitive gap” addresses the problem in cognitive and robotics modeling that, given everything we know right now about human brains, a cockroach-level intellect is as good as it should get for humans. Based on those models of human brains that take each brain in and of themselves, that’s all the smarter we should be.²⁸

The conclusion that many in the fields of cognitive modeling have arrived at is that rather than functioning as a computer with a certain amount of memory and RAM, the human brain is much more akin to a computer with access to the internet. Information can be stored externally to be accessed through collective efforts. This social cognition hypothesis is the response to this “cognitive gap.” It proposes a manner by which social animals can undertake complex intellectual endeavors that should, based on cognitive modeling we have available to us so far, be impossible. This isn’t some kind of mystical

²⁸ Sometimes after spending a day with other humans who presumably have brains, I wonder if the brain-bound hypothesis is onto something.

Oversoul informational cloud that we can download from, of course. It is a simple recognition that for certain types of complex puzzles, there is a potentially incredible benefit from multiple individual brains coming together on the task that is greater than the sum of their parts. There is (currently) no way to successfully use the “brain-bound” method to model a human brain’s processing power and reproduce the intelligence of a robin or a housecat, let alone a more intelligent animal like a dolphin, squid, or the species we’ve been so fixated on— human (DeJaegher and Froese, 2005).

The other assumption we’ve been working with, you may have guessed, is that agency is a purely human phenomenon. But DeJaegher and Froese’s work opens up a potentially upsetting possibility. Agency is not an all-or-nothing bag, even when referring to individuation and speciation. It is a spectrum that includes not only persons and societies as collectives of humans, like Foucault, Marx, Giddens etc. This concept of social agency could also be spread among persons, or even among humans and animals, or among animals only who have never seen a human and for which humans don’t factor into their rich and complex non-human lives— or even more unlikely candidates.

The work of ethnographer Harvey (2005) suggests that, for some cultures at least, this is absolutely true. His work with the Ojibwe people in southern Canada showed a take on agency quite different from that originating in western cultures. To the Ojibwe, deer, dogs, trees, and even rocks can be ascribed agency, spoken to and with, and can make decisions or assist in decision-making. Not only is agency a social property that can exist both within and between persons, challenging the assumed positions of philosophers and social scientists alike, there are now perhaps more assumptions to throw out of our potentially-sentient windows. The important thing, however, is not that objects are agents

all the time in every situation. Quite the contrary. The take-away from this new information is that not only is agency socially-situated, it can also shift sharply given different cultural circumstances. This culturally-informed agency, this previously neat and tidy either-or of a person doing or being done to, has become a strange, shape-shifting, skin-walker of a thing. It is necessarily culturally-informed, and therefore not situationally stable. Who/what can be an agent is determined not by some statistical or god-ordained constant of Language, but via a startlingly wide array of worldviews and contexts.

A unique framework for agency called Actor-Network Theory takes this concept to another level. Agency is not the sole property of humans, they agree. It is not even solely the domain of things that can move under their own power. Spaces, objects, and even theoretical constructs can be agents. As Latour states in his book, *Reassembling the Social: Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*:

There is hardly any doubt that kettles ‘boil’ water, knives ‘cut’ meat, baskets ‘hold’ provisions, hammers ‘hit’ nails on the head, rails ‘keep’ kids from falling, locks ‘close’ rooms against uninvited visitors, soap ‘takes’ the dirt away, schedules ‘list’ class sessions, prize tags ‘help’ people calculating, and so on. (2005, pp. 70-71)

This makes linguistic sense. We can see these objects are definitively acting based on their presentation in the language. And, they are all enacting behaviors impossible for humans solely. No matter how much you try, you won’t boil water in your hands, drive a nail with your forehead or successfully wash yourself or anyone or anything at all without water and/or soap. But, one may argue, these objects are all being human-driven, and in most cases are tools created by humans for these express purposes. The agency is just displaced a little. The kettle was placed over the fire that was built by hand, the knife was

pressed onto the meat with its blade-edge down, the objects were placed into the basket, the hammer was swung at the end of an arm, the soap was applied by a loofah which was moved by a hand, the schedule was created by a busy writing center staff member, and the tags were printed by a sales associate. But while this is very true, this phenomenon can also be seen in the way that we speak of other non-living entities that are not being human-driven. For instance, pathogens:

The plague **created** a series of religious, social, and economic upheavals, which had profound effects on the course of European history.
(Wikipedia)

Where, here, a pathogen can drive global forces in distant reaches of the world. And forces of nature:

Katrina **attained** Category 5 status on the morning of August 28.
(Wikipedia)

Where, here, a force of nature can *attain*, and therefore, apparently, has goals and performance reviews with her supervisors.

This may be difficult to wrap our heads around. It may even be terrifying. How can a force of nature have agency? And what chance have we mere mortals if it can? But remember, as Cooper reminds us, agency is not something that we, or anything else, can *have*. It is not an epiphenomenon, but rather an *emergent* phenomenon that arises from and helps give rise to the sociocultural frameworks it is part and parcel to. As with Grimm's essay, agency is not the art on the wall—it is the air in the gallery.

The author has gone to Wikipedia for examples here not because he was hard-up for them, but to demonstrate the absolute ubiquity of this emergent phenomenon. If you are only to look carefully, examples abound. Water *sweeps* away debris. Wind *whips* the laundry on the line. Even the trees *whistle* in that very same wind. There isn't really any

room to debate about it linguistically— these objects are syntactically agents. Full stop. This may face some resistance from our anthropocentric hive-mind, but the question will confront us again no matter how far we run away. Run to the coast? The waves *lap* the shore. Inland? The land *heaves* in an earthquake. Out in the middle of the arctic ice sheet? Well, those sheets are rapidly *receding*, so I'd be careful about building a life there.²⁹

Once we've gotten over our hang-ups about linguistic agency for these objects or concepts, the question then shifts to whether linguistic agency really holds the answers that are necessary for the context of Writing Centers and writing classrooms. And upon some review, we can find that Actor-Network Theory suffers from the same types of fatal flaws that Davidson and Foucault did— the zero-sum game. It creates an all-or-nothing binary, but in a new and creative way that Davidson and Foucault hadn't thought of yet. While it is true that some objects do, in fact, seem to take on agentive status in our grammar, Latour's Actor-Network Theory seeks to ascribe *all things* with agency. The plague that *ravages* a village can be culturally ascribed agency, as seen in the work of Harvey and the Ojibwe people and in contemporary descriptions of the plague. But it would be false to say that Western culture prescribed agency to all pathogens equally. The flu is not something that catches you (which is good, because that sounds terrifying), but *is caught*.

Nor would it be true to say that the very same non-humans are equally agentive relative to our writers at all times in all situations. That same flu may seem like a random, if inconvenient, occurrence if you catch it once in a winter. But the moment you get your third strain, it may begin to seem a bit more malicious than random. Death in American

²⁹ Sorry for the terrible example— this one is definitely human-driven.

culture is often seen as a passive state, as nothing but a name for when someone moved from living to no-longer-living. It can also be seen as a static portal through which agents traverse. However, it can also be the unstoppable sentient force in the incredibly popular “Final Destination” movies, a fully-fleshed character in the novel *The Book Thief*, or a skeletal cartoon washout voiced by Norm McDonald in *Family Guy*. So it would be equally foolish to say that agency is ascribed even to a particular set of things, even in a particular situation. That same person whom the plague is ravaging has skin that *is scabbed* (not that the plague grew their scabs), hair that *is matted* (not hair that the plague matted their hair), and more. In fact, to say— point blank— that all objects *have* agency is to deny the very cultural and situationally-fluid dynamism of agency that Harvey documents. Even in Ojibwe culture famous for imbuing agency to rocks, not *all* things are agents. Clearly, during a writing center tutorial the writing center’s doorknob does not have agency and ability to command conversation in the same way that a student’s paper does— or even an overactive heating system—and to suggest so is to suggest that all things have constant and unchanging agency, diluting the very concept beyond its ability to hold meaning.³⁰

Given these theoretical understandings discussed so far— the necessity of nonhuman actors (Latour, 2005) in a limited way dictated by the contextual and cultural basis of agency (Harvey, 2005); the social and shared dimension of cognition (DeJaegher and Froese, 2005); the differences between agency and habitus, and the constraining and

³⁰ Interestingly, since writing this analogy the writing center’s doorknob has become something of a conversational topic, and has led to quite a few conversations and even led to one writer ditching the center altogether! People unfamiliar with the center seem to think that our doorknob insinuates “push,” when, in fact, you need to pull to enter. To one writer, this was an insurmountable obstacle for some reason, and after a couple tries pushing they simply walked away looking a bit embarrassed by all the attention they were garnering. The doorknob, here, certainly seems to have provided some key resistance to that writer’s will that actively kept them from attending their scheduled appointment!

enabling reciprocal societal/individual nature of agency (Ahearn, 2001); the agency among social groups or organizations (Foucault, 1978); the role of resistance in agency (Roubroeks, Ham and Midden, 2011); and the central question asked by Davidson (1980) of what are agent-driven actions— we now have the necessary building blocks to construct a definition of agency which will serve our purposes. That definition encapsulates the lessons learned from each of these scholars:

Agency is a space of culturally-mediated social action that makes resistance, possession and recognition of social place possible. It exists among individuals, groups, systems, non-person actors, and also as a physical place of being. It arises from both previously existing and continually evolving biological, social, political, and cultural dynamics.³¹

This definition is drawn from the fields of sociology, anthropology, and philosophy, and informed by cognitive psychology and neuroscience. It attempts to acknowledge the above scholarship in both its strengths and limitations, stipulating, for instance, “non-person *actors*” as opposed to non-persons to avoid the zero-sum fallacy of Actor-Network Theory. It attempts to pay homage to the recursive and reciprocal relationship between social forces and persons by mentioning that it arises “from both previously existing and continually evolving social, political and cultural dynamics.” It attempts to recognize the roles that “resistance, possession and recognition of social place” have, and places agency not *within persons*, as in the individualistic and anthropocentric “brain-bound” or “internalist” paradigm, but as “existing *among*” two or more actors (DeJaegher and Froese 2005). And, most importantly, agency is not just a linguistic function. It’s not

³¹ This definition was in the works for a long time before it was written here. It began as a collaborative venture in Spring 2016 between myself and a student, Devin Newport, in a class I co-taught, ENG 206, who was interested in looking at personal agency and the ways that students can take concrete actions and the Writing Center can help them to take these concrete actions through consultation. In this definition, it has evolved to take on the social dimensions of agency that are so necessary for working with writer/tutor discourse in a collaborative setting. This definition is of course not an end-all-be-all, and the author expects that it will undergo many rewrites and tweaks. However, a place to begin is important.

just about conveying information among actors. It is emergent. It is “a space of culturally-mediated social action.”

