

## A PEDAGOGY OF CURATION FOR WRITING CENTERS

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### Abstract

While scholarship on the spatial rhetoric of writing centers (including Lunsford, Connolly, et al., and McKinney) has demonstrated the importance of evaluating how writing center spaces speak to us and our writers, the field of museum curation offers new insights for writing centers on how spaces and objects and visitors interact in critical, even pedagogical, ways. Contemporary curatorial scholarship has shifted the focus of curation from simple care for the artifacts to a care more broadly focused on a conversation among artifacts and people (including artists, subjects, visitors, and curators). Adopting a curatorial approach to writing center work, we interrogated how we and our writers interact with one another and with artifacts in the spaces we developed. This article delineates how a pedagogy of curation helped us analyze the complex interlocution among all the (living and material) constituents present in a writing center event, and our constellations of artifacts, spaces, and people. Assessing our retreat program through a curation pedagogy, we found a new understanding of how materials and spaces functioned, and how our and our writers' responses to them unconsciously shaped our practice.

“What do we mean by curation? From the viewpoint of someone without a formal background in museology, the term for me is bound up with the idea of care. . . . Central to this thought process must be the audience, whether museum visitor or researcher. Care of the objects, curation in its broadest sense, is entirely bound up with care for our users and a concern for the almost limitless purposes to which they may put the museum's collections.”

—Heather Lane, *Coming in from the Cold: Curation at the Polar Museum*

“The caring I am most interested in is of a different nature, and it is this that I believe is a curator's most substantial role. To curate is, for me, to understand what objects may tell us.”

—Claire Warrior, *What is a Curator?*

“Enabling visitors to make discoveries, to have that flashbulb moment where they see a connection they have never seen before, realize the significance of something they have not thought significant previously – that's the curator's job.”

—Robin Osborne, *Curation in a Cast Gallery*

Museum curators spend a great deal of time thinking about, caring for, and managing spaces. The statements above reflect contributions made by

museum curators to *The Art and Science of Curation*, a project facilitated through the University of Cambridge Museums and Botanic Gardens which seeks to reflect on the role of the curator in a changing museum studies landscape. At first glance, museum curation and writing center work may not seem to have much in common. Yet, when we read the reflections contained in *The Art and Science of Curation*, particularly the contributions by Heather Lane, Claire Warrior, and Robin Osborne, we were struck by the relationship all three describe between curator, space, artifacts, and audiences. Lane, Warrior, and Osborne highlight the role that a curator plays in using spaces and artifacts to help facilitate the emergence of an artist's vision and the meaningful opportunities for interaction between audiences and artifacts. Writing centers are also engaged in unavoidable, ongoing relationships with spaces and artifacts. We too seek to use and structure our spaces and artifacts to facilitate the interactions between ourselves and writers. Previous writing center scholarship has grappled with how we name our spaces and conceptualize our work. Much scholarship has also examined what we communicate through our vision of writing center space (Lunsford, Connolly, et al., and McKinney). Curation scholars, however, emphasize a slightly different perspective on space: one that considers space as a design-able canvas operating in an on-going association with artifacts and people. Curators, then, are designers of spaces, custodians of artifacts, and facilitators of people-artifact-space interactions designed to inspire thought and change. So, too, would we argue are writing center administrators. What then might we learn from curators? What would a pedagogy of curation look like for writing centers?

In *Curation as Graphic Design*, Leslie Tane articulates the role of the curator as an artist and designer, contending that the work of curation must go beyond care and basic exhibition construction to include visual, graphic design. Tane asserts that we must “acknowledg[e] the curator as the generator of design content and [view] the resultant exhibitions as neither traditional curatorial exhibit[s] nor art installation but something unique” (6). This conception of curation, which emphasizes the important role curators play in designing exhibits to communicate a vision, also offers a new way for those of us in writing centers to rethink

not only our roles concerning spaces and artifacts, but more importantly how we operate as designers of experiences that exist within spaces and utilize different artifacts. Curation, as Tane, Warrior, Lane, and Osborne make clear, begins with the need to care for objects and spaces in a way that facilitates a meaningful interaction with audiences. Similarly, writing centers seek to facilitate meaningful interactions with writers, interactions that are necessarily situated within physical or virtual spaces and entail the use of a variety of tools or artifacts.

