

JUST WRITING CENTER WORK IN THE DIGITAL AGE: DE FACTO MULTILITERACY CENTERS IN DIALOGUE WITH QUESTIONS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

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Introduction

Multiliteracy, new media writing, and multimodality: in some form or another, the kind of sleek, technological world these terms conjure emerges as a subject of conversation in current writing center work. When I began teaching a writing center theory course at the University of Michigan's Sweetland Center for Writing, I scheduled about three-days worth of formal space for the stuff of multiliteracy. Among other essays, students read David Sheridan's "Words, Images, Sounds: Writing Centers as Multiliteracy Centers," a piece about how Sheridan helped start a "technology-rich" multiliteracy center staffed by tech- and multimodal-rhetoric-savvy consultants at the University of Michigan ("Words, Images, Sounds" 341). I was met with what I soon learned was a typical response to the essay: "So, where is it? Where's the multiliteracy center?" "Gone," was my answer, and in an official sense, it was: it dissipated after only a few years,¹ and, what remains, among other Sweetland services, is the Peer Tutoring Center, an apparently far cry from the futuristic spaces that visions like Sheridan's evoke. With computers too old and too few in number, our windowless, underground tutoring space looks like days of writing center past, not writing center future. And despite an understanding of our own institutional privilege, our collective affect resembles that of colleagues at less privileged institutions: many of us still feel like we are a long way off from the kind of cutting-edge multiliteracy center that Sheridan describes.

This article examines the dissonance between scholarship on multiliteracy centers and everyday personal and writing center experiences with multiliteracy. I begin by considering extant writing center scholarship on new media, multimodality, and multiliteracy by scholars who position multiliteracy as a rare thing, or as a thing on the horizon, something for which we ideally prepare by providing "instruction in functional technology literacy" and obtaining "appropriate hardware and software" (McKinney, "(R)evolution" 211). I argue that consultants and writers alike may not necessarily be what Marc Prensky terms "digital natives," aware of *all* technologies and

rhetorical approaches that multimodal compositions employ, but rather that they exist in dynamic interplay with the digital media that define our interconnected times, and therefore that they render multiliteracy as always already present in the twenty-first century (1). In accord with my effort to broaden the field's conception of what constitutes a multiliteracy center, I work to expand the conversation about multiliteracy,² putting de facto multiliteracy, meaning multiliteracy as it exists in everyday reality and by default, into dialogue with social justice, or "justice at the level of a society or state as regards the possession of wealth, commodities, opportunities, and privileges" ("social justice"). I discuss accessibility and identity politics among other social justice issues in relation with two practices in Sweetland's Peer Tutoring Center: tutors recording their tutorials for the purpose of observation as well as tutors using a Facebook group for professional conversation. Ultimately, I propose that theorizing the interface between privilege and extant multiliteracies enables writing center practitioners to organize in order to counter everyday oppression via digital environments. It enables them to engage in the ongoing process of setting new terms for contemporary writing center visions and missions, and it enables them to rethink and revise mission statements to represent our field's ever-evolving nature.

Back to the Future

In 1996, the New London Group introduced the idea of multiliteracy as literacy that transcends "traditional language-based approaches" because of "the burgeoning variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies" (60, 61). Since then, scholarship about multiliteracy centers has portrayed multiliteracy as futuristic. As Jackie Grutsch McKinney explains, different "multiliteracy center models" exist, and, based on the assumption that the future has not yet arrived, she argues that "a writing center can evolve its identity by pursuing four paths: (1) staff (re)education, (2) physical redesign, (3) user (re)education or rebranding, and (4) name change" ("(R)evolution" 218, Balester et al.). Consider, too, for

instance, Sheridan's more explicit reference to the futuristic stuff of science fiction: his explanation that "[a] full articulation of a multiliteracy center necessitates a bit of utopian thinking—thinking unfettered by limits imposed by scarcity of resources and various institutional practices" ("Introduction" 6). As a third example, Christina Murphy and Lory Hawkes explicitly view multiliteracy centers as futuristic: for them, "the future of the Writing Center is not as a Writing Center but as a multiliteracy center with expanded pedagogical possibilities and new roles for Writing Center specialists" (175).