Agency is not something that one has or does not have. It is not something that can be given or taken. It is something that is produced and destroyed, maintained and negotiated in combinatorial practice, in situational and contextual modalities, and not within, but *among* actors. For this reason, agency cannot be solely internal. It is not the actors themselves, but the ether between, within, and around them. It is, and must be, a *space*.³²

The Role of the Single Writing Center Session in the Development of Writer Agency

Now that we have a definition of agency, it is time to determine if it is in some way useful to the field beyond framing our understanding. Thus, we'll revisit Mackiewicz and Thompson's call for more RAD research in writing center studies. Previously, RAD studies of improvement have been difficult because our theories of what improvement is and how it presents itself in student writing interactions made it difficult, if not impossible, to do in the short term. In much of our study of “improvement” in writing

³² Of course, this calls into question that word— space. It is a deceptively complex word, and one with a particular utility to this usage. It is a word that has been connected to agency on the down-low in the United States via the women's movement since at least 1989 when GLUE (Gay and Lesbian Urban Explorers) developed their "safe spaces" training programs (Raeburn, 2004). And it's this usage that can help us dissect the many things we can mean when we say "space." This does not, of course, refer to the everything-else beyond earth's atmosphere. It also isn't referring to the phenomenon of having some marginally available room for some new object to fill before Marie Kondo comes knocking. It may be tempting to say we mean it as a place of residence or occupancy, and we would be close— but if GLUE decides to switch office spaces, will that space become unsafe? Will the space they vacated remain the exact same amount of safe, since it's within the same four walls? Not likely, in the way GLUE means it. What they mean, then, is some hybrid of the physical proximity, the circumstances by which it is occupied, the social frameworks within it, and, most importantly, the people who will occupy it and the social mores they will abide. Space, therefore, is a hybridized term of *amongness, place, and social frameworks* that is a particular “structuring structure” somehow discernable from other structuring structures. Using this framework, agency *is* space.

studies, for instance, the prevailing winds are that it takes continued, conscious practice over months, even years, for writers to show evidence of improvement in a measurable way (Cassity, 2013). This means that unless each study or writing centers' role in improvement can be in some way longitudinal, there is no workable method available to the field. However, it may be that our studies have not been looking closely enough. And, importantly, a definition of improvement hinging on writer agency may provide a window of opportunity.

In Bromley et al. (2016) we see some of the first challenges to this long view of improvement. Interestingly, the ability of the researchers to draw these conclusions hinges directly on the definition of improvement that researchers implicitly rely on. While much research in writing studies, such as that referenced in Cassity (2013), focuses on textually-apparent transformations, Bromley et al. eschew this idea in favor of writer dispositions toward their writing. This makes sense. We're not short on ink trying to tell our colleagues that writing is a situated and highly contextual experience, and that the transfer that's for some reason expected to happen as naturally as clouds from a first-year writing course to writing within their major is a tough thing to come by in reality. But we seem to forget that even the smallest change in text from one context to another is built upon a complex array of skills that, in order to manifest in the text, must *have already transferred*. Genre awareness, audience awareness, prompt-decoding, and linguistic meta-awareness such as seen in Lu's classroom (Horner, Lu, Royster & Trimbur, 2011)³³ to name just a few are all key to making appropriate decisions when creating a text. Missing one piece of this puzzle could lead to choices that could be perceived as textual

³³ See pages 22-23 for discussion of how non-textual improvement is documented in Lu's work with her students

errors or miscalculations. None of these elements have any direct relationship to texts, but they are universally recognized within writing studies for their direct relationship to *writing*. For a student to even *begin* to show competent transfer in their text, these things *must already be in place*, and therefore present opportunities for us to more effectively understand improvement prior to its arrival in measurable textual changes.

Bromley et al. focus their attentions on understanding how writers transfer this knowledge between contexts. To do that, they used the concepts of “dispositions,” “learning,” and “transfer.” Dispositions, according to Perkins and Solomon, are “not only what people can do, but what they are disposed to do” (Perkins et al., 2000, p. 270); learning is “continued application of knowledge in more or less the same context as the original”; and transfer is “something learned in one context and applied in a different context” (Solomon and Perkins, 1989, p. 115-16). Through surveying writers who visited the writing center on their experiences, Bromley et al. were able to gain information on the dispositions of the writers who visited. They measured increases in factors like confidence, “[inclination]... toward curiosity, reflection, consideration of multiple possibilities, a willingness to engage in a recursive process of trial and error” (Wardle, 2012) and more.³⁴ According to Bromley et al., if writing centers are to measure student growth, it may be the behaviors and conversations of students where that willingness— the increasingly confident navigation within, among and across contexts— first appears before it emerges fully-formed in the texts that writers produce.

Zennen et al. (2001), for their part, agree that “the appropriate unit of analysis for many scholars who treat language as social action is not the sentence, the individual, or

³⁴ These behaviors, you may notice, bear more than a passing resemblance to “a space of culturally-mediated social action that makes resistance, possession and recognition of social place possible.”

even the conversation but rather speech acts.”³⁵ Transcribed conversations *about* a text allows for corpus analysis, and even comparative analytics between data sets.

Based upon studies by Rosenbach (2016) and Haspelmath (2008), our coinciding definition of agency, and our previous discussion, we see that we can make preliminary determinations about agency of writers based the ways subjects encode references to themselves, their papers, their tutors, and the space and other human and non-human actors around them or in imagined spaces. And, as we have seen in Grimm (1996) and Cooper (2011), in the fields of Writing Center Theory and Composition Theory, agency seems to be growing asymptotically close to, if not actually aligned with, “improvement.”

Bromley et al. (2016) found that (1) Writing Center tutorials show transfer into Composition and General Writing courses and (2) that Writing Center visits can demonstrate noticeable improvement in writing. If evidence through this and other like studies demonstrates that improvement, measured in novel manners and places, can be demonstrated in a single session, this changes the ways that Writing Center and Composition Theorists can recommend the use of the Writing Center. Both a positive result (finding evidence in the data of increases in agency in a single session or very few sessions) and a negative result (finding no evidence in the data of increases in agency in a single session or very few sessions) from this method could be part of crafting writing pedagogy that incorporates peer learning strategies, particularly writing centers, into the writing classroom. It is my hope that the study that follows will be useful in making those

³⁵ Speech acts are differentiated from utterances in that utterances are not necessarily considered a linguistic action, while speech acts are actions by definition. This can be taken to mean that linguistic study needs to be in some way contextualized to be effective in its analysis.

pedagogical decisions through data and evidence, and contribute to the growing understanding of how writers can be best guided in their journey of literacy.

METHODS

“Talk is central to what we do as writers and as humans. It is the collaborative activity that underlies most, if not all, individual acts of composing.”

-Wendy Bishop

This chapter will seek to sufficiently outline the rationale and application of methods in this study. It will begin with a brief literature review that will further identify the gap left in Writing Centers research, followed by an explicit definition of the problem proposed by this gap which presents the opportunity for this study. It will then outline the quantitative methods designed to link this pilot study to previous study in writing centers, as well as create a template for further research.

Throughout the previous chapter, we followed the changing state of “improvement” in the intertwined fields of Writing Centers and Composition. We began, as Writing Centers and as Composition programs did before them, in the curricular/support backshifts associated with literacy “crises” among young people— or, more accurately, in the minds of many of their elders. But as the fields grew and developed to align more closely with linguistic and historical evidence, these fields’ understandings of improvement in writing became both more nuanced and more vague. Part of the challenge the field has faced is grappling with and effectively communicating this move from “concrete, but pernicious” to “undefined, but ethical.” The appeal in bigotry, after all, is the clarity— at least from a position of power and comfort. The resounding simplicity of a right/wrong razor is *great* when you’re not the one getting the blade. And to even attempt to step away from that ivory tower means to begin to suddenly confront the messy state of the world in its reality, even when that messy reality threatens your position. And that’s both *hard* and *uncomfortable*.

One way to better understand and then better communicate the objectives of the field is to more effectively nail down key terms and definitions. Another is to utilize those terms and definitions as a bedrock for replicable, aggregable, and data-supported study (RAD research). The first portion of this task was undertaken in chapter 1. “Improvement” is a slippery concept in the field, but we did find some center of gravity beginning to form around the concept of agency— which, unfortunately, is just as historically fuzzy a concept as “improvement.” Eventually, though, by identifying where the field continually appears to ascribe value, and through those plucky adventures out into related fields we were so blessed to travel, we were able to describe “the subject of

another essay” (Grimm, 1996, p. 9) and both zero in on and define agency as a concept that could be used as the field’s measuring stick of “improvement.”

In doing so, one largely unstated theme continued to crop up over and over again with growing consistency, and now is the time to clarify the enormity of its role— conversation. The importance of conversation in writing fields’ understanding of improvement is a natural conclusion any time writing instructors gather together to talk about their praxis. Pedagogical activities dripping in conversation often dominate the discussion. From peer evaluations to one-on-one consultations to class discussions, these teaching “moves” occupy just as much real estate as responding to student writing or assignment generation, and the insights students generate in class are valued equally right alongside the beauty they craft in ink and space. Wendy Bishop, in fact, kicks off her article in *The Writing Center Journal* by saying “Talk is central to what we do as writers and as humans. It is the collaborative activity that underlies most, if not all, acts of composing” (1993, p. 30). This insight is most noticeable in the work of Min Zhan Lu, whose work “Professing Multiculturalism: Politics of Style in the Contact Zone” focuses not partially or even primarily, but *solely* on her students’ classroom interaction as evidence of improvement (1994).

This focus on conversation has only grown within the field in the last 25 years, and expands ever more as we get closer and closer to a fundamentally agentive definition of improvement. In 2016, Writing Center scholars Bromley et al. sought to measure the effectiveness of Writing Center sessions, and *never once* viewed a student’s writing. Instead, they focused on writer dispositions and perceptions of their confidence and ability to navigate assignments post-session. And, moving into the linguistic fields where

defining and measuring agency and other social/personal linguistic phenomenon is the name of the game, conversation has historically been the primary medium of study (Abbott, 2004; Aissen, 2003; Guedel, Hedberg, & Zacharski, 1993; Haspelmath, 2008; Lamsil, 2012; Zaenen et al., n.d.).

