TOWARD AUTHENTIC DIALOGUE: ORIGINS OF THE FISHBOWL METHOD AND IMPLICATIONS FOR WRITING CENTER WORK

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Dialogue is central to a writing center's mission. Whether we think of dialogue as the literal exchange of words between two people or as a method for prompting a creative openness to others' perspectives, writers, tutors, and writing center administrators rely on dialogue to collaborate and learn from one another. While we may be able to agree on its value, less clear is the best route for achieving authentic, open dialogue. Furthermore, as we export writing center pedagogy and push beyond the physical boundaries of "the Center" to work online, in libraries, in satellite centers, in writing fellows programs, or with community partners, it will become increasingly necessary to expand our field's traditional focus on dyadic, writer-to-tutor exchanges to explore the dialogic potential of larger group configurations. In writing center work, we often speak of such potential in terms of collaboration, and with this essay, we'd like to explore the benefits—and acknowledge the limitations—of the fishbowl method for initiating the kind of dialogue necessary for building collaborative relationships within a campus community.

Our field's commitment to collaboration reveals our fundamental belief that working with others is better than working alone. We've long accepted the premise that students learn better when they work with each other or a peer, but more recent explorations of collaboration focus on the untapped potential for working productively with other administrators and faculty on our campuses. In

"Breathing Lessons, or Collaboration is…" Michele Eodice explores how we might extend the collaboration that occurs "every day in our writing centers" to include the rest of the institution (119). Once we recognize the many ways in which we collaborate with students, with consultants, and with each other, she suggests that we "let our 'insider' inquiry get turned outward" (120). If we are collaborators, if we are writers, then we can/should be writers beyond the writing center and beyond our discipline. She emphasizes that "we should not 'maintain a critical distance from the institution'—we should, in fact, become integral as models for its leadership through collaboration" (122). As leaders, we must "lean in" and embrace the potential of our status as "intellectual bureaucrats" (122). Because collaborative learning, writing, reading, and thinking form the foundation of writing center practice, those of us who spend our time in such rich environments can and should share with the rest of campus what we know about working with others. The challenge lies in figuring out effective means of doing so.

The growing popularity of the "unconference" model at regional and national writing center conferences is one expression of the field's interest in discovering and testing strategies for promoting dialogue and building collaborative relationships. Following the lead of its regionals, the International Writing Centers Association solicited proposals for roundtables, round-robin discussions, and fishbowl

conversations for its 2010 and 2011 Collaboratives; traditional paper and panel presentation proposals were, for all intents and purposes, banned. The Call for Proposals explained that unconference formats allow for greater interactivity, granting participants the opportunity to "explore new modes of collaborating and making meaning" ("IWCA"). Theoretically, unconference formats offer an escape from the hierarchical structure inherent in traditional conference papers and panels; presenters in the unconference model speak for only a few minutes to frame the conversation, and participants spend the rest of the time engaging in interactive, facilitated discussion.

Intrigued by the dialogic potential (and the novelty) of the fishbowl format, we organized a fishbowl for the 2010 IWCA Collaborative at the CCCCs in order to facilitate a discussion about academic culture vs. writing culture.[1] The fishbowl can be configured a number of ways, but its defining characteristic is the use of two concentric circles. For the 2010 Collaborative, we chose an "open fishbowl" format, which meant that participants had the ability to move between the circles.[2] When sitting in the exterior circle, participants listened; when sitting in one of the five chairs in the interior circle, participants spoke. To encourage a flow of movement and conversation between the rings, we asked participants to leave an open seat in the inner ring; once a newcomer took that seat, one of the individuals occupying an inner chair returned to the outer ring. The fishbowl format, then, establishes a physical layout symbolic of the kind of behaviors and energy we wish to nourish if we are to engage in authentic dialogue. All participants are equal, yet the rules prevent a free-for-all, in which all talk and none listen, or a free-for-one, in which one or a few dominate and silence others. Instead, the very layout emphasizes talking *and* listening, both necessary for collaboration.

Detailed analysis of the conversation itself exceeds the scope of this essay, but the range of comments revealed that some of us interpreted academic culture and writing culture differently: some viewed the interrelationship as incompatible, others as inevitable, others as a potentially productive tension. The participants' *post-session* comments, collected via surveys administered at the end of the session, prove more relevant to this exploration, as they illuminate the ways in which the fishbowl format created a generative environment for dialogue. Andrea Alden Lewis described the fishbowl as a "non-threatening environment for sharing ideas" and Moira Ozias compared it to "group brainstorming, but with an emphasis also on listening." Other participants noted the inclusive nature of the format; Elizabeth Beard shared that she "love[s] the way that lots of participants can share thoughts/insights in an organized way that lets us <u>hear</u> one another." Amber Jensen was likewise impressed with the fishbowl as "a way to engage multiple perspectives in an energizing, dynamic manner." A participant who wished comments to remain anonymous wrote that, in addition to promoting listening and inclusion, the format generated "great energy," and Ellen Kolba observed that the format "[kept] the conversation flowing." Additionally, the format provided a better forum for "people to respond to one another and not just to a discussion leader," Kolba wrote on her post-fishbowl survey.