I find these visions of writing centers as existing at a disciplinary turning point and at a moment of radical break compelling, but I, too, find them at least somewhat misleading. I present a counter-narrative that recognizes multiliteracy centers as a de facto reality that already exists—even if writing center administrators avoid developing or organizing around existing multiliteracies that consultants have.³ Subtle and perhaps messy de facto multiliteracy center realities may still resemble the apparently non-digital writing center realities that Michael Pemberton described over a decade ago. Pemberton expressed resistance to developing his center as a multiliterate one because "most of the interactions between students and tutors still center on the handwritten or printed texts that are placed on a table between or, perhaps, shared in a word processing file" (9). Ten years later, I see Pemberton's point. Yet, at least in the Peer Tutoring Center I direct, multiliteracy exposes itself in constant ways despite the fact that we still see most essays on paper.

Even when, in 2011, only four outdated computers rested their worn and weary frames in our flagship center, digital connectivity among us thrived. Inhabitants lived and continue to live digital lives in visible ways. Walk into our center and you'll see the old couch, the fake plant, and the framed art that Mickinney sees as shaping the master narrative of writing centers (*Peripheral Visions* 21). But you'll see, too, evidence of a narrative already transformed: clients write text messages to friends or interpret visual arguments on Reddit as they wait for consultations; tutors armed with personal laptops, their browsers open to Facebook or Google News, connect us to the ever-interconnected world beyond the confines of our physical space. News of tragedies like the Sandy Hook shootings or the Boston Marathon bombings spreads like wildfire because regardless of the multimodal training writing center administrators provide or investments they make in technology and design, we live in an interconnected age—one that Peter Elbow calls "a newish world of writing where lots of people

are busy all hours of the day and night emailing, tweeting, and blogging on the internet" (3). We may not have had a single computer available exclusively for use in face-to-face tutorials in 2011, but our consultants and clients, products of the digital world, brought multiliteracy with them. Consultants know discourse and genre conventions for digital, multimodal, and traditional academic compositions, and these conventions exist in heteroglossic dialogue for them in their everyday lives and writing-centered conversations. Put another way, they exist as products of the digital age, and even in the absence of digital technology, they sustain ways of thinking and being that speak to a pervasive multiliterate reality. As Laura J. Gurak and Smiljana Antonijevic observe, "[w]e have now reached a time when the phrase 'digital rhetoric' is redundant" because all rhetoric is now, in essence, digital rhetoric.

Deconstructing multiliteracy as futuristic allows writing center practitioners to consider the ways in which multiliteracy plays into ongoing disciplinary conversations involving social justice. Anne Ellen Geller et al. (2007), Harry C. Denny (2010), Laura Greenfield and Karen Rowan (2011), and Frankie Condon (2012) have written on anti-racism and anti-oppression in writing centers, but aside from John Trimbur's gesture toward the connection in "Multiliteracies, Social Futures, and Writing Centers,"⁴ James Inman's consideration of multiliteracy centers and disabled students,⁵ and Allison Hitt's consideration of the same subject,⁶ scholars have yet to connect social justice with multiliteracy. In the field of rhetoric and composition, more broadly construed, Kristen Hawley Turner and Troy Hicks speak to social justice's connection to multiliteracy, arguing that "teaching digital writing is an issue of community literacy—one with local and global consequences" (57). As they explain, "[s]tudents—and teachers—can only engage in commentary, critique, and other forms of civic participation if they are afforded the full range of occasions to do so, and digital writing provides one such opportunity" (75). Similarly, Linda Adler-Kassner describes the relationship between rhetoric and composition and social justice in *The Activist WPA: Changing Stories About Writing and Writers* (2008). According to Adler-Kassner, community organizers rely on digital media to create social change, and Writing Program Administrators seeking to shift disciplinary narratives might benefit from "strategies developed by community organizers and media strategists" (5). If writing centers are to engage in the work of anti-racism and anti-oppression, becoming what Denny calls "sites for activism and social change," and if the writers who inhabit them are to be

empowered with digital literacies like those described by Turner and Hicks, then writing center practitioners must put social justice and multiliteracy into dialogue. They must discover approaches to connecting their activist, digital, and writing center identities.