Writing center scholarship utilizing conversation as its medium of study is still emerging, however. After arriving into the world as a primarily text-driven occupation, it underwent a metronomic turn toward conversation and collaborative practices as its primary medium, punctuated with North's "The Idea of a Writing Center"—the best parts (1984). Slower to emerge, however, has been conversation-focused scholarship. A study conducted by Denny (2019) in the most recent *The Writing Center Journal* demonstrates this emergence through its titular conclusions. These conclusions don't emerge from the original problem or research question. Instead, they rest on a gap in previous methods. The researchers didn't have what turned out to be a very necessary coding notation—the "OR," or Oral Writing-Revision Space—which marks a place where writer and tutor are simultaneously writing, conversing, and sort of "trying on" the shoes of an alternate phrasing. This situation is so common in tutorial sessions that one wonders how this has never been noted before, except that this method of study is still relatively vanguard within writing center scholarship. Conversation Analysis as a method (which Denny tells us in pretty plain English that our field sometimes struggles to use appropriately), alongside other methods of utilizing conversation in study, is so new to our field that we're still developing notation critical for our understanding, much less utilizing that notation in any saturating manner.

This is not because Writing Center administrators are unaware of these methods. They're not neophytes just now opening their eyes to the fact that humans might talk sometimes and that this might be important. It's also not likely that some critical mass of administrators aren't practiced with utilizing conversation as a medium of study. Many have split faculty roles in other writing fields such as Composition or Linguistics, or other fields which are heavy users of conversation in study. They publish work in those fields focusing on conversation. Sometimes this work even takes place in writing centers, with applications in writing centers. But publication, journal choice, and time allotment are all political choices with pressures abounding from promotion and tenure to budgets to field prestige. Identifying work as "Writing Centers" does not hold the political/professional clout that Linguistics, Sociology or Anthropology, or even Composition itself do, meaning often those publishing in writing center journals are those who are more novice. As Denny and Geller say in their 2013 article in *Writing Center Journal*, while Compositionists often harp on their marginalization beside Literary Criticism or other fields who seem to look down their noses at writing scholars, "on the rare occasion that WPA conversations turn to the place of WCPs, compositionists often enact the very marginalization they themselves often face in relation to wider literary-tilted English studies" (p. 98).

Nor is it likely that scholarship focusing around conversation has been deemed unimportant, given that conversation is the main work of Writing Centers and the focus of the most influential piece of scholarship in the last four decades (North, 1984). Instead, it likely has to do with one of the main themes from Chapter 1— Writing Center administrators have simply not had the institutional support to do the high-intensity work

that is utilizing conversation as a focus of study, particularly in quantitative ways. Moreover, when scholars do complete work in writing centers, incentive structures exist to frame that work within tangential fields rather than writing center studies. The OR is a phenomenon that is likely unique (at least in such a quantity as to require a coding notation) to Writing Center work. And, given that the field itself is still relatively new, this lack of support is damning for this kind of labor-intensive research and was likely to blame for this critical gap.

Denny does credit several additional authors with doing other ground-breaking work in the analysis of conversation in Writing Center research (Ritter, 2002; Williams, 2005; Waring, 2005; S. W. Murphy, 2006; Rollins, Smith, & Westbrook, 2008; Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2013, 2015; Thompson, 2009; Thompson & Mackiewicz, 2014), but while that list is growing it is still not vast. And just taking in a brief look at this list, we can see why. The entire list is less than two decades old.

Linguists, on the other hand, have been focused on patterns in conversation since well before Y2K (and Waring's article from 2005 was even published in *Applied Linguistics*, despite taking place in a writing center). By the most conservative estimates, Linguistics has been doing something akin to RAD research in conversation since the late 18th century when phonetic similarities were noticed in semantically similar words across India, Iraq (then Persia) and Europe. And even for the shadowy world of that shapeshifting monster, agency, there are frameworks in place for understanding conversational phenomena. When combined with the structural knowledge built into writing centers' theory built over the past several decades (C. Murphy & Sherwood, 2011, p. 10), some really unique possibilities open up for study. This marriage of

linguistics framework and writing centers' functional understanding allows for the study to occur in a manner that can further knowledge in the field. Those lessons will be brought forward into this study to bridge the gap between conversational analysis, improvement, and previous writing center scholarship.

Bromley provides the key bridge between Writing Centers' commonly-used methodologies/study and the field's emerging center of gravity— agency. The qualitative methods of this study seek to build upon the findings of Bromley et al. (2016) in measuring writer dispositions toward various agents relative to the writer. In doing so this study will seek to approximate relationship between these dispositions and the agency demonstrated in a writer's conversational choices.

Participants

This study selected one student from a stratified voluntary sampling of traditional³⁶ first-year students not paired with a Writing Lab Instructor³⁷ and unaffiliated with any course the researcher was involved in teaching. To identify these subjects, the researcher utilized placement test scoring from entrance exams, and contacted all traditional students currently enrolled in ENG 112 with placement scores of “4” or “5” on a scale from 1-5, guaranteeing no students in required Writing Lab and no students who had taken a prerequisite ENG 101. Potential subjects contacted included both men and women of no preferred race or ethnicity, ranging in age from 17-19. The single student selected— “Jane,” as she prefers she be called in pseudonym— was one of three students

³⁶ Here, "traditional" first-year student means a student seeking a four-year degree enrolled directly from high school.

³⁷ See section on the positionality of the University Writing Center for further information about the Writing Lab

to reply to an email call for subjects. Two subjects dropped out of the study before data collection began due to time commitments. In subsequent study, additional participants will of course be required— as will additional resources to recruit, communicate with, and study the additional participants. For the “proof-of-concept” that this pilot study represents, however, a single subject will be effective.

Qualitative Methods

Instruments: Instruments for qualitative study will include Active Interviews (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995) which will serve as the data-gathering instruments. Coding mechanisms are somewhat novel in this particular usage, borrowing coding tools from Zaenen et al. (2008) to approximate dispositions, as in Bromley et al. (2016). The framework includes sample questions³⁸ with content framed around particular varieties of potentially-agentive objects and persons in the writing center space, including self, paper-as-concept, paper-as-object, paper-as-text, and other agents as identified. Active interviews, however, are designed not around these pre-created sample questions, but around the free-flowing conversation of co-equal conversational partners. This allows the participant, in this case the student writer and the focus of the study, leeway in exploring and helping to guide the conversation alongside the researcher. This will allow the participant to act as a sort of co-researcher in helping to determine where value lies, and where to dedicate conversational time and attention.

³⁸ Active Interview guiding questions are included as Appendix A

Procedures

Research Design: Active Interviews coded for agentive persons/objects in conversation will be examined for dispositions, per Bromley et al. (2016), to determine how the writer felt the session worked for them based on their relationship to these potentially agentive persons/objects, and how it felt in relation to other previous appointments. The design combines the research of Bromley et al., with similar research goals and questions, and the work of Zaenen et al. (n.d.) which defined types of agentive actors within English speech. This blending is an intentional move to correlate Bromley's concept of dispositions with that of agency. Defining potential agents within conversation about dispositions after the tutorial will allow those dispositional states to be compared more easily with the results of Bromley et al. to determine whether there could be some type of correlation between these two terms.

Data Collection: Qualitative data will be collected by separating the writer from the initial space of the tutorial³⁹ and sitting down to record an Active Interview on an audio recording device. Each interview will begin by the participant restating their consent to participate, and the researcher and participant stating the date, time, and purpose for the interview. Interviews will have a guiding set of questions based around the coding work of Zaenen et al. (n.d.), but as Active Interviews (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995) do, will meander wherever the participant/researcher collaborative demonstrates interest. Interviews will conclude when the participant feels they have nothing additional

³⁹ This move is mostly due to the practical dimensions of the space which tutorials take place in, but partially to remove the participant from the proximity of their tutor so they may more candidly share any negative details

to say, or one hour has been reached, by the researcher and participant stating the time the interview completed and restating the date.

Analysis: Transcription of interviews will be done on a word-for-word basis, first by a transcription software before being double-checked manually. Given that the use of particular words is less important for qualitative interviews than for other types of study, conceptual correctness will be emphasized over exact word choice or phonetics. After transcription, data will be coded for dispositions in relation to the potentially-agentive actors to determine how the participant felt about the impactful actors in the session.

Limitations

The main limitation of the study is the wide variety and pure amount of capital required for study. The types of capital needed range from time to labor to knowledge to institutional support, and more. The reality of being a graduate student working full time in a position that does not require research, however, is that each of those things is relatively limited.⁴⁰

Time capital is key— something we can all recognize is in short supply everywhere. In a staff position at a university with no contractual release time, the researcher recognizes this limitation. One way of mitigating the time requirements of RAD research is to bring more person-power to distribute the labor and move it more quickly through the process. Often, RAD approaches are said to require a research team. This project was, in no way, the product of a research team, although various individual efforts did help to ease the effort significantly. Finally, with the researcher's experience

⁴⁰ Many people have made this process much easier, however. My supervisor has been incredibly accommodating, so much as allowing time off for writing

as a graduate student who left undergrad without any concrete research experience moving into a field that focuses heavily on anecdotal or self-reported findings, knowledge is also a great impediment in this study and delayed its completion. Navigating institutional and scholarly frameworks, often for the first time, as well as additional hurdles along the way meant consultation with *many* people across multiple institutions to put it together.

In order to mitigate some of these challenges, the choice to forego the goal of creating a full-fledged, generalizable study was a difficult but necessary one. The researcher chose, instead, to take on the more manageable goal of showcasing a viable methodology through this pilot study. This meant reducing the number of participants in the study below what would be required for viable statistical analysis— thus, a large challenge with this study is that in its present state, it is not by itself aggregable. The researcher hopes that the replicable and data-driven methodology of this pilot study can be aggregated through future labor, either by others who replicate it or through future endeavors by the researcher after accruing additional capital.

One additional limitation can be found in the very fundamental nature of writing centers and writing studies/composition itself— and that is the focus on conversation as a primary pedagogical tool. This limitation came full-force into the researcher’s writing center recently, when a fully deaf ASL-speaker came in looking for assistance on writing tasks. Given that conversation is a fundamental property of improvement— both its happening and the measurement therein— this leaves the field in a somewhat ableist position, given the absence of ASL translators and current study this researcher is aware of on how collaborative conversation through a visual medium impacts writer growth.

Lastly, as with all studies, this one is built upon multiple epistemological and philosophical frameworks that inform its assumptions. Given the positionality and the goals of the researcher— who wishes to support critical literacy research in Writing Centers and society as a whole— if there are epistemological or philosophical differences, the basic definitions of phenomena such as “improvement” and “agency” are likely to differ wildly. The frameworks here are those centered within the fields of linguistics, writing studies/composition, and writing centers. But even within these relatively narrow fields points of view can range as the scholarly conversation unfolds, leading to disagreement which, in this case, could prove fundamental. Hopefully, the previous chapter will have sufficiently demonstrated the alignment of the researcher and helped to bring that to light before the study’s findings can be misapplied.

