

THE HISTORY OF US WRITING CENTERS AND THE EMERGENCE OF WRITING CENTERS IN LATIN AMERICA: AN INTERVIEW WITH NEAL LERNER

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Especially in the last five years, writing centers have begun to emerge in Latin America. They resemble the sense and philosophy of writing centers in the United States but with an identity that is still developing. As part of the summer course “Writing Center History, Theory, Research, and Administration,” led by Dr. Rebecca Babcock at the University of Texas of Permian Basin, I interviewed Professor Neal Lerner, one of the leading scholars of writing center theory, history, and administration. My aim in conducting this interview was to consult Prof. Lerner’s expertise to try and understand the development of this field in the United States and compare it with recent trends in Latin America. Dr. Lerner is associate professor at Northeastern University, where he is the director of the Writing Program. He has won the International Writing Centers Association Outstanding Scholarship Award five times. Two of his books have also won awards. *The Idea of a Writing Laboratory* won the NCTE David Russell Award for Distinguished Research in the Teaching of English in 2011. Also, along with his co-authors Mya Poe and Jennifer Craig, he won the CCCC Advancement of Knowledge Award in 2012 with the book *Learning to Communicate as a Scientist and Engineer: Case Studies from MIT*. He is co-author with Paula Gillespie of *The Longman Guide to Peer Tutoring*, a recognized book for training writing tutors. He was editor of *Writing Center Journal* from 2002 to 2008 with Beth Boquet. Currently he is working with Michele Eodice and Anne Ellen Geller in a cross-institutional study of undergraduates’ most meaningful writing projects (<http://meaningfulwritingproject.net>). This interview took place via Skype on June of 2016 and was recorded for transcription. It has been edited for clarity and readability.

Violeta: *What were the main reasons for creating writing centers in the U.S.?*

Neal: The creation of writing centers, as we know them, has been standardized or institutionalized. This was tied to enrollment patterns, so as the access to U.S. higher education broadened—and it did in different time periods starting in the 1890s—suddenly students were far less prepared than previous generations.

Those students were more working class, they had come through public schools rather than elite private schools, and that access broadened from 1890 to 1980. As those students came to U.S. higher education, their reading, writing, and communication skills were sometimes deficient, and that’s the tie to remediation. I think there are lots of class and socio-economic reasons for that; the students communicated in different ways than the faculty were used to, and the way the faculty did, the access was broadened socioeconomically, so I think writing centers were one response to that movement around literacy. It’s an institutional response. When I say that I mean institutions, as a whole entity, feel that they need to do something. They don’t always want to commit to solving a problem, but they feel like they need to do something, and sometimes it’s almost peer pressure if they see other institutions— “Oh, you have a writing center, we need one too!” When I say institutionalized writing centers, I think there has been some writing support in maybe informal ways as long as there has been higher education. Maybe it was just informal tutoring, maybe it was some students taking their own initiative to do peer review, but there’s been something. That sort of institutional response is something that we would recognize as a writing center, led then to have to find someone to get to be an administrator, and then that person plays a role and has a certain status within the institution and all those kinds of factors become important. With my tracing of it, it really isn’t until around the 1930’s in this country that this model became more widespread.

VM: *In Latin America there are also these remedial reasons, but at this point many people start a writing center because you need to put these students with language deficiency at the same point of the others, but I don’t know Dr. Lerner, it is still the same reason? Nowadays, what are some of the other reasons to create a new writing center?*

NL: There are lots of reasons in this moment; it is related to how U.S. higher education is changing. I’m sure that’s true for Latin America as well, and one of the phenomena in this country is that many new writing centers are coming out of larger centers for academic support, rather than coming out of an

English department or writing program with a kind of academic side to it, and those are often tied to particular courses—this country, first-year writing most notably, or first-year composition. Writing centers are a kind of support mechanism for that and the students in those courses, so the ones that are coming out of academic support are often part of larger tutoring centers as math tutoring, physics, whatever subject. Sometimes they have study skills, sometimes they have all kinds of programming that supports students when they come out of the Student Affairs side of the university, which is in this country quite different. I think that something's been going on for in this country at least 25 years, but the sort of recognition that students need support services in that kind of way, and those run from mental health services to academic, to social, and writing centers are one piece of them. That explains some of the continued growth. It seems some writing centers that were part of departments are now part of these larger student support centers, and I think that's partially efficiency of an organization saying "why do we need all these different things", "let's all bring them together under one roof." I don't know whether that's good or bad.