This article will outline how we came to conceptualize a pedagogy of curation and then used it to create an analytical model we ultimately used to assess and redesign our writing retreat program. In our writing center, we have focused our pedagogy on the practices we enact in one-on-one conferences with writers. A pedagogy of curation, as we define it, invites us to expand our purview and explore how our practices are situated in space and place, how our physical environment shapes us as consultants and writers, and how the tools and objects around us interact with our teaching practices. In short, a curational pedagogy attends to the interactions between people, spaces, and objects as they engage in writing center work. Adopting a pedagogy of curation, then, means conceptualizing writing center work, whether conferences, programs, or workshops, as exhibits we curate through our construction and use of spaces and artifacts.

## **Writing Centers, Spaces, and Material Realities**

Considerations of the material realities and locations of writing are not new to either writing center scholarship or writing studies. Writing center scholars have examined and troubled the extent to which our theoretical and physical conceptions of space have defined how we understand our work and communicated an identity to students and colleagues. In “Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of the Writing Center,” Andrea Lunsford outlines a number of the prominent spatial metaphors at work in writing centers, including “writing center as storehouse,” “writing center as garrett,” and finally “Burkean Parlor Centers” (4,7). For Lunsford, our spatial understanding of a writing center is intrinsically connected to our theoretical approaches to working with writers. Other scholars, such as Angela Clarke-Oates and Lisa Cahill, Kristina Reardon, et al., and Colleen Connolly, et al., have expanded Lunsford’s work connecting space to writing center ideologies, practices, and even identities.

More particularly, in “Writing Centers are Cozy Homes,” Jackie Grutsch McKinney contends that spaces tell stories, explaining that “through their arrangements and objects, spaces communicate to us; we could even say that spaces tell us a story about what they are and how we may use them” (21). McKinney troubles the comfortable, “cozy home” metaphors writing centers have used uncritically and attempts to create spaces that students will read as home-like, pointing to the complex cultural lens through which individuals see spaces in very different ways. For McKinney, Lunsford, and Connolly, et al., in particular, spaces, and the arrangement of people and artifacts within them, fundamentally shape the way that we think about our purposes and work, and correspondingly shape the complex ways students understand and interact with us as well.

Writing studies scholarship has also investigated the relationship between writing and space, focusing on the complex, cultural, and highly individualistic ways writers understand and interact with their work through physical spaces and with material objects. Here, writing spaces are understood to include not only a physical location, and the arrangement of objects, tools, and bodies within that place, but also the cultural associations. Jacob W. Craig, Stacey Pigg, Paul Prior and Jody Shipka, and Angela R. Dobe and Ekant Veer all observe and assess the possibilities different writing environments afford to different writers. In “Affective Materialities: Places, Technologies, and Developments of Writing Processes,” Craig contemplates how writers’ material and spatial habits grow from past interactions to certain spaces and objects. He argues for writing scholars to build a better understanding of how material realities shape writers in different ways, asserting that there is “a history and an affective reality that writers engage with each time they begin a writing task.” For Craig, as well as Prior and Shipka, writing spaces and artifacts must be understood in correlation with one another, and with their collective and individual effect on the writer. Writers, then, navigate their practices and constructions of a writing identity through their selection, use, and understanding of writing environments and materials – in much the same way as writing centers must also enact practices through their conception of space.

Importantly, educational scholarship on learning spaces also investigates and theorizes the connection between learning environment design and teaching practices. While much of this work seeks to analyze how classroom arrangement and architecture influence student and teacher behavior (C. Brooks; Gierdowski; Head and Burnett; van Merriënboer, et al.), it also

explores the importance of educators' awareness of the limitations and possibilities afforded by physical space as they implement their pedagogies. In "Learning Spaces and Pedagogic Change: Envisioned, Enacted, Experienced," Dianne Mulcahy, et al. underscore the importance of distinguishing between a realist and a relationalist perspective on learning space design. Echoing the curators included at the beginning of this article, they explain:

in a relationalist way of thinking, learning spaces and the uses made of these spaces are created and sustained together. . . Design can never provide a direct fit between space and occupation, and this space is never simply occupied by people. . . The character of the learning space changes with changes in its practice (579).

For Mulcahy, et al. the theorization of learning spaces cannot rely on a simple or direct connection between spaces, objects, and behaviors. Rather, educators must grapple with how sites of learning emerge from the interactions between people, practices, and space.