Although the fishbowl certainly encouraged more talking and listening and provided a comfortable, engaging field for most, two of the 27 participants expressed concerns about the degree to which someone might have "felt left out." Specifically, one participant wondered if anyone felt that "their opinion was too different from the train of conversation and therefore kept quiet." Another participant worried about the pace: "I like the emphasis on listening . . . but felt the conversation moved from one topic to another too quickly. When I wanted to contribute, my chance passed before I had the time to work up the nerve." Such comments are instructive, as they remind us of the difficulty of ensuring that dissensus, as well as consensus, is voiced and respected. Despite such limitations, we were encouraged by this experience and concluded that the fishbowl has great

potential for initiating dialogue and prompting a first step toward productive collaboration.

After listening to the fishbowl participants' insightful comments at the 2010 Collaborative and reflecting upon how writing-center-led fishbowls might be used to promote large group dialogue and institutional collaboration, we reexamined the origins of this particular dialogic method and discovered that fishbowls—more specifically, the T-group (training group) movement that gave rise to fishbowls—have a rich, yet troubled history. Therefore, in addition to exploring the potential for fishbowl use among writing center professionals, this article offers background information about fishbowls to illustrate the need to fully understand the historical and theoretical grounding of any method we choose to import.

In Scott Highhouse's comprehensive history of the rise and fall of T-groups, he describes what appears to be the nativity of the fishbowl format.[3] Following World War II, a group of behavioral scientists led by Kurt Lewin searched for methods that would decrease interpersonal conflict and facilitate collaboration. In 1944, Lewin created the Research Center for Group Dynamics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and two years later, he and his colleagues were commissioned by the Connecticut Interracial Commission to conduct training sessions to help community leaders reduce racial tensions (Highhouse 278). This assignment provided Lewin with an opportunity to pursue his own interest in the dynamics of intergroup behavior, so in addition to the session participants, Lewin included several teams of non-participant observer researchers who took extensive notes on the daily group discussions and met each evening to discuss their observations (White 473-474).

Lewin had planned to maintain a boundary between the conference participants and the researchers; however, one evening, three curious conference attendees walked into the researchers' debriefing meeting and asked if they could watch the proceedings (Highhouse 278). One of the conference organizers recalls that "Lewin was initially embarrassed by the awkwardness of the situation but was intrigued by the idea of having [conference participants] sit in" (278). At first, the researchers discussed their perceptions of the day's discussion without any interruptions from their research subjects (the three conference participants sitting in their midst). Then, one by one, the participants interjected to disagree with the researchers' interpretations; subsequent joint meetings evolved when all of the conference participants began attending nightly meetings and when the trainers prompted participants to share their perceptions of one another's daytime group behavior. Lewin and his colleagues noticed that participants were gaining metacognitive awareness and experiencing personal growth after reflecting upon their own behavior in relation to the behavior of their fellow participants. When the New Britain conference concluded, Lewin and the other trainers turned their attention to developing structured behavioral feedback in a group setting, thus spawning the T-group movement and the birth of the fishbowl format.

Fishbowl conversations assumed a prominent role throughout the late 1940s until the peak of T-group workshops in the late 1960s. During this time, fishbowls were "characterized by a lack of structure and a passive facilitator who occasionally intervenes to put someone in the 'hotseat'" (Highhouse 288). A facilitator would provide no direction other than telling the newly gathered T-group members that they were responsible for setting the agenda and facilitating each other's learning. Typically, the group dynamic would devolve into chaos as participants struggled to define their mission and negotiate intergroup power relationships. These earliest fishbowls put participants off-balance and made them question their customary ways of interacting with others; although many of the participants described the fishbowl as a type of "conversion experience," others felt frustrated by what they viewed as a "mischievous enterprise and an anxiety-producing enterprise" (as cited in Highhouse 283). Lack of direction, consequently, resulted in something other than the intended dialogue.

As the T-group movement progressed, some of

the trainers' idiosyncratic practices had the unfortunate effect of stifling dialogue, undermining the tone and purpose of the fishbowl. Others, however, resisted the impulse to tinker and found ways to maintain the integrity and purpose of the method. Instead of using the fishbowl as a *laboratory* in which facilitators sparked artificial conflict to teach group members effective problem-solving skills, two prominent T-group trainers, Robert Blake and Jane Mouton from the University of Texas, established fishbowls as *collaboratories* in which groups who were in genuine conflict with one another could put aside their biases and learn from one another.[4] Rather than creating conflict to promote self-knowledge, Blake and Mouton's fishbowl stressed open communication, collaborative problem solving, and egalitarianism among participants. This iteration of the fishbowl holds the most promise for writing center work and most closely aligns to the version that the International Writing Center Association and its regional affiliates have imported to their recent conferences.