Another phenomenon along those lines is a lot of writing centers, new or old, are being shifted and doing collaborations with libraries. And libraries have always been about student support and academic support so that partnership makes a lot of natural sense. It can be a physical partnership. There're lots of writing centers now housed in the campus library, and then there're the other kinds of support where the library personnel and the writing center personnel are working closely together to support students around research, finding sources, about how to use sources, and then how to write about sources, so it's another one of those partnerships that just makes a lot of sense.

VM: I want to ask you about the role of writing center director. How did this position start, how did it evolve, and how do we see it in this moment?

NL: I don't think it's exactly an evolution. In some of the early writing centers, the directors were faculty who were doing it in addition to whatever else they were doing. But also in some of the early writing centers they were just people hired for some reason, sometimes they were a spouse of a faculty member, sometimes they just seem to have some sort of expertise and they were just put in a position to run a writing center. A major tension that runs throughout the history of writing centers is the question of should the administrator, or should the writing center director be a faculty member, with faculty member status, or a non-faculty person? But even the answer to that is

complicated. I've been in the role of the writing program administrator who is a faculty member and who is not a faculty member, and at the institutions where I was playing that role I would much rather to be a faculty member; and when I say faculty member I mean someone who's on the tenure track or has tenure and has that status within the institution. In some of the surveys that have been done in this country of this institutional state of writing center directors, the numbers are kind of all over the place because the data are [confusing]. There was a recent survey that I think it's going to be a little more reliable, but the numbers are still pretty uneven in terms of how many writing center directors occupy faculty-tenure-track faculty positions and how many don't.¹ I know of places where the writing center director was a faculty member and that person leaves, retires, and then they hire a staff person, non-faculty person, and I've heard the other. When I got hired in my current university, I was hired as a writing center director and a faculty member, and I was the first in thirty years of that writing center; I was the first faculty tenure track writing center director, so things change. I know institutions where it's a lot easier to create positions that are non-faculty; they cost less, the institution makes a much shorter commitment, or less of a commitment to the position when they do that. In some ways they're easier to get, so if people in institutions are trying to create a writing center and get a director, they probably have a better shot at it if they're not hiring a faculty tenure-track person. And I think that rise of the student success centers or student support centers, and then writing center director is coming out of those entities. Usually the history of those centers in this country is not that they're run by faculty, they're run by specialists who aren't; they don't have that kind of academic degree because they don't need to, that's not where they're coming from. Those entities won't hire a faculty member to run a writing center; it'll be pretty unlikely. So those both worlds are operating simultaneously in this country.

VM: As you said, currently there are some writing center directors with no graduate background, and this could be an obstacle if they don't have a degree in something related to writing center studies; and you can imagine what's happening in Latin America when we don't have a common core of education for writing center directors. I am curious about how it would affect a writing center professional to lack an educational background to support them in their job as writing center director. Is it really an obstacle if the writing center director doesn't have any background about composition, about writing, or about writing center studies?