Organizing Around Extant Multiliteracies

What sorts of writers and consultants inhabit our centers? What privilege do these inhabitants have? How do they engage with digital environments in their everyday lives, and how, in turn, do or might they engage with multiliteracy in everyday writing center practice? These questions get me thinking about the connective tissue between social identity, multiliteracy, and social justice—between ideals for multiliteracy and the realities of the everyday *de facto* multiliteracy center that forms because of its inhabitants and evolves in dynamic interplay with them. Perhaps writing center administrators opt, to varying degrees, to brush aside digital literacies that manifest informally in their centers. Perhaps the tick-tock of Geller et al.'s clock renders them short on time for multiliteracy.⁷ But practical and pedagogical benefits exist in acknowledging these literacies and talking about the thorny nature of our interface with digital environments. *De facto* multiliteracy centers already exist, and writing center practitioners can organize around extant multiliteracies in the sense that Adler-Kassner and social movement theorists conceptualize organizing: they can engage in dialogic work that draws people together to shape initiatives for their collective interests. Writing center practitioners can thereby develop around extant multiliteracies and put them into conversation with writing center practice in organic, grassroots ways.

Writing center administrators encounter multiliteracy in their everyday work. Perhaps *de facto* multiliteracy gets unearthed via overt administrative efforts—attempts that ideally resist utopian idealism, involve consultants as grassroots organizers, and recognize developments in university resources. At other times, *de facto* multiliteracy manifests itself at unexpected moments, unprompted by substantial administrative initiatives: consultants already engage with digital media, and their engagement bleeds into writing centers in ways that administrators can recognize and theorize about. At best, recognizing extant multiliteracies leads to productive pedagogical ends. At worst or at least, it reveals problems that need further interrogation. To illustrate how multiliteracy comes into conversation with questions of social justice, I tell two stories from Sweetland's Peer Tutoring Center. First, I tell the story of the

implementation of a digital-technology-based system of observation for purposes of professional development. Second, I tell the story of our center's practitioners' use of Facebook to extend a thorny staff-meeting discussion.

1. Observing Digital Developments

Unlike centers in which administrators and faculty attend face-to-face writing center conferences to observe tutors, our center now conducts observations for professional development using digital audio-visual recorders. My own limitations on time prompted my approach to these observations. As a contingent faculty member who does administrative work predominantly as departmental service, I needed to limit my physical, on-campus presence to quasi-normal business hours—a difficult task given that some tutors only have late-night shifts due to work, school, and family obligations. The instructions for creating recordings that I developed invited students to borrow, for free, equipment available to them on campus: a small, handheld audio-visual digital recorder and a laptop on which to show me the recording during an hour-long meeting. They would be responsible, too, for writing a reflection on the consultation—one in which they narrate the tutorial, explain what they think they do well, and identify room for improvement.

In implementing this observation system, I worried about accessibility: I wanted to avoid Othering tutors who lacked their own laptops or other necessary devices, but I also wanted to use resources I knew our institution had, and I came to see that the tutors themselves were resources I had overlooked as I planned for multiliteracy in the confines of my solitary office. Tutors certainly turned to the approach for recording that I outlined, but they, too, readily developed resourceful approaches to creating these audio-video recordings. They recorded and exhibited tutorials using laptops alone, theirs or borrowed, and, to my surprise, personal cell phones, even older models, sufficed for the task—as long as they had video recording devices. Tutors, too, organized other tutors into using easier strategies that they developed. In the second semester I employed this method of observation, I continued to hand out the instructions I developed for tutors, but rather than turn to my instructions, they more readily watched one another's approaches to recording and emulated one another's methods. As a result, I came to revise my instructions for creating recordings based on my observations of what tutors actually did and continue to do. I learned that I am certainly not out of touch with digital developments, but tutors are best positioned to teach me what is most convenient for them, and our digital-

age developments best come from them instead of from me.

Although my reasons for instituting digital observations were pragmatic, I came to see pedagogical benefits to them—despite the fact that many tutors expressed anxiety about watching and listening to themselves on screen. Because I watch tutorials alongside tutors, they, like me, have the opportunity to engage critically with observations of their consultations with writers of different races, ethnicities, classes, genders, and nationalities. They see body language and they re-experience tutorials in ways they would otherwise be unable to re-experience them. In particular, because we serve such a large number of multilingual writers, I see tutors engage with issues involving approaches to serving multilingual writers in their reflections and our conversations. They may sense what Denny terms as a “rush to monolingualist hegemony;” they may see, laid bare before them, “the identity politics at play when sessions address the needs of L2 consultants and students (126, 122). As one monolingual tutor expressed in her reflection on her session with a multilingual writer,⁸

Watching the tutorial, I [...] realized that she asked me quite a few closed-ended questions, like “Is this point made too far down the page?” and “Is it ok to talk about this in my conclusion?” I missed my opportunity to deflect these questions and redirect them towards her, in the form of, “Why do you say that?”, so she could learn to solve these issues herself. Instead, I gave her yes and no answers, which made me seem like an all-knowing teacher and probably did not make her feel any more confident as a writer. [...] I didn’t feel it at the time, but looking at the video of the tutorial, I seemed overbearing at times.