RESULTS

“Okay, cool... I’m going to go ahead and write your report.”

-Kate

This chapter will summarize the findings resulting from the methods enumerated above. It will look at the ways that three categories of findings emerged, and begin the process of setting up some of the analysis by providing a framework, including some tables, for the reader to begin conceptualizing the ways that the data from this pilot study emerged.

Jane sat for three tutorials of between 9 minutes and 21 and a half minutes. Each tutorial took place with the same tutor, Kate. The tutorials occurred over the course of exactly one month, from February 6th through early March 6th. These tutorials were each immediately followed up with Active Interviews of between 11 minutes and 28 and a half minutes long, conducted by the researcher in a separate public location. Interviews were recorded on a single recording device and then transcribed using TEMI transcription software before being checked by hand.

The subject, Jane, is white, cis female. She is a middle-class to upper-class traditional first-year student-athlete raised primarily in a wealthy area of northern Indianapolis, IN. However, in her first tutorial, Jane let the tutor know that English is, in fact, her second language. She was born in Eastern Europe and emigrated at age 5. Jane does not speak with any hint of accent (she began working primarily in English in public life during the “critical period” of language acquisition), but retains some of the baggage associated with entering school in Kindergarten barely speaking the primary language of her peers. Early on, she struggled in her English courses and had significant cultural differences from the mainstream that were viewed as “strange” among her peers. In her explanation about the ways her heritage affected her, she talks about herself as “the girl with the smelly lunches,” referencing her family’s Eastern European foods like cured meats. She elaborates on the ways this affected her as an adult, such as a lack of confidence in her abilities in writing and the need to pre-empt discussions of her writing with a disclaimer about her language ability that is, in the researcher’s estimation, phenomenally misplaced. Jane’s command and control of the writing conventions of Standard Written English is on par with or better than most of her peers. She is a high-

achieving student hoping to become a physician's assistant (PA), has held state-level presidency of a high school student organization, and speaks fluently in the (at least undergraduate-level) Discourse⁴¹ of the biological and physical sciences.

Throughout the study, Jane held an air of confidence and a desire to communicate. She showed a drive to be heard and understood, especially in light of the fact that she seemed to feel quite misunderstood as a language-learner and writer through much of her education. She showed a remarkable willingness be flexible for the benefit of the study (and in her eyes, all writing students who come after her), and a surprising lack of self-consciousness around both the idea and fact of being observed as the subject of a study. In fact, she seemed to revel in it a bit. She toyed with using her own name as her "pseudonym," but her scientific mind got the better of her and chose Jane. Not as a way to protect her confidentiality for her own sake, mind you, but because that's "the right way" to conduct a study and "to make sure IRB stays off your back." That sentiment, which she volunteered to the researcher, seems to have been a way to demonstrate her savvy in this context of subject/researcher/study.

This was one of the many instances of sometimes odd, but always so small as to almost go unnoticed, resistance to institutional or artificial constructs that ran through much of the conversation. For instance, while she understood the researcher cannot clue her into the hypothesis of the study and verbally dismissed the notion that it could ever be otherwise with an "of course, of course, yes," she subtly resisted that artificial boundary

⁴¹ The capital "D" "Discourse" comes from the work of James Paul Gee, and cites the difference between lower-d discourse, or the generalized conversation between two or more individuals, and the capital-D Discourse, which is a specialized set of ways of being within which language is an inseparable entity, and is intertwined with identity. The fact that Jane is able to speak in the discourse patterns (lower-d) of a student of the biological and physical sciences is intimately intertwined with acting as, wearing as, being as, and conceiving of herself as a student of the biological and physical sciences, and therefore being part of that Discourse (capital-D).

in the ways she approached both tutorials and interviews. For instance, in Interview 1, Jane noticed a pattern of questioning that began with “Did you and Kate... did you know each other?” and a follow-up of “So now you know her a little bit... how would you describe the relationship... and how did that change?” Jane got a knowing look in her eye, and the words “connection” and “close” and other words related to proximity began appearing in her responses where they had not been before. This did not affect the data. Responses related to closeness or proximity to the tutor were not coded for. However, we know from our definition that resistance is one marker of agency. This behavior appears to be one place Jane was asserting agency within the study, and attempting to gain clarity and an ability to confidently navigate in a space where she was being intentionally kept in the dark.

Kate, the tutor who chanced to be involved throughout the study, was a senior biology major until her graduation a few months after the completion of data analysis. She identifies as a cis-het white female, and had worked in the writing center for three years. Two of those years she served on the Student Leader Board— a group of peer tutors and tutor coordinators nominated to represent their peers in meetings with WC administrators and carry out various administrative tasks. She is a highly trusted and respected tutor in the center. She performed very well in ENG 208 (the tutor training course), as she does in all courses. And despite her busy schedule she regularly reads in writing center theory, linguistics and writing studies journals/books for enjoyment and to keep improving in her work. She has been routinely identified as an extremely strong tutor by many community members, students, faculty/staff, and peers in the Writing Center. She is also a biology major— a commonality with Jane that Kate quickly

identified before the researcher had even gotten the recording equipment sorted out, and was built upon throughout the first tutorial.

Kate, unlike the subject, did seem somewhat nervous about being observed. This is understandable, given that the psychological stakes are a bit higher for Kate. The researcher is also her direct supervisor, after all. Assurances that the results of the study will not and cannot have any impact on her employment are factually true, but emotionally can be much more difficult to accept. The result of this additional stress meant that she ended a couple of tutorials prematurely, which could potentially have an effect on the writer's dispositions. Rather than following her training as she has done a thousand times before and revisiting the themes discussed during the session, the agenda items and how they were addressed, revisiting or advising on next steps, and asking if there are any additional questions, Kate simply stops Tutorial 1 dead, saying "Okay. Alright. Cool. So I'm going to go ahead and start to write your report..." This closed off any further discussion, despite the subject asking just before this abrupt transition into the closing phase a question clearly leading toward more discussion: "Other than that, what did you think, I guess?"

Kate settled in a bit more in subsequent tutorials. The ending phase of tutorials grew longer and more developed, and the sessions seemed to flow much more seamlessly. This beginning awkwardness is an unforeseen challenge in this pilot study which could be rectified by a much larger sample size. This was exacerbated when during the first tutorial the recording equipment failed, and almost immediately after getting that handled another Writing Center employee who hadn't effectively read the room and

wanted a few seconds of the researcher's time barged into the conversation with a question.

Such is the life of conducting research in a public workplace.

Finally, after these issues were ironed out, tutorials proceeded relatively unimpeded for the duration of the study, and data collection was smooth sailing. The researcher observed three tutorials, which were followed by Active Interviews between the researcher and subject in an alternate location, recorded to be later transcribed and coded for qualitative analysis.

The interviews, from 1 through 3, proceeded relatively naturally. Jane seemed comfortable in the study environment and the tutorials/interviews. The presence of Kate throughout each tutorial provided some sense of continuity for the subject. Though this could potentially be seen as a confounding factor for any results (writing center patrons will often work with multiple tutors in subsequent visits, and need to build new relationships with each), in this situation Kate was routinely working during the same time that both Jane and the researcher were available. The subject voluntarily selected Kate each time she created an appointment in the Writing Center, specifically desiring that continuity. So while this may not be representative of the typical outcomes of the process, it was representative of the process itself given the small sample size. A larger sample would likely eliminate this issue simply through the realities of scheduling.

An additional wrinkle arose during the first tutorial session when the tutorial needed to take place outside of the center itself due to over-crowding.⁴² While the writer expressed in interview that she was not bothered by this (and really there wasn't another

⁴² The University Writing Center's capacity is often too small for the need, and multiple sessions can routinely spill out into other spaces within the library, the building where the center is located.

viable option), in further research continuity of space would provide a much better baseline for understanding how those spaces interact with agency.

Interviews were transcribed using TEMI and hand-coded line by line by the researcher. The researcher made the determinations himself about what salient agents of discussion would be used as categories based on the definition of agency arrived at in the literature review, as well as an initial reading of the interview data. Salient agents identified by the researcher include the Self, Author (self as writer), Relational Space (between subject/tutor), Paper (as concept), Content (actual ideas discussed within the paper), Paper as Entity (the physical or electronic document itself), Space (immediate location of the tutorial), Meta-Space (external spaces or contexts such as the University or Composition class), and Subject (the topic of the paper and its treatment, as separate from the Content or Concept).

After categorizing the data, words indicating writer dispositions were coded for positive and negative. Additionally, the researcher noticed variability within those descriptions, such as “confident” or “comfortable” on the positive end of the spectrum and “unsure” or “frustrated” on the negative end. Dispositions were placed within the context of the interview and the writer’s work during analysis, so the researcher maintained the focus on disposition but allowed for a more narrative method of analysis to emerge in addition. For instance, while noting that a passage near the end of Interview 3 demonstrated positive disposition to Self, the researcher also noted the continuity of this answer with other previous discussions of self which, together, build a narrative of self.⁴³ This addition provided a baseline for understanding how the subject wishes to see

⁴³ This narrative of self will be referenced more thoroughly in the results and analysis, but seemed to hinge on notions of individuality and self-sufficiency.

themselves generally and could be then compared to the ways they see themselves in relation to their writing. They seem to lean into uncertainty and self-sufficiency in their life. Do they in writing, as well? Does their ability to do so change over time across tutorials? These results gained through this blend of straightforward and narrative coding allowed for different results to emerge that would not have been possible with a simple focus on coding for disposition only. For instance, the subject demonstrated a pattern of responding to Space concerns with flippancy— in the first two interviews, 5 of 9 instances where Space was discussed were followed with “I don’t care” or some version of that. However, this always was then related back to, in some way, the opinions (implied negative) of others. This pattern did not hold for positive opinions, and it did not hold for positive dispositions, either. This pattern, which tells us about how the writer conceives of spaces as holding people who may be critical of her, and her defensive posture toward that criticism, intertwine with her identity as a second language speaker, her immigrant story, her dislike and distrust of educational institutions, and tell us a bit about why her current writing instructor’s positivity toward her writing is so powerful. We could never have even glimpsed this pattern, let alone its implications, without the narrative approach.

Qualitative Findings

In order to build a bridge between this study and that of others such as that of Bromley et al. (2016), the qualitative findings are grouped into three categories: Category 1 mimics the work of Bromley et al. (2016) by coding subject responses in interviews for agentive persons/objects/spaces and correlating those to dispositions expressed by the

subject using words like “good” or “comfortable” or “confident” to represent positive dispositions and words like “awkward” or “bad” to represent negative dispositions; Category 2 is the narrative relationship of those dispositions to other expressions of disposition; and, finally, Category 3 is the qualitative notes within the tutorials themselves, which demonstrate correlations between the qualitative findings in the interviews and insights into interesting and meaning-rich moments within the tutorials themselves.