NL: I think not always, but there's a bigger chance of someone not doing a very good job. I've worked for

years with faculty across the curriculum on teaching with writing in their courses and not all those people have training or experience on teaching with writing in some way or another. Some of them still do a good job. They had good instincts or they themselves learned to write in ways that they are applying to how to teach others how to write, so they know “well, let’s see writing is a process, so people need to revise.” Or, “I should give feedback that isn’t just correcting grammar and maybe it’ll be more effective.” There are a few principles that they learned themselves because they’ve had good instruction that they can then apply to their students, but to depend on that is not a very good plan for success and that’s why there’s training. It’s not as if every writing center director in this country is a star and knows what they’re doing. I’ve been at regional meetings and there are people there who are running writing centers who really don’t have much background in it. It’s still the case that there are places where it’s a faculty writing center director; the institution will choose a faculty member from some other discipline, some random discipline. It’s that person’s turn go run the writing center, and they usually think “I don’t know what I’m doing,” so they’ll turn to colleagues at other places and say “what should I do?” Is there now a Latin American writing centers association where people can have colleagues and resources?

VM: Yes, we are working on that. We have one network. I am the director of this network, and we have had two conferences; the first one was in 2013 and the second was last year in Colombia. There are people from Mexico, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Colombia, Ecuador, Venezuela, Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay. We are trying to develop an academic community. I’m trying to help to understand if we are different than U.S. writing centers. If we are different, what are our differences? What is our identity?

NL: I would wonder about that because the way I think about writing centers in this country is they have a kind of reflection of their institution. There are a lot of differences because of that; not all universities are the same but there are patterns. I would wonder if the differences between the other writing centers that you’re looking at in Latin America and what’s going on the U.S. are a function of higher education, what students are being prepared or educated for, who’s being educated, how open access is it, what kind of careers are people being prepared for, or what particular kinds of professional skills or larger kind of general education, things like civics training and be a good citizen and all the rest. I would wonder how the institutional purposes and the purposes of helping

students learn to write—how those are feeding each other, or not. That could be an interesting tension, too.

VM: The main difference is that in Latin America a private college is really different from a public college. In some private colleges they are preparing people who are going to govern. In those cases they care about what the students are doing with writing, and it is so different than in other colleges, even private colleges. In Colombia, at least, there are private colleges preparing students to work in entrepreneurship, to create new business. Some others are preparing students to work in an industry and there are tensions about humanities in higher education. There are different conceptions about why our students—or we—need writing. In public universities this sense is more critical in that they are preparing for citizenship; it is a broader conception, and in those courses you can see differences. The way that they traditionally are doing it is in regular courses in the first semester and in those courses in public universities they work, for example, writing at the beginning biographies or self biography, with the idea of writing to understand themselves and being able to explain their writing to others. Another example: in my private college we work at the beginning with academic writing, the kind of writing that they need to survive in college. There are different points of view depending on the institution.

NL: That’s an interesting way to think about it; the different types of institutions creating different kinds of needs, and then administratively creating different kinds of writing centers as a result.

VM: In your experience, Dr. Lerner, or in what you heard when the writing centers were starting, what were the main obstacles that they had to face?

NL: A lot of the early writing centers in this country started as classes, so students would sign up for a class called writing laboratory, so it was part of their regular schedule. And that make sense, it fits in with how we’re thinking of students and they take classes: “ok here’s another class; you’re going to take this one, is going to be called writing laboratory. Well, it’s going to be different than other classes; in that when you’re there during this set time period you’ll be conferencing with someone, you will be getting one to one writing feedback with someone”. In those writing laboratories usually work was assigned, it was relatively unusual in these early ones that students would bring work from other classes, which is how we think of writing centers today. So they come to the writing center and they had a curriculum, they’d say “okay, go write this and then, come talk to me and I’ll give you feedback”, and there were like 40 students in a room doing this. I think that model wasn’t sustainable partially because, I would guess two things: one is it was under the assumption that there’s a sort of generalized writing skills, so a student could do

wonderful things in the confines of that writing laboratory, but then they have to write something in one of their classes; that's completely different. And they're struggling; we see that all the time. So, suddenly it's like "Why can't they, why didn't they learn to write in the writing laboratory?" I think that model might not have been particularly effective for that reason and they were always understaffed; it was like one person with 40 students at a time. I studied the writing laboratory of University of Minnesota; that was in this model and started in 1932 and I did some archival work there. And there is a whole series of letters, or writing memos from the writing center director to the head of the program complaining about his workload constantly: "Oh God, I need help." I think this wasn't sustainable in that kind of model, so in some ways that's why it's changed. The idea of a peer staffed writing center is relatively late in this country, isn't until the 1960's when peer tutoring really took off. Once that happened, and then the labor issues were worked out, because suddenly there's a lot of cheap labor.