## **A Curatorial Approach to Writing Center Work**

We argue that writing center practitioners, like those designing learning spaces, need to go beyond studying how we select environments or what our spaces say about us; we need to understand our practices and pedagogies as intrinsically enmeshed in spaces and artifacts. We must attend to what Jessica Enoch calls "space's rhetoricity," which recognizes the fact that "human actors create space not only through design and material composition but also through the rules and expectations for the space" (10). In *Domestic Occupations: Spatial Rhetorics and Women's Work*, Enoch explains, in addition to helping spaces "gain meaning," spatial rhetorics "suggest the purpose of the space; the actions, behaviors, and practices that should happen inside that space; and the people who should occupy it" (6). For Enoch, this critical interaction has "the power to divest spaces of their past identities and create new spatial meanings for the past and future" (6). People's responses to and interactions with and in a space, contribute to and reshape the rhetoric of that space. This definition of spatial rhetoric echoes both the definition of a relationalist perspective of learning space outlined by Mulcahy, et al., and the definition of the work of a curator outlined by Tane, Steve Bitgood and Don Peterson, and Lane. They all insist that a complex conceptualization of space demands that rhetors, curators, and educators go beyond considerations of objects and architecture as simple, static structures, and

instead consider deeply how people's culturally-charged behaviors and practices construct and re-construct that space.

As writing center practitioners and administrators, we wanted to engage in this kind of deep consideration of how our practices emerged from our own interactions with spaces and objects. To help us imagine what a spatial-rhetorical or relationalist approach to writing center work looked like, we turned to scholarship on curation. Contemporary curatorial scholarship, as Lane, Tane, and others outline, has shifted the focus of curation from care for the object (artifact) to care more focused on a mediated and educational conversation between artifacts and people (including artists, subjects, visitors, and curators). Osborne describes the role of the curator as a facilitator, claiming that "what the curator facilitates is the access of the public to the object on display. Or, to look at it from the other end, the curator's job is to maximize the impact of the object. Curators remove barriers." Warrior likewise asserts that "curators have become the facilitators of stories, incorporating new narratives into objects' histories, and entangling objects with people's lives in new ways." Inspired by the perspectives articulated by Warrior, Tane, Bitgood, and Patterson, we outlined a pedagogy of curation for our own writing center work. In doing so, we sought not only to understand the rhetoric of the spaces we inhabited, including their material conditions and cultural meanings, but also how we were, or were not, acting as critical designers and facilitators of a dialogue between students, ourselves, spaces, and artifacts. A pedagogy of curation, as we define it, prompts writing centers to unpack how our goals and practices operate within our physical environment, and how we and our writers relate to that environment and one another. Enacting this pedagogy consequently requires us first to engage in analyzing our goals and strategies, evaluating how we use spaces and artifacts within our practice, and, most importantly, examining how consultants and writers interact with and respond to the physical structures around them. From this deeper understanding of how space, objects, writers, and consultants are interacting, we can then better design, curate, and adapt our work.

How, specifically, might writing center practitioners begin executing a curatorial pedagogy based on the deep analysis and design of sites of writing center work as exhibits? Helpfully, both Tane and Bitgood and Patterson articulate a method for curators to analyze and construct exhibits. For Tane, this process entails an assessment of design plans in relation to the curator's goals and understanding of audience. She delineates that "the curator must ask: How are these objects

connected? . . . Is a story being told with the objects? Who is the audience?” (12). Accounting for the spatial rhetoric of museum exhibits, Bitgood and Patterson likewise “describe the principles of visitor behavior that relate to three other principles of exhibit design: (1) the characteristics of the exhibit object or animal; (2) the characteristics of exhibit architecture; and (3) the characteristics of the visitors” (4). They provide an empirical background for visitors’ interactions with museum spaces, advising how physical elements such as size, motion, and positioning effects visitor behavior (4-5).

Building off these exhibit design principles, we created an analytical model to accomplish the first goal of our pedagogy of curation: analyzing the programs and practices of our writing center. We chose to think about writing center programs or activities (such as individual appointments, classroom workshops, or writing retreats) as exhibits. Conceptualizing a program or practice as an exhibit encouraged us to articulate and scrutinize that practice’s goals and strategies as they were situated in a physical location, among artifacts and people. As with a museum or gallery, writing centers often construct multiple programs, events, and practices within a single space. We wanted to construct an analytical model, then, that would guide us in considering each program or event as an individual exhibit to help us more deeply probe the constructions and interactions of space, people, and artifacts within a limited frame.