Category 1: Responses in interview were coded based upon the researcher’s estimation of agentic actors within the tutorials referenced within subject interviews. Out of 355 lines of speech in Interview 1, lines broke down in the following patterns: Self, 18 lines; Self as Author, 23 lines; Relational Space, 40; Paper as Concept, 11 lines; Content of Paper, 3 lines; Paper as Entity, 0 lines; Space, 52 lines; Meta-Space, 107 lines; Subject, 25 lines. Out of 114 lines of speech Interview 2, lines broke down in the following patterns: Self, 0 lines; Self as Author, 5 lines; Relational Space, 17 lines; Paper as Concept, 52 lines; Content of Paper, 4 lines; Paper as Entity, 0 lines; Space, 9 lines; Meta-Space, 15 lines; Subject, 0 lines. Out of 412 lines of speech in Interview 3, lines broke down in the following patterns: Self, 89 lines; Self as Author, 15 lines; Relational Space, 22; Paper as Concept, 37 lines; Content of Paper, 1 lines; Paper as Entity, 4 lines; Space, 8 lines; Meta-Space, 92 lines; Subject, 0 lines.

Dispositions within these coded categories were assigned based on incidents of the subject volunteering disposition as related to the line of questioning. These dispositions were then placed into a Table, demonstrating the ways that disposition related to these agentic categories (Table 1).

Table 1

Category 1, Agents and Correlated Dispositions

		Interview 1			Interview 2			Interview 3	
Category	Lines	Positive	Negative	Lines	Positive	Negative	Lines	Positive	Negative
Self	18	4	0	0	0	0	89	10	8
Author	23	6	2	5	0	0	15	9	3
Relation al Space	40	8	3*	17	5	1*	22	7	0
Paper	11	2	0	52	7	13	37	7	4
Content	3	1	0	4	0	0	1	1	0
Entity	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	2	2
Space	52	6	6*	9	3	1	8	5	0
Meta- Space	107	4	9*	15	5	2	92	9	7
Subject	25	5	2*	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	355	36	22	114	20	17	412	50	24
Ratio	1.6			1.2			2.1		

The ratios of each tutorial's positive to negative dispositions demonstrate a dip in dispositions at interview 2, especially in reference to the paper itself, and a surge in Interview 3. In addition, many of the negative dispositions in Interview 1 are oriented in the past, while positive dispositions are oriented in the future. The pattern held to a lesser degree in Tutorial 2, but picked up again in Interview 3.

Category 2: While this information about the ways dispositions correlate to each interview/tutorial and to each agentive actor within those tutorials is important, it is equally important to recognize the ways these dispositions and concepts relate back to each other. To that end, a narrative of the interrelationships and contexts within which these relationships exist is a necessary endeavor.

The first tutorial took place out in the Library space, while the second and third took place within the University Writing Center itself. A particularly salient pattern that arose as a result of this dynamic was the refrain of the subject in relation to space— “I don’t really care,” always seemingly related, then, back to the opinions of others. In fact, out of 7 references to the space in which the tutorials take place in Tutorial 1, 4 of those references included this dynamic. One of two occurrences held this pattern in Tutorial 2, and the pattern did not crop up in Tutorial 3 when dispositions were more positive. This suggests that, perhaps, this way of responding to the concept of the opinions of others is a method of resistance.

This relates back to the writer’s depictions of self, particularly in the ways that with regard to self, the past seems to hold negative dispositions in relationship to writing. Standardized testing, the burden of English as a second language, the judgement of other students, are all common negative themes brought up from the past that are explicitly related to the opinions of others, while the positive opinion of the subject’s professors is a current, positive disposition toward writing.

The self, the self as writer, the space, and the dispositions of the writer seem to collide within the relational space. The identity as “writer” is a relational, agency-thick identity. It is very much about how they, their subjects/texts, and their readers interrelate. It doesn’t appear to be a static identity, as is often assumed, but a dynamic and fluid one.

The other, potentially largest factor, both numerically in number of lines coded and in the influence it appears to have on the writer’s dispositions, is the meta-space. Comfort within the university itself as it has accumulated over time, comfort within her writing class, and comfort with the writing professor all are directly cited by the subject

as contributing to the positive disposition within the writing center, and when asked what could make a tutorial a negative experience, not once did the writer mention any factors beyond those that would be assigned to the meta-space.

This could be interpreted to mean several things. It could, cynically, be interpreted to mean that the Writing Center will have minimal impact in relation to these meta-space factors. It could, optimistically, be interpreted to mean that the Writing Center is a space where these meta-space factors are mitigated by an agency-facilitating, collaborative environment. More likely, however, in an ocean of factors, the meta-space is both most impactful, most dynamic, and most numerous. It is, after all, literally everything not directly related to the space of the Writing Center. Which, of course, leaves a lot of factors. But this doesn't change the fact that these factors appear to be heavily impactful on the ways writers will enter our space, and should be factored into future study by either recruiting much higher numbers to even out positive and negative life events, or by controlling for meta-space factors in analysis.

Category 3: In addition to the numerical relationships between identified agents and the dispositions, and the narrative relationships between those dispositions, there exists the relationship between the tutorials themselves and the qualitative data from the interviews. While this relationship will be explored more in depth within the Analysis/Conclusion chapter, one bit of information is pertinent to this discussion, and that is the repeated presence of a particular variety of stutter.

This pattern can be exemplified by the we/it stutter⁴⁴ in Tutorial 3. This transition comes during a description of the assignment— an assignment that the writer is expressing some degree of alienation from. The writer expresses some degree of artificiality in the paper, and the challenge of this construction is then followed a dozen or so lines down by two it/she stutters. where the writer has just referenced a positive peer review that day in class, and is going through what support they have been offered. This movement tends to relate to linguistic scales called the Hierarchy of Persons (Wiggins, 1980) and the General Animacy Scale (Yamamoto, 2006), and seem to indicate a transition between two topics with differing dispositions. In the cases documented in the study, the writer/speaker stutters down on one scale (Hierarchy of Persons) when moving into discussing negative disposition, and then later stutters upward on another scale (General Animacy) when moving into discussion of a more positive disposition. These stutters suggest that, at these moments, the writer is grappling with the ways they relate to the topic at hand, and that they have potentially changing or non-stable attitudes toward it.

Chapter Synopsis

The results have opened up a series of relationships between our data that, together, are beginning to tell a cohesive narrative of agency for the writer in this pilot study and provide promise for further study. The bare results themselves begin to tell a story of data cooperating across methodological frameworks in unexpected and

⁴⁴ A stutter is an involuntary linguistic disruption in speech patterns, sometimes caused by a neurological tick, sometimes nerves, and other times by some variety of linguistic uncertainty. In this case, it appears to be that the speaker began to use “we,” and for some reason decided instead to use “it.”

productive ways. There are in these results significant opportunities for inquiry along the lines of the research question. In the following chapter, we will take up that inquiry and delve deeper into the meanings available within those results, both quantitative and qualitative, as well as the ways both expected and unexpected that those results communicate.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

“Other than that, what did you think, I guess?”

-Jane

This chapter will first set up the “why” of the study and its methods before utilizing the results from the previous chapter to explicitly identify patterns and useful means of utilizing those patterns for effective meaning-making within the Writing Studies discipline. Some patterns of note will include the conversational movements of the student-writer who is the subject of the study through the different agents they are interacting with in the writing center and how that can impact improvement in writing center sessions, and the positive or negative dispositions provided during the interviews. Finally, the chapter will conclude with addressing what conclusions can be drawn from the pilot study, as well as the limitations of the work and what further questions arise as a result of the work herein.

In the introduction to this thesis, the conversation touched on barriers to RAD research in writing centers. The main impediment, and the one from which all the others emerge, is a systematic disinvestment in writing centers as spaces of research. Writing centers on balance simply do not have the time, funding, staffing support, or in some cases even faculty directors with release time or expectations for research. This isn't where the impediments end, but to begin this chapter we don't need to rehash all of them. We will, however, need to remember that none of those barriers have been magically lifted while reading the previous three chapters. Even many of the challenges experienced in this project itself are linked to these systematic impediments to study, despite the author's university being an institution uncommonly friendly to its writing center. Writing Center Studies research is still simultaneously devalued and de incentivized, at the same time that "justification" is demanded. Practitioners and directors are still seeing burnout rates that scratch the surface of the sun (Caswell, McKinney & Jackson, 2016).

The author would like to think that this does not keep the field from exploring the implications of this pilot study. He would like to think that while the wings of centers everywhere have been intentionally (though perhaps not maliciously) crimped and clipped, the work done here can provide some sort of lift. Hopefully the 60-odd pages of work done to directly link improvement with agency (Boquet, 1999, 2002; Boquet and Lerner, 2008; Cooper, 2011; Grimm, 1996, 1999, 2011; Horner, 1992; Horner et al., 2011; Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez, 2005; Pratt, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978; Waring, 2005; Yancey, 2011), to define it through the work of compiling the work of half-a-dozen fields into one set of explanatory principles (Ahearn, 2001; Bourdieu, 1977; Comaroff & Comaroff, 1997; Davidson, 1980; De Jaegher & Froese, 2009; Foucault, 1978; Gee,

2012; Guedel et al., 1993; Harvey, 2005; Lamsil, 2012; Latour, 2005; O'Hara, 1992; Ortner, 1995; Pratt, 1991; Roubrouks, Ham, & Midden, 2011; Vygotsky, 1978; Yamamoto, 2006; Yancey, 2011), to then craft a RAD methodology useful to Writing Center Studies by investigating the work of linguistic study in the realm of agency (Abbott, 2004; Aissen, 2003; Fillmore, 1968; Guedel et al., 1993; Haspelmath, 2008; Silverstein, 1986; Wiggins, 1980; Yamamoto, 2006; Zaenen et al., n.d.) that can link previous writing centers work to the current study (Bishop, 1993; Bromley, Northway, & Schonberg, 2016; Driscoll & Wells, 2012; Godbee, 2012a, 2012b; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Irvin, 2014; Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2015; McKinney, 2016; Osman, 2007; Perkins & Salomon, 2012; Ritter, 2002; Rollins et al., 2008; Waring, 2005; Williams, 2005) are not in vain. Hopefully this work is one part of the movement toward understanding writing centers as the pedagogically-rich, knowledge-building capitals of peer learning and research that so many directors and tutors see them as. In a perfect world designed by the researcher, this work and its conclusions will be a small part of a conversation which brings those resources to centers. A portion of a movement to allow for the space within which they reside to be one thick with agency, growth, and that familiar scent of liberation. And not just for the writers who enter them, the tutors who staff them, and the directors who lead them— but even for the centers themselves.⁴⁵

The hope is that this chapter will speak to those aspirations for this work. It will delve into the relevance of key findings from this study, demonstrate its interrelationship

⁴⁵ Liberation for an organization can look like many things. Quite recently, the University experienced an upgrade in space from a wet, windowless basement in the corner of campus to a phenomenal, glass-walled space on the first floor of the library. This movement was liberatory, as it improved the dispositions of the employees (sunlight will do that), but also did other things like improve access to institutional assets like the library, the Wi-Fi, upgraded gender-neutral restrooms, etc. and allowed for the center to blossom in ways it was incapable of doing in its previous space.

with other data found through the study, and in relationship to the field as it is introduced in the literature review. It will seek to determine its own scope, any assumptions clouding the study's ability to effectively respond to its hypotheses, and overall whether these challenges leave us with a study capable of doing so. Finally, it will draw conclusions relating to these hypotheses and any others that arose during the study based upon the analysis, offer gaps for further research, and attempt to stake its place within the fields of Writing Center Studies, Composition, and the structures within which those fields operate.

