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Intellectual Property Paranoia and the Writing Center

Fall 2004 / Columns

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How writing center practice confronts, complicates, and reconfigures institutional codes of ethics.



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The current atmosphere of numerous academic institutions is one of suspicion regarding intellectual ethical transgressions. Universities that have long-standing honor systems, like Southwestern University, dismiss this paranoia as being unrelated to their establishment because the honor code system protects them. The honor code incites additional thought regarding consultation methods in writing centers like Southwestern's Debbie Ellis Writing Center (DEWC). One must question what Southwestern students are truly affirming when writing "I have neither given nor received aid on this examination, nor have I seen anyone else do so" on an assignment they have taken to the writing center (Southwestern University 58). Are they saying they did not benefit from their visit to the writing center, or are they merely affirming that they did not engage in unethical behavior? According to Stephen North, "Nearly everyone who writes likes—and needs—to talk about his or her writing.... A writing center is an institutional response to this need" (North 71). In addition to fulfilling the needs of the university's writers by creating a place for discussions about writing, the writing center complicates the supposedly clear ethical and non-ethical dichotomy of the honor code system by being an institutionalized exception to that system. As an exception to the honor code system, the DEWC calls into question the viability of that system and the ideas of intellectual property that serve as its foundations.

The writing centers' location in the academic institution contributes to its ability to pose questions about conflicts of honor code principles within the school's policies. As Irene Clark and Dave Healy observe, "the fact is that writing centers are well positioned to question the status quo" (253). The separation from typical institutional instructional methods is what makes the writing center

an appealing individual-centered space. However, while the writing center is empowered by functioning as a quasi-independent entity, this separation also places the writing center under ethical suspicion. The concept of an unethical center is entrenched in the concepts of intellectual property and the individualist creation of thought that are problematized by writing centers' collaborative practices. In fulfilling the institutional need to "manage cultural anxiety about literacy," writing centers become the focus of paranoia directed towards students' intellectual development (Grimm 527). Thus, the concept of an unethical writing center has more to do with archaic notions of ownership within academia than actual moral faltering within the center.

The need for writing centers to justify their practices and confirm themselves as legitimate parts of academia illustrates those notions of ownership. The emphasis on intellectual property has not been altered or reviewed to fit within the actual learning environment of a university. It does not allow for students to acknowledge that they are working within and expanding upon a discourse. Rather, it implies that their thought development occurred in an intellectual vacuum. This inadequate definition of plagiarism makes it difficult to determine if truly unethical behavior has taken place, while feeding the suspicions surrounding writing center methods. Indeed, "the historical construct of the author as private laborer/owner must inevitably conflict with the public concept of labor implicit in writing group theory, which calls upon students to create their own essays in an atmosphere of oral and written exchange" (Spigelman 241). This conflict illustrates that the definitions used in delineating honor codes are incomplete at best, required as they are to apply a single concept of intellectual property across cultures, academic disciplines and circumstances. Writing centers' ability to demonstrate that what one can claim as one's "own" academic production is more complicated than institutional honor codes allow therefore makes writing centers dangerous within academia.

Another instance in which writing centers challenge institutional ideas of honor code ethics is in regard to rendering aid to students. Rendering aid is different from plagiarism in that plagiarism involves supplying ideas and content or simply writing the paper, whereas aid involves providing assistance in the writing process. The Southwestern University honor code requires that every student upon submission of an academic assignment affirm that they have not given or received aid but does not define what giving or receiving aid is. To complicate matters, within this institution, concerned enough to place placards of the honor code in every classroom and require it on all assignments, there is a writing center, whose very institutional purpose is to aid students. Faced with a similar situation, Joseph Munch states, "Because giving or receiving aid on any assignment violates this code, every consultation at the writing center contains a possible threat to what is arguably the foundation of the honor code" (14). Thus, the co-existence of a writing center and an honor code that prohibits providing any kind of aid illustrates a clash of different ideologies of intellectual property.

In an attempt to remedy the dissonance between universities' honor codes and their need for writing centers, there have been several adjustments to the manner in which the centers operate. Some universities have established a hands-off approach to consulting with students in an attempt to avoid unethical aid. In several instances, this translates into consultants being unable to discuss the students' actual assignments. Centers even go so far as to prohibit students from consulting with those who are in the same area of study. This practice deprives students of contact with the very people that could prove to

be the most beneficial. Consultants aware of the stylistic minutia of a specific discipline would be the most valuable resource for a student attempting to replicate that academic style. Yet some believe that "the procedures are not only beneficial to the operation of the center, but they also help establish the tutor's ethical consciousness, enhancing his or her ability to help a student" (Herek and Nequette 15). Even if hands-off procedures help consultants to better serve the students who come to the writing center, the language of the interaction is still one of assistance or aid. One does not need to physically touch a text to be a participant in the writing process of its creator. Rather than making the consultant more ethical, keeping consultants from interacting with students actually degrades the ethical obligation of the writing center to aid writers. "It is worse than simplistic," Clark and Healy argue, "to require that writing centers withhold helpful information and refrain from helpful practices out of a misguided sense of what is ethical" (255). However, withholding aid is the very requirement of most university honor codes.

To deal with the unavoidability of receiving aid in a writing center, some universities recommend that students indicate the involvement of the writing center while affirming the honor code. In the case of the Debbie Ellis Writing Center, students are encouraged to write "I went to the writing center" at the end of the assignment as an addendum to the honor code. However, this honor code addition is not incorporated into any aspect of Southwestern's honor system constitution. This omission demonstrates that the addendum does not alter the code, but rather serves to establish ethical intent. The need to establish intent confirms the presence of a dichotomy of ethical and unethical aid to further complicate honor code morality. As Joseph Munch contends, "in actuality, only the unsanctioned giving or receiving of aid is an honor code violation" (15). However, the acknowledgement of multiple forms of aid confirms the inappropriateness of utilizing the term as the sole definition of intellectual propriety.

Where do all of these honor code and intellectual property issues leave the writing center? Pending institutional administrators' becoming more aware of the conflicts between honor codes and writing centers, the center must continue to function as both a marginalized and empowered academic community, committed to its purpose of aiding writers. By serving as a physical location for discussions of writing and the implications of word-based actions, such as the honor code, the writing center incites members of the intellectual community to examine textual representations critically. Thus, writing centers heighten awareness of institutional flaws and move toward their solutions. Ultimately, writing centers' challenge to traditional honor codes will encourage institutions to get beyond their intellectual property paranoia and to develop a more modern and holistic concept of academic ownership that focuses on ethics rather than aid.

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