VM: *Do you think that this improved the writing center services, when they started with peer tutoring?*

NL: I do. I think there's so much value in peer-to-peer collaboration that only happens in peer-to-peer collaboration. That's not simply about writing, that's about institutional and cultural knowledge and all kinds of other things. That's really valuable; that's not going to happen otherwise. I think that really was a key moment in writing centers in this country. So, how common is that in the Latin American writing centers?

VM: *Most of the writing centers work with peer tutoring. I just know one writing center working with faculty as tutors, but the rest of them are using peer tutoring. What are the main obstacles with writing centers in order to pay attention to that, and learn about the other's experiences?*

NL: One of the things that I've read about, looking at historically, are issues around space, an adequate or constant space.

VM: *Is this the main obstacle right now for our writing centers?*

NL: It's amazing. There are others, but it's hard to understand in a way. If you think, "Great, we need students to eat, so let's build a cafeteria"; "We need a library, so let's build a library"—why not build a writing center? Why does it not occur to people to do that?

VM: *Maybe for these reasons some of those writing centers are moving to learning centers—because of the space, because they need other conditions to work in. Let's talk about IWCA, which was at the beginning NWCA. What were the main*

changes that happened in writing centers when they created this association? How this association improved support? Were there any changes when IWCA or NWCA started?

NL: I wasn't there at the start; I'm not that old. Joyce Kinkead wrote an article, so I think that in the same way that your network is playing a role, IWCA played a similar role.² It gave people who are doing some kind of writing center-related work opportunities to have conversations to learn from each other. This is the thing that has always been hard for me to know, and I've been part of the IWCA, first NWCA. I was treasurer twice, so I have felt a commitment to the professional organization. It's always hard to know if it matters to anyone outside of the people who are members, so in other words, does my institution care about that professional organization? And I never know the answer to that. One example of that is there has been a conversation, over many years now, about whether the IWCA should add some sort of certification process that a writing center can apply to be certified by the professional organization. One of the arguments for that has been that it will give some credibility with deans or provost or whatever, and I'm truthfully skeptical. I know lots of deans, provosts, and chairs, and I'm not sure if they're going to be impressed by such things. I don't think it hurts, but it's a lot of pieces to put in place for that particular function. It's not the same way that some professional organizations for other fields play certain kinds of roles, where they certify professionals and you can't practice unless you are certified, such as doctors and lawyers or teachers. I think the professionalization has done lots of good things and continues to do lots of good things, and can drive conversations in certain ways. I think lots of the current movements around research are driven in many ways by the professional organization and the journals, which are part of the professional organization, but I'm still trying to figure out what all of the benefits potentially are and how best to take advantage of them.

VM: *How does a writing center benefit from becoming part of IWCA? Are there any benefits to staying separate? I think that when you become part of one of these organizations you can be part of the conversation, and also you can interact in the conferences and learn a lot from those.*

NL: I agree. One thing that you said made me think of it. When I was treasurer I used to get this question all the time. IWCA has members, individuals, writing center directors or tutors, but I used to get asked: can my writing center itself be a member? And it's not really set up for that; it has to be talking to a person so how the writing center itself might benefit, I think it's a really interesting question. I don't think it's

really set up to do that; it's set up to respond to what individuals needs are rather than kind of collective needs. I don't know what it would look like, if for the centers as a whole, but it would be interesting to think about what that might look like, but I certainly agree, the conference, running a conference has been the best thing that IWCA has done.

