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Writing Centers as Innovative and Creative Environments

Introduction

Walking through the front door of the Writing Center at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, one immediately has a full view of the collective space, a space used to promote individualized thinking and defy institutionalized standards. This view includes the administrator's desk area, the middle tables which house the tutors in between sessions, the desks with computers that tutoring sessions typically take place at, the room usually used for online tutoring, and the director's office. These sectional spaces mark specific territories of the Writing Center, each creating their own connotation within the center as a whole category. The physical placements of each section are noted upon entrance and registered as the customary layout for the space they represent.

What about the elements that make up the overall space in the Writing Center? These elements include physical aspects: chairs, desks, and the layouts, and nonphysical elements: noise, space, and proximity. In this research paper, I will answer the question of "how does the environment of our writing center affect tutors, tutees, and the dynamic of a tutoring session?". I am interested in analyzing how the aspects that comprise the environment contribute in certain areas, and further what aspects are potentially harming to a session. What about certain elements aid a session? What about certain elements hinder a session? How can our writing center work to improve these aspects in order to accommodate and understand the different dynamics of certain tutoring sessions?

These questions serve as the foundation of my research and allow the initial discussion of writing center environments to open into a forum of theory and perception. Much of our writing center has the same up-right chairs, with leveled desks that sit in congruent uniformity around other specific sections of the space. Certain aspects which do not completely change how we tutor, but rather the overall tone of the environment could be especially useful by adapting characteristics and elements to be able to encompass a wide variety of work environments. There are many possibilities of tutoring in writing centers and by allowing options for different aspects, it could open a door for innovative and creative thinking in an individualistic environment that supports a mass of perspectives and preferences.

Literature Review

When researching the literature that has already been done, I didn't want to simply stick to the elements that I was researching. Rather, I explored the fields that circled around my research questions and different topics that could arise as I began addressing a broader space of the writing center environment. I looked at themes such as noise, location, environment, and communication, and noted how they could intersect in my research and relate to each other in terms of tutoring sessions.

Before understanding the environment of a writing center, I wanted to first have a concrete perception of the type of writing center being analyzed for my research. Basing our writing center from the standards described in Richard Leahy's "What the College Writing Center Is—and Isn't", as a place for understanding "the writing process and the power of collaborative tutoring" (48). Leahy addresses common questions surrounding writing centers, their function, the users, and the session themselves. At the beginning of a session, tutors usually ask the tutees questions about their writing, which he assigns the function of discovering the

tutee's writing process (Leahy 46). These questions hold an important placement in the dynamic of a session, as they establish criteria and the tutor-tutee relationship in terms of communication and conversation.

In Elizabeth Boquet's "Noise from the Writing Center" she explores the implications of noise in relation to location, pedagogy, and various types of relationships in metaphorical contexts. Her text attempts to describe the relationship the Writing Center holds between students and the university, through the multitude of expectations that it is implied to uphold. These expectations help to shape the prologue of the text, as a faculty member sends an email expressing his discontent with the noise coming from the writing center (Boquet xii). This asserts that a writing center is assumed to be quiet and invisible in regards to its surroundings. The silence suggests a level of professionalism and Boquet's response to the email shows her defiance towards the assumption that noise equates to raucous (xiv-xv). Boquet confronts the essence of noise as a necessary result of productivity for the staff.

In regards to performative pedagogy, Boquet explains how she relates the work of the writing center as controlled chaos, writing "It is a frame that enables me, in my work with writers, to acknowledge the importance of preparation while at the same time immersing myself in the pleasure of the here and now" (83). She equates the here and now with realizing the inevitable reality of chaotic work and that the writing center develops out of chaos. Relating this to her thought process of designing her course that teaches writing center tutors, she explains how she asked "'What do the sessions in the writing center look like?' and 'What do I want them to look like?'" (Boquet 86) thus visualizing the writing center as a product of chaos.