Analysis

To find the genesis of this study we must go back a little way to the writer's childhood obsession with Bill Nye the Science Guy and paleontology. Not for long—promise. Just long enough to understand the genesis of a world-view that crystallized the ways that evidence—like the minerals that systematically replaced the organic matter of dinosaur bones—became the skeletal structure of an evidence-based system of understanding the world. The writer always knew that they would spend his life closely examining the petrified bones of something. But not of course for the sake of the minerals themselves. The minerals are fine—they don't need anyone to check their blood pressure. The minerals are a window into the larger ecosystem among which that bone, skin, muscle, nerve tissue, and *life* existed.

It is also worth noting what these petrified snapshots cannot tell us. Determining and reacting to these “known unknowns” and especially “unknown unknowns” has, at

times, been as much of a challenge as reading the bones⁴⁶ themselves. The scientific view of dinosaurs, it turns out, has been at times as much influenced by popular perception as it has influenced that perception. For instance, after the smash hit *Jurassic Park* (still one of the best sci-fi movies of all time), the concept of dinosaurs as sleek and mobile animals rather than lumbering behemoths took off. The concept of more mobile dinosaurs was already gaining steam in the scientific community. The bones were beginning to tell that story. New analysis of dinosaur hips and knees, and comparisons between the leg structure of swift animals on earth today and the leg bones of certain dinosaurs began to add up to quick, feisty creatures. That's where the movie-makers drew their inspiration, after all. But soon the movie began to lead as well as follow, and even the known unknowns of dinosaur structure began to coalesce around these silver screen marvels. This "shrink-wrapped" version of dinosaurs as sinewy and athletic, with bumpy reptilian skin and a bloodlust the envy of any Game of Thrones character was the only version depicted anywhere.

And into this fray emerged the authors of *All Yesterdays: Unique and Speculative Views of Dinosaurs and Other Prehistoric Animals* (Conway, Koseman, & Naish, 2012). This brilliant piece of visual/orthographic rhetoric challenged this status quo. They created artistic renditions of present-day animals using only the types of skeletal knowledge we have for most dinosaurs, exposing the *huge* assumptions and perceptive flaws in our understanding of these animals. For instance, many whale skeletons give almost no clues about the massive fat deposits, large gut, or the shape of the animal's head. The artists sketched a whale missing 2/3 of its body mass, leaving it looking more

⁴⁶ The allusion to divination is intentional

like a literal sperm than a sperm whale. They drew a camel without its hump. They drew fatty, dynamic, interesting animals in shrink-wrapped costumes that left them utterly without character.

Then, they reversed this logic. They took that understanding that there are likely as many or more unknown unknowns about dinosaur structure as there is clear evidence of their structure and built “speculative” versions of dinosaurs with wrinkles, with accouterment like crests and humps and frills and the air sacs many birds use to create and amplify their calls. But perhaps most important was their depiction of a Tyrannosaurus Rex. The animal was not hunting or eating, as it always seemed to be depicted. It was sleeping. Conserving its energy. Digesting a heavy meal. Predators like lions today spend a *minimum* of 60% of their time sleeping, after all. Why would a prehistoric predator who lived on a similar diet not do the same? This depiction of a Tyrannosaurus Rex is almost cute. Petable. Cuddly. Curled up into a little ball like a dog at the foot of the bed. And it disrupted the entire narrative of dinosaurs that had been percolating between scientists and paleoartists and the public for two decades.

Of course, this story leaves out the prevailing narrative before evidence was even considered on the subject. Dinosaur bones— which had been around as long as there were humans and hundreds of millions of years before— had simply been seen through the lens of the cultural folklore. There were dragons, beasts, and giants. When in 1676 Britain, Robert Plot discovered an enormous thigh bone, the prevailing lore about such bones only allowed him to see it as a gigantic man. That there was no evidence for men this large ever before was not a concern. Nor were the irregularities between this bone and the actual bones of men. Nor that this bone was, you know, *made of rock*. The author

can't really stress that part enough. Human bones *are not made of rock*. But the lore made these irregularities and “unknowns” invisible. It wasn't until 1841 when British scientist Richard Owen looked at skeletal remains and realized no living species held these characteristics that this lore was challenged. The impossible idea of large extinct animals— the birth of the conceptual framework that would become dinosaurs— had finally worked its way up through the rubble of folklore to become possible.

The minerals gave us the evidence of these large extinct animals and so much of our understanding of what these creatures were capable of. But the very concept of “dinosaurs”— the boundaries of what is and is not “dinosaur,”⁴⁷ the ways that these capabilities would have interacted in social and predator/prey and behavioral webs, the enduring mystery and mystique of these forever-unreachable animals, and the silver screen magic of *Jurassic Park* that captivated kids like me... that is all narrative. So while the accumulation of empirical evidence can work to dispel unhelpful narratives, narrative methods can use other forms of evidence to bridge the gap between the inorganic empirical data and the inevitable personal and popular narratives that writer agency exists among. Narrative is not only the framework of viewing these linguistic mineral deposits with interest and feature, but also about viewing them not as sharptooth-ergo-predator, but as a life that breathed oxygen and carbon dioxide, had a heartbeat (perhaps even an arrhythmia), slept, yawned, milled about aimlessly, and yes, occasionally both liked to

⁴⁷ Why are birds, the direct descendants of dinosaurs like T-Rex, not dinosaurs? Lizards are the direct descendants of lizards, and it's not really like there are more phenotypical or genetic differences between Archaeopteryx and a Tern than between a Cretaceous-era lizard and a present-day lizard. The answer comes, in part, from the narrative these distinctions tell and the ways they serve human minds. Would dinosaurs be as captivating if they were directly associated with the foot-tall cluckers laying eggs in your back yard?

and needed to eat. It helps us to view the evidence in light of the broader constructs within which our expectations for the data exist, and puts flesh to these bones.

The three RAD and narrative elements in this study are designed to do just this—bridge the gaps between the hard, mineral data that this study hopes to allow our field to see and the squishier reality that folds around it, together offering as close a depiction of truth as possible given available knowledge. As a result, both RAD and narrative data will be analyzed interdependently. It is only when those analyses are combined that the best possible picture of the closest estimation of reality this study is capable of constructing will emerge. It will, of course, be an approximation. But with further study, both RAD and narrative, the picture will hopefully clarify further, and the approximation will be lessened with each new discovery.

Qualitative Analysis

The genesis of this thesis came from a curiosity about the relationships between improvement in writing through a critical lens and RAD research. Often, these two perspectives are seen as incompatible. The focus of most critical research is inherently narrative-oriented, as critical lenses are inherently focused on how writers relate to, through, within, and among their texts rather than textual elements themselves. The curiosity led to inquiry in the various Writing Studies fields like Composition and Writing Centers, but also venturing into tangential fields of linguistics, anthropology, philosophy, and even fields like cognitive psychology and neuroscientific computer modeling. In the end, a series of discoveries led to a possibility, and the drafting of a method of RAD research to investigate whether single writing center sessions can

demonstrate improvement in writing. So, after discerning a working definition of “improvement” through that slippery term “agency,” the author introduced a qualitative method to measure dispositions toward agency-laden actors within the space of the tutorial.

Along this journey, there were many false starts and dead ends. One venture—whether a critical literacies perspective on improvement developed by the author is compatible with quantitative study, for instance—led to a dead end. But the final result of joining critical perspectives on writing improvement and RAD research to document growth over time is a very real possibility based upon the literature review and preliminary findings of this pilot study.

The key results between the RAD and narrative study demonstrate that when the writer shows a more positive narrative disposition toward their writing, this is reflected in their references to agentic actors within the space. When a more negative narrative disposition toward writing occurs, there is a corresponding negative series of references toward these same actors. Importantly, the trend of positive narrative disposition and positive relationship to agentic actors not only aligned closely, but trended overall upward across three tutorials. With, of course, one key exception which has been mentioned previously.

In the results, a key bit of evidence emerged which we spent some time discussing. This is the dispositions gap between tutorials 1 and 3, and tutorial 2. This anomaly will take up the majority of the analysis here, because for our purposes it is the most interesting as it is the most anomalous. However, before we take up that question, we must first look back at the results as a whole to see what they can teach us. As with

the results, our analysis must be broken up into three sections: The first category will look into the systematic analysis of dispositions self-reported during post-tutorial interviews. The second will look into the narrative structure between those self-reported dispositions. The third and final category will focus around the relationship between the qualitative data and anomalies in the recorded interviews, where we will finally take up that key bit of evidence— the Tutorial 2 anomaly.

Category 1: Coding for the qualitative analysis broke down by the categories of Self, Self as Author, Relational Space, Paper as Concept, Paper Content, Paper as Entity, Space, Meta-Space and Subject. In Tutorial 1, the Relational Space (40), Space (52) and Meta-Space (107) stuck out as the main coding hits, taking up over half of all lines in the interview. In Tutorial 2, however, this phenomenon reversed, with the Relational Space (17), Space (9) and Meta-Space (15) playing second fiddle to the Paper as Concept (52), which took up by itself 46% of all lines in the interview. In Tutorial 3, the Meta-Space again became the primary coding hit (92), with the Self (89) just beneath that, and the Relational Space (22) and Paper as Concept (37) forming a second tier. An interesting anomaly emerged in Tutorial 3, however, which is worthy of a bit of focus before we move onto a more careful analysis. Tutorial 3 was the first and only time the subject referred to the Paper as Entity, doing so for 4 lines. This manner of referring to the paper expressed equally as a positive and negative disposition, but *always* expressed a sense of distance from the paper, referring to it as a document that needed to be finished rather than a living concept or actively shifting content. This shift in disposition will come up again in Category 2 as we look at the narrative developed around these data, and yet again in Category 3 as we seek to build that narrative into the quantitative results.