Inspired by Bitgood and Patterson, we divided our model into three principles (goals and practices, relations among artifacts, spaces, and people, and curatorial design) and outlined a series of questions to help guide our analysis and subsequent design.

### *Analytical Model for a Curation Pedagogy*

#### 1. Goals and Practices

- What do we want to communicate to writers?
- How do we want writers to interact with us, one another, the space, and materials?
- What do we want writers to experience within this program or practice?
- What do we know about our writers?

#### 2. Relations Among Artifacts, Spaces, and People

- What artifacts are present?
- What is the structure and basic functionality of the physical space?
- What different meanings and possibilities might the physical space be communicating?
- How are consultants and writers interpreting the space and artifacts?

How is the physical environment facilitating people’s behavior?

How are we interacting with it?

How are we (re)defining the environment through our practice?

#### 3. Curatorial Design

How can our practices intentionally engage the physical environment and artifacts?

How can we present and organize artifacts to communicate our goals, and enable the experience or interaction we want for students?

How can we best utilize our artifact(s)?

Are we constructing and interpreting artifacts and spaces in the best way for our audience?

In the discussion that follows, we outline how we first sought to enact a pedagogy of curation by using this model to re-examine and reconstruct one of our most popular writing center programs: weekend writing retreats. To facilitate this analysis and inform our subsequent revision of the retreat program, we received approval from our institution’s human subjects research committee for a formal examination of our retreat site and writers’ experiences in the retreat program. Specifically, we surveyed retreat participants about their reasons for attending the retreat and experience as writers in the retreat space. Full survey questions are listed in the appendix. During retreat time, we also documented writers’ and consultants’ locations within and movements around the physical environment. We connected this data with a detailed recording of the layout and structure of the retreat space.

Investigating this program from the perspective of a pedagogy of curation helped us realize that we were allowing our unconscious arrangement of space and artifacts to speak for us in ways that did not always align with the purposes we intended or the messages we wanted to send. In particular, when we observed and analyzed the interaction of space, artifacts, and people within the retreat, we discovered the extent to which our program exhibit inspired conflicting practices, interactions, and messages due to a lack of intentional design-thinking on our part. Re-approaching our retreat program with a curatorial pedagogy allowed us to see opportunities to craft a more meaningful constellation of spaces and practices.

## **Curating a Writing Retreat**

### *Goals and Practices*

For the past seven years, our writing center has hosted writing retreats for undergraduate students completing their senior thesis project. These short,

three- to four-hour, Saturday retreats have been incredibly popular and remain a hallmark program for our center. Our writing center is part of a small, liberal arts college in which every senior is expected to complete an independent thesis, an original research project that spans both semesters of the student's senior year and is structured as an individual tutorial with a professor-mentor from each students' major department. Recognizing the needs of a population of students who are a facing a long-term, research and writing project for the first time in their academic career, we originally sought to create a program, distinct from our "traditional" one-on-one appointments in the center, that would provide productive space for students to engage in the writing process.

Writing center-facilitated retreats (or bootcamps or write-ins) have become increasingly popular programs for undergraduate students, graduate students, and even faculty groups, and exist in a variety of forms. Sohui Lee and Chris Golde distinguish between two different styles of writing retreats, labelling them as either "Just Write" programs or "Writing Process" programs in their article "Completing the Dissertation and Beyond: Writing Centers and Dissertation Boot Camps" (2). While "Writing Process" models include more structured writing support and workshops or one-on-one tutorials, "Just Write" events are less structured; these retreats "presume that students will write productively, if they are given space, food, and monitored time" (Lee and Golde, 2). The writing retreats facilitated by our center clearly adhere to the "Just Write" model: though we offer students the opportunity to notify a consultant if they want feedback, our retreats are set up as quiet workspaces with little to no structure. Students arrive with all the items they need to write, including not only laptops and books, but also headphones and other items that help them focus. We provide breakfast and consultants for "quick consults."