Boquet addresses Nancy Welch's ideas about breaking silences and what truly threatens relationships, relating it to the process of revision and centers and productive spaces. However,

in Nancy Welch's other text "Silence to Noise: The Writing Center as Critical Exile" she discusses realms of conversation in collaborative spaces, equating noise to the communication between tutors and tutees during sessions. Welch explains how the writing center defies the norms of academic institution through its nonconformity, and therefore creates a metaphorical noise for tutees who do not receive it elsewhere. She states that the "center is located on the boundaries of the university where it is vulnerable to the yearly rounds of budget cuts but where it is also freed from the constraints of a pre- determined curriculum and the normative force of grade" (Welch 5). Through the nonconventional academic setting, the writing center offers a different kind of learning space that equates noise to individual thought. She writes that in terms of critical exile, "the writing center is a place where these students converse with, question, and rework the conflicting, often unsettling, always potentially creative other voices that populate their words" (Welch 13).

In the text "Scaffolding in the Writing Center", Isabella Thompson offers a microanalysis of communication and strategies during tutoring sessions and how they relate to different types of scaffolding to progress understanding. Thompson examines body behavior in sessions, writing that "body posture, hand gestures, and other forms of physical movements show how people are engaged with each other and their environment, how they feel about each other, and how willingly they invite relationships" (423). In relation to Boquet and Welch, Thompson's research furthers their themes of communication and discusses how it relates to the environment that the session takes pace in. While her focus is on the technique of scaffolding, the relationship between how the tutor and tutee converse in the environment that Thompson studies shows the dynamic of communication in sessions.

To enforce the importance of space and environment, Johnathon Mauk presents his theory of the "Third Space" in his writing "Location, Location, Location: The "Real" (E)states of Being, Writing, and Thinking in Composition". He poses the "Third Space" as a projection of a "'real and imagined' realm of intellectual and social action" (Mauk 200). He creates an intersectionality of conversation and space, creating its geographical existence in conscious discourses. Mauk elaborates on the idea to give consciousness a location, writing that "what students do require is a way to makes sense of the particular academic space that contextualizes their own writing and thinking. Students need to be placed within assignments…[which] need to create a *material-discoursive where*" (213). The where creates a location for writers to have an academic attachment to consciousness that they may not have previously been able to.

Mauk addresses Nedra Reynolds' topics of geography and relates it to the locational implications for students and the exploration of the "*where*" (Mauk 207). Reynolds metaphorically connects spatiality to space within discourses in her text "Geographies of Writing: Inhabiting Places and Encountering Differences", where she analyzes geographies, cultural differences, and their social influences. She writes "I argue that learning to dwell, even when those places are imaginary like texts, might encourage a willingness to encounter difference. The concept of dwelling, then, is a third spatial practice I want to claim for geographies of writing" (Reynolds 140). Here she mentions the notion of a "Third Space", like Mauk, only she focuses on dwellings, the places people most frequently occupy, as a set of practices.

Reynolds compares her notion of geography in writing with Sidney Dobrin's, who cowrote the text "Writing Environments" with Christopher Keller. Their writing discusses how "the production of texts and discourse is influenced by the places and environments in which and

for which they are produced" (Dobrin et al. 1). Through a series of interviews and responses to

authors, they construct criticisms of how different models of place and space affect one's

perception of diverse writing. Back in Reynolds' text, she uses a previous idea from Dobrin, that

"there are no prescribed responses possible since each act of writing takes place differently—in a

distinct environment" (Reynolds 175). These two authors assert the apparent complexities that

correlate geography to spatial awareness in writing, and how texts are aware of their

environments.

Veronica Oliver examines the institutional location and physical layout of a writing

center and analyzes how it affects the dynamic of a session. In her text "Writing Center Location

and Physical Environment: The Relevance of Tutor and Tutee Perceptions", Oliver researches

how the location and environment are perceived by both tutees and tutors, finding that "tutors

and tutees…seem to prefer the "closed" writing center configuration with cubicles and / or

dividers, which aid in keeping out noise distractions" (101). By suggesting that her participants

preferred more private sessions, she reveals a potentially ideal physical layout of writing centers.

She also discusses the participants' awareness of the writing center's location within the

institution, but notes that many were not aware of its particular department of the program.

Furthermore, specifically regarding the physical environment of the writing center, she writes

that "the issue of noise and distractions is revealed as an emergent theme" (Oliver 111). Oliver

also addresses Elizabeth Boquet's advocacy for noise in the writing center and mentions her

difference in context with her opposition that "I'm speaking of another type of noise—noise that

creates communication walls, rather than breaking them down" (118). This contrast of types of

noise creates a conversation of what kind of noise belongs in the writing center.