One unexpected result in this data was exactly how heavy on the meta-space these results became. Out of 881 total lines of interview, the Meta-Space was coded in 214 of them, or 24% of all results. This focus on the meta-space, moreover, seemed to relate directly to tutorials that demonstrated the most positive dispositions— in Tutorial 2, it was recorded at less than half the rate (13% of all lines) as it was in Tutorials 1 and 3 (30% and 26%). This indicates a potential correlation stronger than anticipated between the writer's focus on circumstances outside of the Writing Center (the writing classroom being the most obvious, but including other factors as well such as other courses, the university as a whole, their lives beyond their scholarly work, etc.) and positive disposition within it. This relationship is of course intuitive; writers do not drop their lives at the door of the Writing Center. But it is also surprising in the ways that this conversation so heavily dictated the interviews where the subject indicated most positive disposition, and moreover was so conspicuously *absent* from the interview where negative disposition was more prevalent.

In Interview 2, which showed a significant dip in disposition, the subject turns very sharply from the collaborative moment and the contexts within which they are positioned (Self, Relational Space, Space, Meta-Space) and toward the assignment (Paper as Concept). These dispositions toward the paper as concept, furthermore, were where the most negative dispositions resided, with 13 negative instances to just 7 positive. This is just one of two instances in the entire study where the negative hits outnumbered the positive. The other was in the Meta-Space of Tutorial 1, but all negative hits in the Meta-Space Tutorial 1 were past-referential, speaking in the past tense about feeling trapped and unconnected to writing in high school, the year before. These negative hits were

about *this* assignment *right now*. It's no wonder that the overall disposition of the tutorial dipped. Something about this particular assignment— not the space of the center itself, the relationship between the subject and the tutor, the way they relate to their writing, or even something going on outside of the tutorial— was drastically affecting this subject's confidence in their writing in this particular moment.

Category 2: This phenomenon of hyper focus on the assignment in negative terms within Interview 2 is only strengthened when we allow the narrative elements of the interviews to emerge. Even when the writer enters into conversation about the meta-space, the ongoing concern is regarding their lack of guidance within this particular assignment and the content needs of this particular moment. The subject begins their first Meta-Space reference by saying “I had never done this before, never been asked to do something like this before in my previous English classes.” Subsequent references to the Meta-Space reference growing comfort within the class structure, the Writing Center, and the University more generally, but that discomfort with the assignment continues— in terms of both guidelines and processes. Not only had the writer never written an annotated bibliography, but they were confused about the process of beginning a research paper with one, and unsure of how this assignment related to further development of their writing (a huge concern for this writer, and their main source of complaints about the test-heavy structure of high school writing courses). The writer says “I don't know if I'm approaching this right” and expresses “uncertainty” and a “lack of confidence.”

This brief dip in overall disposition does not mean that the tutorial did not demonstrate improvement in writing both within and through tutorials 1, 2 and 3, however. Just a difference in focus. Thinking back to the tutorial, the writer expresses

that they were “relieved” and even expresses a bit of ability to author their text, suggesting that because of the reassurance they got during the tutorial, they now could not only “clear up what I’m going to do for my essay but possibly give me an idea of what direction I want to take it in.” In fact, the dispositions in categories that deal with relational and spatial concerns in Interview 2 were way *up*, with a 13:4 ratio. That is higher than any other interview for these categories. What we see in Interview 2 is a hyper focused event. Negative dispositions pervaded about certain agentive actors that may have created an overall gloomier disposition. The raw numerical data show us that dip in disposition. However, when we examine the data further we see a writer that believes fervently that they achieved something very positive in their tutorial. They believe they have left the session much more capable of navigating not only the assignment that was bringing them down, but writing within the relational space as a whole. Interviews 1 and 3 possessed no shortage of hits on relational and spatial categories: Self, Space and Meta-Space, as well as the Relational Space. As expressed in Category 1, these seemed to be the subject’s primary focus within these interviews. And while these were primarily positive hits, a series of negatives came though coded for Meta-Space that take some conversation. They were referenced askance previously, but in particular, the function of time will be our focus now.

It is an almost uniform phenomenon within these interviews, especially in Tutorials 1 and 3, that when writing is mentioned within the Meta-Space in the past tense it is brought up negatively. Mentioned in the present tense it is given positive disposition. And in the future tense, results are mixed. One key piece of data that highlights this phenomenon is the Self as Author category. When asked in Tutorial 1 whether they

consider themselves a writer, the subject gave an answer that encapsulates this phenomenon neatly: “I guess now at this point in my life I would consider myself a writer. But in high school I never did because I always thought I was not good at— and I thought like, honestly my writing sucked all the time.” In Tutorial 3, this issue is then brought up relative to the future, demonstrating a mixed feeling about writing moving forward: “I mean I’m not the biggest fan of English and I’m probably not going to turn into an author, but I mean I still want to do well it’s still a class I have to take and pass. So I might as well do it right.”

The subject expressed growing comfort in all of these major categories, from Self through the Relational Space to the Space to the Meta-Space. They expressed growing comfort with their tutor. By Tutorial 3 she was demonstrating an increasing amount of control over their own self-narrative (conversation moved to the ways we can tell stories in different ways, without lying, to different audiences for different effect), expressed familiarity and comfort with the Writing Center and the various university structures they interact with, and overall growing positive disposition through each tutorial within these collaborative and spatial areas of agency. In effect, she had now told us that not only was she improving as a writer within the space she occupied, but that they even *identify as a writer so long as she occupied the space that provided them the agency she exists among now*. If we needed any further proof that agency is a space, we can see it in this pattern. The writer can feel it, and demonstrates this to us through her responses. The writer tells us that she is a comfortable and confident writer when she’s in her writing classroom (except for Interview 2), and especially in the writing center and with her tutor. She is quite emphatically not a writer in the past tense. She is not likely to be a writer in the

future tense. She likely isn't a writer anywhere but here. But she is a writer here and now, in this space she currently occupies.

Category 3: We've seen that the data shows a dip in the Interview 2 dispositions reported despite overall growth from Interview 1 to 3, which confirms the hypothesis of overall improvement, but complicates the result because of the lack of a clear-cut trend-line. We've seen that Interview 2 has an overall lower disposition than either Interviews 1 or 3, but that when adjusted for frustrations directly linked to the assignment challenges, see that trend can be seen as reversed, with Interview 2 showing an even better ratio of positive to negative dispositions for all things unrelated to the assignment. But then... what does that mean?

The researcher is optimistic. With a small caution (this is only a pilot study, after all), this result seems to link the concept of disposition such as in the study by Bromley et al. (2016) with the proposed method and definition of agency. And, through that, lends credence to the goal of this pilot study of presenting a method for utilizing RAD methods to measure improvement in writing.

Conclusions

Since the field began its turn away from the Eliotine drill-and-skill sessions that we once called Composition courses (Otte & Mlymarczyk, 2010), we have gotten far better about what we know we *do not* mean by that sticky word, "improvement." We have built curriculum and pedagogy, castles upon castles of *decolonizing*, *antiracist* work. We are, as a field, incredibly adept at defining our opposites, or those things that are contrary to the liberatory work that we want to do. What we have done a less

successful job of in our field, however, is defining exactly what we are striving *toward*. What, exactly, *do* we mean by that sticky word, “improvement?”

In some ways, this lack of definition is both convenient and savvy. It allows us to call whatever movement happens in our classrooms by that name, for one. What a gig, no? But less cynically and more realistically, writing is a subjective set of tasks and skills that is difficult to define due to its inherent complexity. It is art, and art will always be a moving target. Withholding a definition allows for cross-spectrum interpretation of what it means to help our students grow in their writing. It allows for multiple perspectives, with multiple philosophical nuances, to live and coexist within our field. While for some increased specificity is a primary signature of growth, for others it is the more complex use of metaphor. For others, genre-awareness and critique. For still others, social consciousness and a propensity for understanding and utilizing writing consciously as social action. These philosophical frameworks are all orienting mindsets from which instructors can examine and understand a writer’s work from Point A to point B+. But somewhere in there, across all these varying emphases, is a dark matter... an unseen mass driving the movement of that writer’s text. The writer has become more specific, more adept in metaphor, more socially-conscious and aware of the methods for utilizing writing as a means for upending the patriarchy (or more adept at striking keys to navigate an instructor’s philosophical bent). But even in the most cynical of places, where the writer is simply playing a game to get through a class, what has changed? What can we agree upon within that context? What within and among that writer has been altered, beyond the writer’s ability to recreate a set of tasks, to duplicate patterns of thinking, to calibrate word choice, or to navigate the whims of a grader? Where do we find the non-

transactional *stuff* crammed into these pedagogies that push writers to grow and understand and resist and negotiate and collaborate and fight?

Through the course of the literature review, this work has argued that *agency* is that stuff. It is that dark matter— that mass that we have so far been able to know exists, but never detect. We know it when we see it acting, of course, by its murky signature. Nancy Grimm is quite aware of the ways the system quashed agency among her students (1996), and even goes to all the trouble of almost defining that key term.⁴⁸ Lu, Trimbur and Horner (2012) recognize the value in their students’ increased mastery over the English Language via their turnaround relating to “can able,” and their newly flexible and adept massaging of linguistic norms. Even Lev Vygotsky all the way back in the 1800’s recognized that peer learning facilitated more confident navigation within and eventually beyond the Zone of Proximal Development (Daniels, 1978).

The thing about dark matter is that even though we know little about it, what it looks like, or anything about what it is at all, we know that it’s there because we observe it indirectly. And we know that despite its mysterious and murky nature it is a huge center of gravity within our universe. Such is agency. While it is the atmosphere, the oxygen in the room for work by Grimm and Lu, Trimbur and Horner, and Vygotsky, among others, it was also the subject of an entire journal issue— *College Composition and Communication* 62(3) in 2011. In this issue, Yancey (2011) and Cooper (2011) among other contributors took on this “abstraction greatly underspecified, often misused, much fetishized these days by social scientists” (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1997, p. 37). And their work provided some key insights. For instance, Cooper further narrows agency

⁴⁸ No, I’m not going to let it go.

away from its common parlance as an “epiphenomenon,” or something one can have or not have, into something more akin to the oxygen or dark matter metaphor we’ve been using—an emergent phenomenon that is enacted within situations *among* actors. But to narrow down onto a truly effective definition of agency, we needed to peruse the fields of philosophy, anthropology, sociology, critical theory, and surprisingly neuroscience/biological computer modelling (Ahearn, 2001; Bourdieu, 1977; Comaroff & Comaroff, 1997; Davidson, 1980; De Jaegher & Froese, 2009; Fillmore, 1968; Foucault, 1978; Gee, 2012; Giddens, 1979; Guedel et al., 1993; Harvey, 2005; Lamsil, 2012; Latour, 2005; Ortner, 1995; Roubrouks et al., 2011; Vygotsky, 1978).