Achieving authentic, productive dialogue on our campuses depends on creating an environment that encourages talking and listening. Because the fishbowl format can create the necessary conditions for authentic dialogue, it can help us continue the necessary work of building collaboratories with our campus colleagues. For example, assessment presents a tremendous challenge for universities and colleges, and often we find ourselves responding or reacting to demands for accountability rather than participating in conversations about the best purpose or mission for our institutions. One productive theme for a fishbowl might be "what do we want our students to learn," a prompt that invites each participant to reflect on his or her values and priorities, to express them clearly, and to listen to others' views and perspectives. Given external demands on higher education for accountability, collaborative relationships seem especially crucial if we are to have the proverbial "say" in higher education curriculum and leadership.

Even more important, authentic dialogue is a necessary ingredient for creating the kind of culture of responsibility Linda Addler-Kassner and Susanmarie Harrington describe in their critique of accountability rhetoric. They rightly argue that our current model of assessment locates knowledge about teaching and outcomes in employers, government officials, and administrators; according to this model, "teachers . . . don't possess this knowledge" (85). To correct such a doomed approach to education, they encourage educators to take the initiative and reframe assessment in terms of *responsibility*. This frame "draws on actions and literature attending to three key ideas: identifying and working from principle and best practice; building alliances with others; and engaging in (and assessing) shared actions based on common interests" (86). These three strategies correspond to the central goal of the fishbowl: promoting authentic dialogue among egalitarian participants who focus on problem solving to achieve positive change.

Fishbowls can create productive environments for initiating important, yet potentially charged, conversations, and we can imagine a number of topics (in addition to assessment) that would work well within the fishbowl format. For example, at a faculty development event, one of the authors facilitated a fishbowl conversation about teaching multilingual writers. As an alternative to the agonistic, performative rhetoric found in some traditional question-and-answer discussions, the fishbowl approach created a more relaxed atmosphere. Faculty members appeared more willing to "lean in" together as they discussed their own difficulties in writing and expressed a desire to learn more about writing pedagogy. Within the fishbowl, fears were spoken, concerns were voiced, and, ultimately, values about writing and grading were negotiated in a collaborative, public forum.

Collaboration and dialogue are integral to writing center work, and as a discursive method that values both talking and listening, the fishbowl has great potential to help writing center practitioners nurture the collaboration already taking place on our campuses, as well as build new relationships. Fishbowls can promote authentic dialogue and

consequently help the writing center community—as well as the larger academy—avoid the type of egocentric thinking that inhibits critical thinking and blinds us to others' insights and perceptions. With richer knowledge of the fishbowl's theoretical and historical background, writing center practitioners will understand better how to utilize the method. If facilitators create a fishbowl that maintains a generative openness to others, this dialogic format can help us achieve more productive conversations with our colleagues, even as we recognize and minimize the limitations inherent to the method. Like all collaborative practices, the fishbowl approach should not be imposed or forced; rather, we should recognize its value as one of many methods for engaging in a higher level of not only talking but listening to one another. As our exploration of its history revealed, putting people in a circle will not guarantee authentic dialogue, and future scholarship should continue to explore not only productive methods for creating the right physical environment for authentic dialogue, but strategies for developing our own ability to listen genuinely to others.

Notes

[1]. We would like to thank Michele Eodice for introducing us to the fishbowl concept and for facilitating our session at the 2010 IWCA Collaborative at the CCCCs. We would also like to thank our fishbowl participants, whose thoughtful comments informed our work greatly.

[2]. Since both of us were new to the fishbowl format, we found it helpful to watch videos demonstrating possible fishbowl configurations. In "Fishbowl—Collaboration" (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uOzpZDDoQmU&feature=related), five educators participate in a norming session in which they articulate and negotiate their interpretations of a shared rubric; this video illustrates a "closed fishbowl" format and shows how those seated in the outer circle gain an insider's view of their colleagues' thought processes. The addition of a facilitator creates a very different dialogic dynamic for the fishbowl conversation at the 2009 Lasa Circuit Rider Conference, "Fishbowl part1 - Clip1 of 2" (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rf5PI_lQZ88&feature=related).

[3]. In his historical treatment of the T-group movement, Highhouse employs the subheading "One Night in Connecticut" to underscore his view that those who participated in the first accidental fishbowl responded as if it were a conversion experience—for participants, this "one night" marked a significant moment in the history of training group research. Once introduced to this method of group interaction, proponents of the fishbowl exhibited enthusiasm for the method with something like evangelistic zeal.

[4]. Blake and Mouton rarely use the term "fishbowl," even though they are cited by other scholars (Fisher 87) for popularizing fishbowls. In their book *Managing Intergroup Conflict in Industry,* Blake and Mouton, along with their co-author Herbert Shepard, describe fishbowl meetings among workers involved in corporate mergers. Although fishbowl practice undergirds much of Blake and Mouton's work on consensus-building through large-group dialogue, the authors' discuss the term "fishbowl" on only two pages of their monograph (Blake, Mouton, and Shepard 149-50).

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