In "Writing Centers Are Cozy Homes", Jackie McKinney also discusses the physical environment of the writing center, but takes a theoretical approach to her perception. She asserts that "I think the idea that a writing center is—and should be—a cozy, homey, comfortable, family-like place is perhaps most firmly entrenched (McKinney 20). McKinney also references Nedra Reynolds' assertions (from a publication in 1998) and their significance, stating "if the writing center as home is part of the grand narrative for writing centers, then it is easy to see how this spatial metaphor may distract us from the material realities of actual writing centers" (28-29). However, McKinney does note their differences in geographical education and how the study has changed in recent decades. McKinney concludes her work with the final sentiments that "the writing center grand narrative that writes writing centers as homes has taught us to narrow our gaze, to see particular items and to ignore others. Peripheral vision asks us to widen our view" (34). Understanding how to understand the cozy home narrative, McKinney shows the importance of the environment of the writing center and the occupants' relationship with it.

Through the intersectionality of texts in my literature review, I gained a better understanding of the complexity that arises when discussing the environment. There are many factors to be taken into consideration, which these texts delve into and weave through each other. The literature opens my research to include multiple aspects when evaluating the environment of the writing center. These texts fill the gaps between the relationships of spatial elements, how tutors and tutees perceive them, and how they become evident in tutoring sessions.

Methods

I chose to interview tutors for the best results of my research. After much deliberation on what questions to include in my interview, I thought of what kinds of questions would allow the tutors to think outside of the natural construct of our writing center. Our writing center was the

only one they had been in and therefore their idea of a writing center and its environment was heavily weighted on what they had known. I wanted them to feel comfortable exploring different possibilities of the environments of a writing center and not only think about the physical elements, but also the nonphysical elements that can alter a session in ways that may not be immediately evident. The questions consider personal preferences, perception, and desires in the Writing Center and in tutoring sessions. By asking critical questions that encompass present perceptions and gradually asking questions that allow more theoretical and interpretive responses, the participants were introduced to the concepts and thought about the implications of them as the interview progressed.

I had two participants for my interviews who both individually volunteered to be a part of my research. They were interviewed in open public spaces at their comfort and read the questions minutes before beginning the interview, so that they had an initial idea to start forming their thoughts. During the interview, I recorded both full interviews which I later transcribed onto a document so I could examine the answers further.

Before I drafted my interview questions, I wanted to only focus on the physical aspects of the environment within the writing center, such as chairs, desks, administrator desk, and the office, however once I began writing the questions I found myself becoming increasingly more aware of the aspects that we are not immediately aware of, such as noise, lighting, spaciousness, and proximity. These were elements that I had not previously considered, but the more I thought of them the more I realized just how crucial they can be in the environment of a writing center and especially in a tutoring session. When I was going over the interview, I noticed the participants had answered certain questions from both tutor's and tutee's viewpoints, as they had also been tutored before. I had not completely realized how different the perceptions could be

between the two positions, but after analyzing the responses I understood how. Once I deeply

implored these characteristics and perspectives, my research question shifted from the initial

"how do the physical aspects within a writing center affect tutoring session?" to "how does the

environment of our writing center affect tutors, tutees, and the dynamic of a tutoring session?".

Analysis

My research revealed one overwhelmingly major point in regards to the environment of

the writing center: elements affect a session once we stop and realize that they are there,

otherwise we may just accept them as inevitable rather than a construct of the space itself.

Throughout interviewing my participants, both had analyzed the environmental aspects once a

situation arose that made them immediately apparent. In regards to noise, both stated that they

had acknowledged certain noise levels when the occasion deemed necessary. For example, if the

noise level was high they mentioned that they would be aware of others around them, however

they didn't like if the noise level was quite low because they felt that others were aware of them.

One participant noted that low noise levels leads them to be conscious about their tutoring

strategies, due to the assumptions that others in the room can clearly hear them. However, they

also described that higher noise levels led to a more casual tutoring environment in terms of

conversation, while lower noise levels made the dynamic of the session more formal. There is

then the implication that high or low levels of noise directly affect a session due to the distraction

by those around them and can implicate a specific tone.