This journey may have seemed long and winding. But it was necessary to get from the guiding question to the method of attaining an answer: from a research question that answers the call of Mackiewicz and Thompson (2015) for more RAD research in the field to even a guess as to what that might look like. From the admittedly ambitious question “can we measure improvement in writing?” to even any semblance of what successfully assessing that question might look like. We encountered first the barrier of answering the unexpectedly sticky question of what improvement is within the field by linking it to the concept of agency. Which, of course, required its own definition so graciously not provided by Grimm. But what that journey allowed for was the freedom to use the definition built through this journey to construct a method based on work by Zaenen et al. (n.d.) and building on the work of Bromley et al. (2016) that appeared capable of answering Mackiewicz and Thompson’s call. And with the support of current qualitative research in Writing Centers and other related fields on dispositions (Bishop, 1993; Bromley et al., 2016; Driscoll & Wells, 2012; Perkins & Salomon, 2012), the

researcher was able to build a qualitative analysis utilizing Active Interviews (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). The results of this pilot study appear to have provided preliminary evidence that not only can improvement in writing be measured using RAD methods, but that improvement may be able to be detected and backed by dispositional evidence in as little as a single session and sustained across multiple sessions.

The study found evidence of improvement within a single session based upon the positive relationship among the salient actors within the tutorial, as well as complicated but overall growth in that positive relationship moving from Interviews 1 through 3. These two results, along with the accompanying narrative analysis, tell a story where the writer believes that her writing has improved after each session, that outside context matters greatly and should be considered very strongly in writing instruction, and finally that each tutoring session led the writer to greater ability and more comfortable navigation of the spaces within and among which she must write as a student.

While this is only a pilot study and these results are only preliminary, the work provides compelling evidence that this avenue should be pursued more fully within the field. While this process answered a narrow question of potential viability, the process looks hopeful and opens up further questions. Deeper and broader research built upon this bedrock can more definitively confirm the results, as well as move beyond the scope of this method. Some of these questions include:

- What is the relationship between dispositions and agency? While there is clearly some type of connection, are these sister phenomena that sometimes will diverge, and other times converge? Are they co-phenomena which are distinct, but will always or almost always converge? Or, are these phenomena as they are

conceived of in this study and others really two different names for a single phenomenon, and writer dispositions as reported are an effective method of measuring improvement and the only thing to quibble over is which word to use?

- Given that both a single tutorial session and multiple tutorial sessions (up to three) report positive results sustained across time within this study, what is the optimal number of appointments? When does the diminishing rate of return begin to manifest? Does it ever? Is the answer to this question in some way linked to the writing classroom and its requirements and pedagogies and methods, or does this optimal usage remain stable across writers and writing classrooms and contexts?
- What types of methods in tutoring lead to the greatest growth in writer agency? Are there particular methods that work best with particular types of writers? Particular types of situations? Particular levels of tutoring experience or other factors?

And, of course, many additional questions we have either not time to ask or have so far gone unnoticed beneath the surface of the work done throughout its pages.

As with any work, along with additional questions come additional challenges. The primary challenge to this and additional iterations of this study is the time that RAD studies take to effectively execute. One hope for this study is that it provides a framework upon which further study can stand, therefore saving time and energy for future researchers who can put that energy into collecting and analyzing data rather than setting precedent. Additional challenges are the need to systematize and streamline coding methods to ensure uniformity, speed, and efficiency with hopes that this will further eliminate any potential volatility within the results. While hand coding allows for a

significant familiarity with the data, it is highly time-consuming, taxing, and prone to error— especially without another team member double-checking coding decisions. Finally, additional iterations of this study should be conducted by research teams, rather than a single individual. This will provide checks for coding, interpretations, perspectives and math, variability of observers and interviewers, and allow for a system of checks and collaborative interpretation not possible with a sole practitioner study. It would also allow for more data to be gathered in a shorter amount of time, and the intense labor of this type of study to be shared and therefore lessened overall.

This study can contribute to driving conversation around Writing Centers and Writing Studies along the lines that Mackiewicz and Thompson (2015) have drawn— a need for more RAD research in the field. However, the researcher submits that this may or may not be an answer for the field. The answer to move the field further may, instead, be more and different types of non-RAD qualitative research utilizing other frameworks such as Critical Action Research or Design Theory. This study, for instance, may prove redundant to Bromley et al. should further research find that dispositions and agency, as discovered through qualitative results, are equivalent (in result, if not effect on audiences, which more and more demand quantitative results). This focus on RAD research may eventually be a blip on the radar in the larger history of Writing Center Studies. But should the field choose to follow the road we have currently set out on and push for more and better RAD research, this study provides one promising set of avenues for the field to follow in the pursuit of greater understanding.

But whatever the field chooses, the hope is that this study will contribute to that ongoing conversation about the direction of the field's present, future and past. And that in some small way, it helps us all to collectively choose that direction.

May we become ever more effective at navigating the complex and sometimes agency-depressing spaces among which we work, breathe, and study, and may we be ever-greater advocates for our centers.

APPENDIX

1. SELF: Talk a little bit about yourself as you were during the tutorial. What were some words you would use to describe yourself in the session? What did you most notice about your disposition? Did anything change?
2. AUTHOR: You came into the session as a writer— would you say that you identify as a writer? Why or why not? Do you feel more or less like a writer than you did before the tutorial?
3. RELATIONAL SPACE: Did you and the tutor share a relationship prior to this session? How would you describe your relationship now? How would you describe your relationship to your work— would you say that your tutor has a relationship to your work now?
4. PAPER: Tell me about your paper— not its content, not what it's about, but what *is* Is it an idea? Is it a growing baby? What *is* it, if you had to describe it as something?
5. CONTENT: What changes did you make to the content of your paper during the tutorial, if any? What changes are you going to make to your writing, if any, as a result of this tutorial?
6. PAPER AS ENTITY: You guys spent a lot of time with that paper, and you've probably spent a lot of time with it by yourself, too. If you had to describe your relationship to it, how would you describe it? Have there been any changes to that to report?
7. SPACE: Were you uncomfortable coming in today? Are you still uncomfortable in here?
8. OTHER ACTORS AS IDENTIFIED: TBD

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CURRICULUM VITAE

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EDUCATION

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PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Writing Center Assistant Director – Marian University 2015-Present

- Develop and implement technological infrastructure of Writing Center
- Management of 40-60 undergraduate, graduate and professional employees
- Create and oversee scheduling of all Writing Center employees
- Create and oversee curriculum and training for all employees
- Manage Writing and Composition Lab Hour program, serving 70-180 students each semester in one-on-one writing instruction
- Collaborate with members of Near Northwest Community through Community Writing Centers, Community Meetings, and other forms of engagement.

Writing Instructor, ENG 101 – Marian University Fall 2018

- Craft classroom structure to enable the thriving of writers predicted to struggle in general education writing course work
- Create reading and writing assignments, rubrics etc. to assist in growth of writing skills
- Schedule and meet for one-on-one instruction multiple times through semester
- Provide effective feedback to guide writers through assignments
- Assign grades in accordance with student performance

Instructor, COL 099 – Marian University Fall 2017

- Craft classroom structure to enable the thriving of students predicted to struggle in the university
- Create reading and writing assignments, quizzes and tests designed to increase college literacy, increase reading ability, and develop study skills
- Provide effective feedback to guide students through assignments
- Assign grades in accordance with student performance
- Assist in proctoring of Nelson Denny reading and critical thinking tests to monitor growth of students through course

Assistant Director of Student Activities – Marian University 2014-2015

- Organize everyday office functions and plan, organize and implement special events on campus

- Rebuild, restructure and oversee Campus Activities Board, a student event-planning and leadership organization
- Contribute to Student Orientation events
- Manage between 5 and 15 student volunteers and employees

Writing Composition Lab Instructor – Marian University 2011-2013, 2014-2015

- Work one-on-one with writers in course structure meant for support in writing-intensive coursework
- Keep accurate records of student attendance and provide input on grades

COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP POSITIONS

Co-Chair, Food Access Committee – Northwest Quality of Life 2016-Present

- Coordinate and empower food sovereignty initiatives in the Near Northwest Area, one of the largest Food Deserts in Indiana
- Implement survey initiative, which canvassed Near Northwest residents to determine food-related needs and types of projects that could lead neighbors toward food sovereignty
- Build coalitions to serve the residents of Near Northwest Indianapolis in areas related to food
- Collect data regarding effectiveness of Food Access initiatives in the Near Northwest Area
- Serve on Governance Committee for Northwest Quality of Life

Youth Advisory Board— Faith Hope and Love Community 2018-Present

- Innovate methods for pantries within FHL network to more effectively serve patrons and instigate positive effect on lives through food and relationship-building
- Complete assignments for innovative programming as assigned by CEO
- Meet bi-weekly with other advisory board members

Coach – Marian University Gaelic Athletic Association 2017-2018, 2019-Present

- Build and maintain Gaelic Athletics student organization at Marian University utilizing grant money through the USGAA won by the Indianapolis GAA
- Work with athletes interested in gaelic sports to build skills and develop understanding of gaelic sport
- Set up competition against gaelic athletic organizations under the USGAA at other universities, including Purdue, IU and Butler University

Committee Member – Marian Coalition to End Sexual Assault 2017-Present

- Meet bi-weekly to discuss and implement programming related to sexual assault awareness and prevention on campus
- Coordinate efforts to engage the Marian University Writing Center in the awareness and prevention of sexual assault on campus

- Conference Co-Chair – East Central Writing Centers Association March 2020
- Coordinating and executing yearly regional conference for the East Central region of the International Writing Centers Association at Marian University

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

Revisiting the Ideas of “Making” and “Better” for Writers and Papers	ECWCA 2018
Cracking the Pretextual Code	IWCA 2017
Neuroscience, Systems Theory and the Teaching of Writing (Featured)	ITW 2015
Neuroscience Systems Theory and the Teaching of Writing	ITW 2014