The degree to which tutors engage with social identity issues varies, of course, and some tutors struggle more than others with acknowledging identity politics in one-to-one consultations. However, when “championing the student’s right to her own language” can be “just as problematic as policing language acquisition,” opportunities for reflection are key (Denny 118). In a newer incarnation of the written portion of this assignment, I have added a specific request for reflection on the interplay of social identity in the tutorial to more pointedly invite tutors to engage with it.

2. *Social Networks and Social Identity*

The second story I tell—of our center’s practitioners’ engagement with one another via a social network—resembles my first: it shows means by which tutors and questions of social justice shape our center, and it likewise shows practical approaches to

sustaining conversations about social issues via digital media. When we started a Facebook group at our center, becoming among the eighteen percent of centers on Facebook, we did so primarily because a majority of peer tutors already inhabited Facebook and used it to develop connections and conversations about their work (McKinney, *Peripheral Visions* 78). In other words, the Facebook group was an organic development, and it remains one that grows organically as tutors organize themselves into membership. As of yet, the space has been a respectful one, yet I recognize that every social network and online forum is volatile—never wholly safe from bullying and the language of oppression. On our heretofore respectful site, tutors advertise that they have housing available or they post links to articles they read that might be of interest to their peers. They also use the space to introduce questions that I consider taking up in staff meetings, and they extend conversations from staff meetings via the space. In other words, even though the space arose via relatively informal means and even though informal conversations happen in it, the space exists as a pedagogical one—one from which writing center tutors and administrators alike can learn.

Of particular interest to me is the use of our Facebook group for continuing a thorny conversation that began in a staff meeting. The conversation involved dress in the writing center—dress that reveals not only our physical bodies, but features of our social identities like political perspectives. The tutors who started the conversation had brought in photographs of different kinds of dress, for instance a woman in a short skirt and another woman wearing a “Legalize Gay” t-shirt—a shirt that itself engages directly in ongoing national debates about gay marriage. Questions emerged around the images: If a female tutor wears attire that sexualizes her body, is she or the individual objectifying her via a sexual gaze responsible for what some may conceive of as less-than-wholly-professional conditions in the writing center? Does the “Legalize Gay” message professing support for gay marriage politicize the writing center in what some inhabitants might view as uncomfortable ways? Should we engage in “covering” our identities as dress represents them, and to what degree is covering social identity possible, especially in face-to-face as opposed to digital environments (Denny 18)? As an activist academic who sees all spaces as inherently political,⁹ I have my own answers to questions like these, my own sense of the relevance of public controversies to writing center practice. Moreover, I see it as my obligation to invite students to consider the significance of these questions through pedagogy

that helps them “become aware of both the practices of domination (assimilating to the mainstream currents) and the possibilities for opposition and resistance” (Denny 72). For tutors to perhaps embrace activist-academic identities themselves, they must work through questions via conversations with one another. Our staff meeting provided much-needed space for conversation, but its official end-point arrived with debates rearing on. We scratched at the surface of questions, but few tutors felt satisfied. As a result, tutors decided they would continue talking via our Facebook group.

Like the face-to-face conversation, the digital one developed in thought-provoking ways, and posts obtained views from nearly every peer tutor affiliated with the group. The public controversy to which the “Legalize Gay” t-shirt speaks, too, became a pointedly local one when one tutor posted to ask whether anyone had said something about the “Legalize Gay” shirt to another tutor who happens to own and wear the shirt. The potential for an unruly thread on our site loomed large in my imagination, but tutors exhibited respect in their comments. In the end, though, the thread still sustained an underdeveloped feel to me; still, it seemed more conversation was necessary. For weeks following the initial posts to Facebook, talk of the clothing controversy continued among tutors during downtime on shifts, and via the interplay of face-to-face and digital conversation, all tutors—even those who had not attended the staff meeting where the conversation originally began—had the opportunity to engage with the issues at hand. Even if not all of them actually did, they at least had the opportunity to push past old assumptions—those involving gender, gay marriage, and the political nature of the writing center.