VM: *Something that I'm asking in this moment is about the ethos of writing centers, because there had been some discussions with my colleagues about whether we are servers or scholars. In some cases we are known in our college because we offer workshops to serve other classes and do all the administrative work as directors, but our academic work, as faculty members, is not as well known. What can we do about this perception that we are a service unit rather than academics?*

NL: That's definitely been the tension forever in U.S. writing centers, and since I can't resolve it, I don't have an easy answer. As you mentioned about doing workshops, almost always when I do workshops I try to include some content that comes from research about how students learn to write or from what we know or even if it's my own research; and that's my attempt to say, "Well, there's an intellectual foundation for what we're talking about here." So, what I want to do is, I don't know how effective that is, but it's my attempt to kind of bring those two worlds together, which sometimes do seem really separated.

VM: *What do you think is the role of research in a writing center?*

NL: I think you'll agree that the function of doing research in some sense is to create new knowledge about what we are curious about, what we need to know. It gives us certain kinds of institutional standing. Sometimes we have to do it to get tenure and promotion, but it also informs practices. I think that writing center research is especially important because of the ways we need to understand what it is we're doing. Do we know why the model of one-to-one tutoring is most effective or why peer tutors? The whole use of peer tutors really started with a much more theoretical foundation, and that led to practice. The theory really drove the practice, I think in that case, with Ken Bruffee's work. I think they're inseparable, but I do agree that sometimes it seems like we're living in two different worlds, whether a research world and then a kind of service world. I know some people feel terrible about being in a position of having to be a service unit and that service equals servitude. I've never quite felt that way; I don't know why that is because it is a service, in a sense. I think of it like community service. So, it's about the connotation of

the word, and I believe deeply in community service, so if that is what we're doing, what's wrong with that?

VM: *I think this depends on the writing center director.*

NL: Yes, and I definitely understand that in the three-part teaching, service, and scholarship, that faculty are responsible for, service is the lowest status in every institution I've been part of. And my job as an administrator is part of service, and it immediately carries the lowest status as a result, and it takes the most amount of my time, too. I'm being naive about my reclamation of it because I understand what the argument is.

VM: *I think this is why it's so important for writing center directors to have some kind of background in administrative skills, because you are administering a program, a center, and you are working with people who you are in charge of, and you have to manage budgets. Sometimes you have a lot of things that as a faculty member you don't know how to deal with.*

NL: That's true. I would add that is not just administrative skills, but leadership skills. Leadership because writing center directors have opportunities to be leaders at their institutions, in ways that are around the teaching of writing, but it can be others. Usually there are many writing center directors who go on to become deans and provosts in upper administration, because they have those skills and they were successful in the writing center because of those skills. There're a lot of administrative roles, so I think it's important to cultivate those kinds of leadership roles, and I don't mean to leave the writing center, but leading through the writing center.

VM: *In this sense, Dr. Lerner, what do you think would be the most desirable preparation to become a writing center director? In an ideal world, what would be desirable?*

NL: I think a kind of apprenticeship or mentoring program is really important. So, for instance, at my institution the writing center director has an assistant director for a year. The assistant director is a graduate student in our English Ph.D. program who plays that role, and it turns over every year. So lots of people will get that opportunity and that person gets great training as a writing center director, because he or she is dealing with lots of the day-to-day things. That's one way, but even when I was a graduate student and tutoring in a writing center that was not part of the English department, I was able to be on the search committee to hire new tutors, so those aspects that are apart from one-to-one tutoring, those aspects of administration, getting experience and practice and doing those under some guidance, I think they're really essential. Some places are creating courses and that's great if that

works, if there's enough interest. The ability to get on-the-job experience without being thrust into the role, I think it's really important. If someone is taking classes that are about writing program administration, I would hope those classes would include something specific to the writing center and not about writing programs generally, because there definitely are specific needs within writing centers.

Notes

1. See The National Census of Writing, <http://writingcensus.swarthmore.edu>.
2. The article in question is J.A. Kinkead's "The National Writing Centers Association as Mooring: A personal History of the First Decade." from *The Writing Center Journal* vol. 16, no. 2, pp. 131-143.