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Homer, Lady Day and Elvis: The Postmodern Poetics of the Center

Fall 2004 / Columns

by Stephen Newton

The transformative power of decor at the William Paterson University Writing Center.



The William Paterson University Writing Center

One of the most common reactions people have when they visit the William Paterson University Writing Center is to comment upon the décor. Who puts up all these weird postcards? Why are characters from *The Simpsons* all over the place? What is up with all the gorillas? Who takes care of the plants? And who, pray tell, is obsessed with Elvis? He seems to be everywhere around here, along with Groucho Marx, John Lennon, Charlie Parker, Billy Holiday, and Bob Marley.

It may seem self-evident to suggest that the atmosphere in a writing center is crucially important, but I want to go further, and risk hyperbole, by saying that it can be as influential as almost anything that we do. It has become a given in much contemporary pedagogy that all teaching is political, whether or not one recognizes the political content of the teaching practice. According to this line of thinking one can be unreflective about political ramifications in the classroom, but one can't escape them.

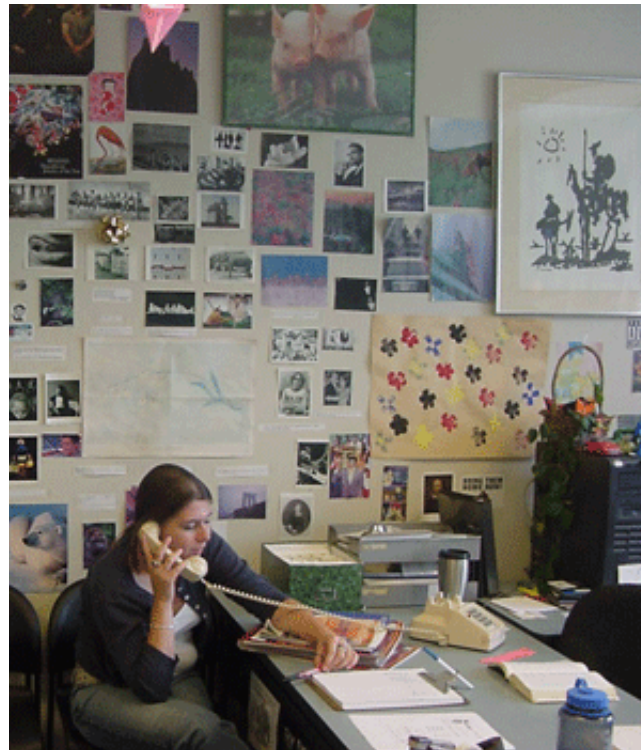
One might argue that the décor of writing centers is a similar situation. We may be unaware of the fact that the ways that our spaces are decorated are important, but we cannot escape the fact that they are. The impression one

gets upon first walking in the front door is crucial, but it goes much further than that—this atmosphere surrounds the clients and staff the entire time they are in the writing center. It helps to define who we are and what we do.

This may seem unremarkable to many writing center administrators: décor matters. What's new about that? Nothing really, but I want to argue that we need to be moving beyond the institutional, office-style, government-issue sterility that characterizes so many workplaces, because the more that we embrace this antiseptic, regimented image, the more that we are also endorsing a world of things that we probably don't want to be expressing to our students.

Writing is stressful no matter how you cut it. It is also personal, tied to identity in ways that other academic issues are not. We all know how important it is to be kind and patient, helpful and encouraging in tutorials. We know how delicate the process of writing can be and how insecure so many people are about their work. As writing center professionals these are truths that we hold to be self-evident. We should not be surprised to find out, then, that many of the students who come to the writing center for help are nervous when they walk in the front door. They are frequently embarrassed by the fact that they need help with something. Sometimes they feel stupid, and sometimes a teacher has made them feel this way.

Many of the times when students go to offices around campus, at least at the campuses where I have worked or visited, it is not a particularly pleasant experience. In addition offices frequently have unfortunate echoes attached to them, connected to memories of the temp agency where they sat in a cubicle and listened to customers yell at them through a head-set or the doctor's office where they went to be poked and prodded in a check-up.



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Let me be clear about this. There are many, many people in university offices across the country doing fantastic work and treating students with the utmost respect. But there are also people in these situations who do not act in

student's best interests, and when I have talked to students about these office encounters the message has remained remarkably consistent. The message is that students at least perceive themselves to be ill-treated in offices, and the more that our writing center décor echoes the atmosphere in other workplaces around the university, the more that we are going to contribute to the overall anxiety of students coming to the writing center, especially the ones who are coming for the first time.

One way to help counteract these effects is through the conscious use of irreverent, subversive humor, frequently achieved by the surrealistic juxtaposition of seemingly incongruous images. I have found that this postmodern turn is almost a commonplace on many faculty office doors. Most of us have seen the same potpourri of images.

Advertisers, novelists, poets, musicians, painters, and movie directors have been using similar techniques—collage, pastiche, mixing high and low culture—for at least the last hundred years, the same strategies that I am currently employing in the writing center to decorate the walls and that professors use to decorate their office doors.

We embrace chaos. We depend upon random improvisation. I resist aligning myself in any kind of rigid way with the dogma of any one group or point of view, but we clearly are expressing something, or something is expressing itself through us, when we put these pictures or postcards up on the walls. Many times this happens through the collaboration of aligned sensibilities, with a kind of collective writing center consciousness emerging, the lineaments of its contours taking shape in front of our eyes.

Tastes are going to vary from context to context, from college to college. In a sense the details don't matter all that much. The important thing is that we find ways to energize the space so that it feels alive and people want to spend time there. Students have had telling responses.

" You guys never make anyone feel stupid—that's why we like this place."

"The WPU Writing Center, so much better than Starbucks."

" That place looks like a Gustav Klimt painting."

In our writing center we open our doors to the rich matrix of culture. We are embodying postmodernity in ways that are consonant with writing center theory and practice, but without trying to sell anything more than the richness of the world and the wonder of Homer Simpson slapping himself on the head.

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