The primary goal of our writing retreats has been to create a dedicated space for writers to work productively and with minimal distraction. From our appointments with seniors in the writing center and our discussions with faculty in different departments, we know that many students struggle to create and maintain a sustainable and productive writing schedule. As students are working independently, many seek a supportive social network, but struggle to create or sustain a productive community of fellow writers. Our purpose in hosting writing retreats has been to enable students to work individually, but within a community of colleagues. Our vision, then, for student interactions during retreats was not one of collaboration, but of camaraderie. Likewise, while we want students to know

that writing help was available, we emphasize focused writing time, and productivity, as the primary goals of the event. We hope to convey to students the value of using small, consistent blocks of work time to make progress toward a larger goal. For us, the rationale for such a practice is obvious: we understand the importance of breaking a large project up into achievable tasks and understood as well that this strategy was a vital part of a successful writing process. When we initially created the retreat program, we also believed that the writing retreat practice would attract wider populations of students than those who already visited the writing center. We likewise assumed that by locating it outside the writing center itself, removing formal programming, and providing a meal, we would create a more comfortable environment. However, as we assessed the retreats through a lens of curation, we discovered that we were not, in fact, designing an exhibit for broader audiences, nor clearly communicating our beliefs and practices. We were, in fact, conveying other messages unintentionally.

#### *Artifacts, Spaces, and People*

We began our curatorial analysis of the retreat program by documenting and defining the artifacts at play in our "exhibit." From a curators' perspective, artifacts are the foundational element of exhibit design; the object of the "care" which Lane points out etymologically defines a curator's work, artifacts tell stories and convey meaning through their arrangement within the exhibit space (Craig, Warrior). It seemed fitting, then, to begin our assessment by first identifying the artifacts of writing retreats. We quickly realized that, for better or worse, we provide writers with no resources and few communications, and so do not curate many artifacts at all. We began, then, with the artifact which serves to introduce students to the writing retreat: the email invitation. In "Graduate School-Facilitated Peer Mentoring for Degree Completion: Dissertation-Writing Boot Camps," Jan Allen notes the importance of the email as the first interaction for students with the facilitator of the event, asserting that:

a skilled facilitator contributes to the development of the peer community . . . These messages set expectations, explain some of the logistics, and, for our events, prompt students to begin a productivity and reflection log (37).

Our email message clearly invites writers to a comfortable, social space. It is framed as an event invitation: "the Writing Center would like to invite you to join us." And, as Allen notes, conveys the type of community and environment we intend: "writing retreats are a great way to make progress on your project

in company with your fellow senior classmates.” However, while we do outline logistics and, in a short reminder email, describe a few expectations for what students should bring, we do not work toward “contribut[ing] to the development of the peer community” as Allen suggests (37). Given that one of our listed goals for the retreat program was to help students learn how to set achievable goals and how to build productive writing time, we realized, through this analysis, that we had not, perhaps, crafted the most effective artifact. Nor had we given much thought to other artifacts, practices, or spatial arrangements that would help us build the camaraderie or goal-setting skills we wanted to make a part of the retreat practice.

We turned, then, to assessing our retreat space, both in terms of what meanings it might be communicating to writers and how writers were interacting within that space. To aid this analysis, we took extensive pictures of the room we use for the retreats, as well as the hallways and building. We also spent time moving about the empty room: seating ourselves in the spaces usually occupied by students and taking note of different features of the room, some of which we had not noticed before. We documented all the objects in the room and their placement. Then, during one of our retreat times, we used a hand-drawn map of the room to record where students situated themselves, and where they moved during the retreat. We also manually documented how frequently, and when, students got up and moved about the room.

The first thing that we noticed, both in surveying the room and reviewing the pictures, was how our perspective of a space changed. Simply revisiting the space with an eye toward exhibit design had us reevaluating elements we thought of as conducive to writing. In the classroom, three of the walls are bare, and feature whiteboards that are generally left blank. The fourth wall is composed of glass and has two doors, one at either end. We establish the students in the traditional rowed seating and place ourselves at the front of the room. While this is convenient, it became clear that the positioning unintentionally reinforces the authority of the writing center staff who act as proctors for the event. Here we noticed, for the first time, we had created a space that was truly academic: a traditional classroom arrangement with writing center staff overseeing a large classroom of students. We were also struck by the size of the space and number of tables. We had originally chosen the room for just that reason: we wanted to accommodate as many students as possible – there are usually between thirty and fifty – and thought it would be easier to have everyone in one room. In surveying the room and images, however, we realized

that the space, and number of participants, might also be intimidating to students. Because of the space we had chosen and how we structured the event, this was not a cozy, intimate environment suited to relaxed writing. Without giving it any thought, we realized that we had selected and designed a formal space with expectations of quiet, productive work, even as we envisioned and advertised a more relaxed, communal event.