Conclusion: A Just and Multimodal Mission

Stories like those I tell of our center’s engagement with digitally-recorded observations and professional development via Facebook conversations begin the process of putting multiliteracy into dialogue with questions that drive social movements for change, and further exploration of the interface between digital media, privilege, and social identity will enable writing centers to continue the process of redefining their visions, their missions, and their influence for thoughtful and often digital twenty-first century work. Digital identities and digital writing inform academic identities and academic writing and vice versa. Likewise, digital concepts inform writing center practice, and questions of access, privilege, and

sustainability drive the informal or formal adoption of technology in a writing center. They drive the adoption of online scheduling platforms like WCOline or TutorTrac. They, too, surround the creation of and conversations about asynchronous and synchronous tutoring platforms: Who creates online tutoring platforms and what circumstances influence decisions they make? How can tutors themselves be agents of change who appropriate affordable and accessible technology via a grassroots approach? In what ways can writing center administrators avoid utopian thinking and opt instead for organic and sustainable relationships with digital literacies—grassroots efforts that recognize digital media and literacies as always already part of the fabric of writing center identity?

Because writing center identity exists in constant and dynamic interplay with writing center inhabitants, tutors who have a pulse on how defacto multiliteracy operates in their centers might be best positioned to engage in reshaping writing center mission statements. And they might do so as we at Sweetland’s Peer Tutoring Center are doing it: as a result of our experiences and with an eye for social justice and multiliteracy in content and in form. Ellen Schendel and William J. Macauley Jr. advise writing center administrators to “min[e] institutional statements” to develop their own missions that matter via assessment, but I advise writing center administrators to also consider their own mission statements as they relate to developments in writing center theory (61). If writing center missions make no mention of social identity, anti-oppression, or social justice, tutors might rework them to showcase the changed and continually changing nature of the twenty-first century writing center. Tutors, too, might make mention of contemporary writing center issues via multimodal means. For writing center mission statements to literally exhibit the multifaceted, digitally-literate, and socially-concerned work in which writing center inhabitants engage, blocks of alphabetic text may not suffice: they fail to exhibit the kinds of ideas that set the terms for contemporary writing center practice. With free and easy-to-use resources such as Prezi that might animate mission statements in new ways, viable alternatives to stagnant blocks of alphabetic text exist, and writing center inhabitants have an opportune moment to employ their multiliterate imaginations to reflect the means by which their identities constantly shape and will continue to reshape the writing center as a de facto multiliteracy center.

Notes

1. It opened in 2000 and closed in 2003.
2. This effort is one that McKinney supports. As she explains, her hope in writing “The New Media (R)evolution” is to keep the conversation of multiliteracy centers from narrowing to a set of practices [...]. To be sure, pioneers in multiliteracy centers have not wanted to limit the conversation of multiliteracies in particular ways—in fact, they are most invested in having the conversation expand. (208)
3. Economic privilege obviously influences access to technology, but based on 2010 census statistics, a majority of 18-34 year-old adults own cell phones and own or have access to computers and Internet: 95% own a cell phone, 57% own a desktop computer, and 70% own a laptop computer (Pew). Those 18-34 also have Internet access via different outlets according to statistics gathered in 2011: 34.70% have access at home, 32.63% have access at work, 61.89% have access at school or a library, 50.48% have access at another place, and 50.49% have it via their cell phone or other mobile device (GfK).
4. As Trimbur puts it, “[l]inked to the notion of multiliteracies is the challenge to develop more equitable social futures by redistributing the means of communication” (89).
5. As Inman explains, a vital “consideration should be the accessibility of any zoned space for individuals with disabilities. In this pursuit, the idea is not just to make spaces minimally accessible, but instead to consider how the disabled may be able to most fully participate in the uses for which the spaces were designed” (27).
- 6 See “Access for All: the Role of Dis/Ability in Multiliteracy Centers.” Hitt argues that “disability remains a troubling binary that creates an us/them framework, undermining the inclusive spirit of multiliteracy centers.”
7. Geller et al. argue that “our use of time and our conception of time can change and can be changed for the better” (32).
8. I have permission to quote this text from its author. I also have “not regulated” status from the IRB to include this quote.
9. As Patricia M. Malesh and Sharon McKenzie Stevens suggest, beliefs “that learning can and should be apolitical, free from partisanship, and that academic knowledge should be neutral—distanced from immediate social and political action” are unrealistic (14). Instead, they see “knowledge, and the ways we acquire it,” as “*always* interested and, as such, rhetorical” (14).

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