In correlation to noise, participants also noted that they desire more space in the writing

center to separate tutoring sessions and allow a more evident sense of individual space. In our

writing center, many desks are directly next to each other, which can also lead to the greater

awareness of noise. While they didn't state they wanted individual cubicles as Veronica Oliver

had found in her study (101), they expressed the desire for more space in between desks to allow for privacy in regards to noise and the awareness of other sessions. When expressing their initial observations as they enter the writing center, both participants indicated the middle desk area where the tutors congregate between session as the immediate focus point. This collective serves as a friendly space within the center for collaborative ideas and communication between tutors. This space being the first perception upon entrance, marks this clump as the heart of the environment that it exists within.

The participants also both expressed that they would like options in terms of seating for tutoring sessions. One specifically noted the usefulness for tutees who are nervous or shy in structured settings. Specifically, they wanted unconventional chairs, such as the lounge egg shaped chairs that sit outside of the writing center in the library basement. This furniture change represents the deviation from conventional academic norms, i.e. the standard upright chairs against desks. Regarding the deviation representing the writing center, Nancy Welch writes "the fundamental assumption of the center is that writers on this overcrowded campus with its two-hundred-seat lecture halls benefit from time and space for writing and reflection". There is potential for this space for writing and reflection to lie in the cushion of nontraditional seating, creating a new kind of academic environment that is productive, while allowing for individual innovation.

This research relates the common conceptions of writing centers to their non-immediately effective environmental aspects. It is important that we, as frequenters of the writing center, are aware of the elements at play which can contribute in certain ways to tutoring sessions and affect our perception of communication in them. We should be aware and notice the geography of where we write and the variations of noise around us, as they carry different connotations that

can shape our writing and tutoring sessions. Wariness of the writing center environment can invite discussions of physical aspects and spatial awareness, allowing for consciousness of our surroundings.

As writing center habitants, we should always seek to challenge the norms that surround the institutional powers and work to defy them in our own writing center. With writing centers as active agents in deviating from academic norms, we should seek to create, innovate, and understand differences in environmental patterns that can affect tutoring sessions and how to incorporate disparate techniques and responses. These techniques and responses should be separate from the conventional institutional standards which can be monotonous and frustrating for tutors and tutees alike. By straying from these standards, we can truly break from the dichotomy of power between innovation and control in order to implement effective and communicative tutoring that encompasses spatial awareness, realms of collaboration, and creativity. Jackie McKinney writes that "we can begin to re-see our centers if we look *at* our spaces as opposed to *through* them" (34). Environment plays an important role in the work of tutoring, and while there are many ways to address our surroundings, we must first acknowledge the implicit affects that drive our perceptions.

Limitations

Unfortunate limitations to my research include that I only interviewed two people, who were both tutors. They had both been tutees for some occasions, however I would be interested to know how someone who does not work in the writing center views the environment and what their perceptions of the different aspects are. I also would have liked to interview more people to gain a better understanding if noise levels, proximity, and seating furniture are overwhelmingly prominent aspects in the environment. It would be interesting to see if other participants would

not care for different options for seating and why the preferences were so. I also had interviewed tutor interns, but I would have liked to interview paid-tutors to see if their perception of the writing center is different based on the longer amount of time they had spent in the space compared to the interns or given that they were being paid by the institution.

If I were to further my research I would be very interested to explore the metaphorical aspect of the office in the writing center. One participant noted the office as the "authority off to the side", which was an interesting observation in relation to the rest of the space that is primarily filled with undergraduate students. I would like to explore the dynamic between the open space where the tutoring sessions take place and the separate office that remains at the back of the writing center, to the side of the sessions but still in view of the entire space.

I would also be interested to see the effectiveness of alternative seating, a steady noise level, or more space between sessions while tutoring. If I had the resources and approval from a tutor and tutee, I would have liked to observe a session that put the theoretical ideas from the interview participants into practicality and see if and how the alterations affected a tutoring session. Most notably seating because it's a big change from the standard upright chairs at all the desks, relaxing chairs could add an effective element into the dynamic of a session. These areas could further add to my research findings and add more information to the conversation of writing center environment and communication within.

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