We further noticed what we dubbed the “panopticon effect,” as consultants are situated facing both the tables of students and the glass wall that looks out on the hallway where the bathrooms, water fountains, breakfast buffet, and building exit are located. Thus, when students leave the space for a break, all their actions are in full view of the consultants. As the consultants do not spend much of their time answering questions (we now question if this is due to the lack of artifacts or tools for students to cue a need for assistance), they spend much of the time sitting and watching the students. Studying the images of the room and the placement of consultants and students, we realized that our consultants were not functioning as the facilitators of a writing community such as Allen describes, and as we had intended, but rather acting as classroom proctors.

Evaluating our documentation of how frequently and when writers moved away from their writing space, either to seek help or to take a break, reinforced our observations of the space. Students did not approach the consultants often, and we could not identify artifacts (emails, notices on the board, or other tools) that we had supplied to encourage them to do so. While we believed that inclusion of a breakfast softened the formality and added to the social nature of the event, and we realized that nothing else about the structure of the space or our practices within it contributed to any communal feelings. Our observations suggested that the placement of the food outside the room primarily served to provide students with an opportunity for a break. Our observations of writers’ movements about the room revealed that they took breaks fairly often, suggesting to us that our writers might want or need the retreat time (three and a half hours) to be divided up into smaller portions with a communal break in the middle.

Ultimately, identifying and analyzing the interactions between the artifacts, space, and people in our retreat program led us to the conclusion that we have unintentionally, but not necessarily problematically, created an academic environment that provides a pressure to perform. Our choice of a classroom that has limited visual distractions and our consultants’ positioning (and behavior) in the room contribute to the creation of this formal space for

writing. Additionally, while the classroom is designed to be used collaboratively (the tables and chairs are easily movable and there are collaboration boards available), we offer no encouragement to utilize the furniture in this way. Analyzing the room in this way prompted us to wonder, what might happen if we did encourage writers to make use of the vast window and whiteboard writing space?

To answer this and other questions that arose throughout our analysis, we created a survey that was distributed to students who attended any of the writing retreats throughout the academic year. We wanted to learn about our students' experience at the retreats and their perception of the space. Twenty-one students responded to our survey, of which half had attended at least two retreats. Most had visited the writing center for an appointment that academic year. Though two students reported not being very productive, the rest indicated that they had been extremely productive (52.4%) or moderately productive (38.1%) during retreat time and that they strongly or somewhat agreed that they felt more focused during retreat time than when working on their own. Respondents were evenly split on whether they were extremely or somewhat satisfied with the layout of the room, location on campus, food, and tables. Lack of access to power outlets was a consistent complaint, however. Ninety percent reported feeling comfortable in the space; the two who did not cited wanting more space or seating options. We also suggested possible changes to the retreat set-up to elicit survey-takers opinions on whether a smaller retreat would be preferable, a different length of time, or the inclusion of more structure. Students were undecided on whether they would prefer to work with fewer people in the room (eleven said "maybe" and the rest were split between "yes" and "no"). However, they were quite clear in not wanting changes to the timing or structure of the retreats.

While our initial analysis offered considerable insight into what we thought we were conveying in our use of space and structuring of the retreat, learning the perceptions attendees added nuance to our understanding. We had believed that we were creating "alternate" writing center programming for a broader base of students than those who regularly visited the center. Through analyzing our curation of the program, however, we realized that we had set-up and inhabited the retreat space in a much more formal way than we originally believed. The survey and attendance records likewise revealed that, the same students who already felt comfortable visiting the writing center were signing up for the retreats. We were not reaching new audiences after all. Unsurprisingly, then, this population of

students reported, in the survey, that they were generally satisfied and comfortable with the program and space. None of this was bad news – but it was disconcerting to discover that our vision for the program and curatorial execution did not match.

### *Exhibit Design*

Though it was gratifying that the survey confirmed that we have generally succeeded in creating a productive, if formal, space for students to write, it is perhaps more important to note that we were not wholly aware of how the space we used was functioning, nor how our positioning and artifact practices were shaping the retreats. We realized, in short, that because we had not consciously and critically adopted a curation pedagogy (had not attended to the interaction between space, artifact, and people), we had persisted in envisioning and messaging a relaxed, consultant-supported writing "retreat," and yet had delivered a proctored study-hall. While the popularity of the writing retreats and the responses to the survey made clear the formality and even authority we had reinforced in our program construction was useful and productive for some students, we still wanted to design a program that would appeal to students who prefer more relaxed spaces, would like more community-building or structure.

Armed with what we learned in our analysis, then, our writing center staff redesigned our writing retreats using a pedagogy of curation. Our discussion of the goals we had for retreats, and what we wanted to convey to writers through them, now also incorporated a consideration of how the room we choose, our staging of that space, and the materials we might bring with us would reinforce those goals. Tane asserts that "curatorial design is communicating through object and artifact, telling a story, and engaging the viewer" (25). What, we asked ourselves, could we communicate and achieve through our arrangement of objects and artifacts within our retreat space? How could we "engage the viewer" in this exhibit?

Ultimately, we chose to take advantage of empty academic buildings on weekend mornings and constructed a retreat that used multiple rooms on the same floor. We placed our consultants in an open, communal reception area that includes food and writing resources. We divided students among small "break-out" classrooms where they could either work in silence or have conversations with partners, depending on the room they selected ("quiet work room" or "collaborative room"). Writers have the option to stop in the reception area at any time for help. Our decision to utilize multiple rooms was informed by the differing

opinions expressed in the survey and by our observation of students' movement in the previous retreats: some students were quite focused and moved only once for a break, while others frequently checked in with the person next to them or made multiple visits to the buffet where they might share a word or two with another participant. Our intention in designing a multi-room retreat was not only to allow participants to select the space that would best suit their needs, but also encourage writers themselves to participate in "creating and sustaining" the nature of that learning space through their practices in and use of it (Mulcahy, et al.). To that end, we too have changed our practices in hosting the retreats in that we begin by discussing with writers how we organized space for them, and how they might make use of (or re-appropriate) the spaces and resources at their disposal. We articulate our own goals as consultants and describe how we will behave in the space. We then prompt them to consider their needs and goals for the retreat; both their needs and goals for writing, and as writers in this place. Do they want to sit near friends, or away? Do they want a whiteboard nearby? Do they want a timer?

In short, our more careful consideration of our physical environment not only reshaped the way we design the retreat program, it has also prompted us to articulate for writers how our practices are enmeshed within the space we inhabit and the tools available to us and encourage them to do the same. Our work as curators of this program, however, is ongoing, as we seek to continue noticing how we and our writers are interacting within the retreat space, and to continue acting as facilitators of new artifacts and spatial constructions.

### **A Pedagogy of Curation for Writing Centers**

Writing centers need to keep analyzing and problematizing the relationship between space, perspective, and our student populations. More particularly, we need to develop an understanding for how writers navigate not only our spaces, but also the resources or artifacts we make available in those spaces. We need to step beyond thinking about the writing center space – or the spaces where we host events and workshops – as merely symbolic or metaphorical. We do need to be aware about what our spaces are saying, but we must also interrogate how we and our writers interact with one another and with artifacts in those spaces. We need, in short, a pedagogy of curation to help us analyze the complex interlocution among all the (living and material) constituents present in a writing center event, and design (or redesign) our constellations

of artifacts, spaces, and people to suit our purposes and the needs of clients. In doing so, writing centers might build on the work visible in learning space design and writing studies that seeks to understand the material realities of teachers and students, and writing and writers. And we might go further. We might develop an understanding of the material, spatial, and interactive components that make up productive collaborations between writers and consultants, and among writers in writing center spaces.

This is not to suggest, however, that a primary goal for a pedagogy of curation is to simply assess the physical spaces writing centers occupy and facilitate their redesign. Some of us are able to contribute to the design of our spaces, and some of us fight hard to keep a dimly lit corner with a predetermined aesthetic. No matter the physical space or our control over it, we believe it is still beneficial to measure and analyze our practices within those spaces using a pedagogy of curation. In their respective accounts of constructing innovative new writing center spaces, Karen J. Head and Rebecca E. Burnett, Justin A. Young, and Ben Lauren outline how their design decisions emerged from the intersection of institutional goals and limitations, writing center pedagogies, and examinations of student use of and response to learning spaces. In these accounts, writing center administrators had the opportunity to think deeply about the connection between space and pedagogy, and to subsequently reshape their physical environment with that pedagogy and their student audience in mind. These models for designing writing center space are valuable, especially for moments when writing center administrators can shape or re-shape their physical environments. A pedagogy of curation, however, as we hope we have shown, is not solely or even primarily concerned with the re-construction of a physical space, but rather a sustained attention to how our collective and individual practices work within that space. What a pedagogy of curation might offer us, then, are ways to re-think our practices, design, and use of space – even when we have limited or no control over changing that environment.

In defining and first using a pedagogy of curation, we did not seek to reconstruct an ideal physical space, nor to simply account for how our environment was influencing us and our students. Instead, we sought to better understand how our own program was operating within our chosen space, and to more critically redesign a retreat that communicated through its physical spaces and artifacts more consciously. Assessing and redesigning our retreat program through a curation pedagogy, we began by developing a new understanding of how materials and spaces functioned, and how our



responses and our writers' responses to them unconsciously shaped our practice. These observations prompted us, to examine how our goals aligned with and were communicated through our use of space, and to learn from students how they perceived the spaces how the structure of those spaces and our programming affected them. For our writing center, the result was both a change in where we located our retreats, but more particularly, we shifted the way we prompt students to use that space and began, to communicate with students about how our goals and suggested practices related to the physical surroundings.

However, adopting a pedagogy of curation need not entail a large-scale project; indeed, writing centers could begin adopting this approach through simple acts, such as observing and taking notes on the physical positioning of objects in center, role playing students in an appointment to understand their physical situation in the center, and noting or recording the movements and interactions of both consultants and writers. These methods of assessment are fundamental to a pedagogy of curation, and yet easy and free to implement. Additionally, many centers now have a form of exit survey that could include questions to help consultants and administrators begin to understand the kind of experience they are curating. Approaching one-on-one appointments with a curation pedagogy could begin with an analysis of how consultants and writers are interacting in their environment. What objects do the consultants and clients use, ignore, or visibly work around? How are the participants and objects or furniture positioned, and does that positioning support or influence the consultant's and writer's desired practices? Surveys might further tease out writers' responses to writing center spaces. For instance, if the consulting table is filled with center-supplied reference books, paper, and pens, and the consultant's own work materials, does the writer feel they are entering the domain of the consultant rather than joining a shared space? Understanding how we and our writers are adapting to and using the environment of the one-on-one appointments carves out the opportunity to reshape that exhibit and the way we practice in it. Consulting spaces would not need to be remodeled to enact significant change for writers. It is instead important to be intentional in using the space and conscious of how physical spaces and the objects around us are influencing our practices.

Despite its emphasis on the construction and design of space, much of the literature on learning space design finds that while certain classroom configurations can be more conducive to different types of teaching and learning, it is still the educators' behaviors that have the

greatest impact on students' experiences (Mulcahy et al., C. Brooks, Gierdowski). Likewise, a pedagogy of curation considers not only how spaces, artifacts, and objects can be designed and organized to best facilitate our programs and one-on-one appointments, but also how these elements and our practices work together to shape how writers experience our centers. In this way, a pedagogy of curation builds on and combines work we have already done in examining how our conception of writing center space speaks for us and even how our physical positioning in relation to a writer and their text may convey ownership or authority (J. Brooks). What a curatorial pedagogy adds to this work is not a call to radically re-construct our physical spaces, but rather to commit to an ongoing investigation of how what we and our writers do is situated within and emerges from our sites of practice.

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## Appendix

### Survey Questions

1. How many writing retreats did you attend this year?
2. Did you visit the Writing Center for an appointment this year?
3. What motivated you to sign up for the retreat or retreats? (Survey participants were instructed to check all that apply from a list of options.)
4. Overall, how would you rate your productivity during retreat time?
5. How satisfied were you with the following elements of the retreat set-up? (The food; the building's location on campus; the layout of the room; the tables and chairs; the availability of electric outlets.)
6. Was there anything you would change or would like to see added for future retreats?
7. Did you find this space a comfortable place to work?
8. Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements:
  - a. The structure of the retreat motivated me to get work done.
  - b. Seeing peers around me working helped me stay focused.
  - c. The presence of Writing Center staff helped me stay focused.
  - d. I was more focused during retreat time than I am when working on my own.
9. If it was available, would you prefer to work in a space with fewer students?
10. If it were possible, what days and times would you most like to see retreats offered?
11. How do you feel about the length of time of the retreat?
12. Would you have found it useful if writing retreats included a brief goal-setting discussion at the beginning?
13. Would you have liked to have seen the Writing Center staff provide more structure to the retreat?