

CLAIMING AN EDUCATION: USING ARCHIVAL RESEARCH TO BUILD A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Molly Tetreault
m.f.tetreault@gmail.com

Patty Wilde
Washington State University
Tri-Cities
patty.wilde@wsu.edu

Sarah B. Franco
New England Institute of
Technology
sfranco@neit.edu

Abstract

This article explores how archival research can be used in staff education courses to work toward what Ann Ellen Geller et al. call a “community of practice”: a writing center culture that emphasizes constant, continual, and recursive thinking and learning among directors and consultants. Offering voices of tutors and directors captured in a three-year study of an archival project, the authors maintain that this kind of research offers several gifts, as it cultivates flexible conferencing practices, dismantles hierarchies, and establishes a cross-generational community. To help writing center directors and assistants incorporate such research into their own center, this article concludes with assignment instructions, tips for archival research, and suggestions for building a writing center archive

“[Y]ou cannot afford to think of being here to *receive* an education; you will do much better to think of yourselves as being here to *claim* one. One of the dictionary definitions of the verb ‘to claim’ is: *to take as the rightful owner; to assert in the face of possible contradiction.* ‘To receive’ is to *come into possession of; to act as receptacle or container for; to accept as authoritative or true.*”

--Adrienne Rich, *Claiming an Education*

After twenty years of occupying space in various nooks and crannies around campus, our writing center recently found a permanent home in the library, a place the center’s founder and first director, Robert Connors, had envisioned as an ideal location. Although moving to the library symbolized the writing center’s success and growth, we, the directors, were concerned about what might be lost in this transition. Aside from a portrait of Connors and a large oak table he built to symbolize the collaborative work done in the center—fondly referred to by the tutors as the “big table”—few other historical relics from our writing center’s past made it to the new space. Ten new tutors started work in the center that fall, and after one of them asked, “who’s the guy in the portrait?” we decided to implement an archival project into our tutor education course. This project asked new writing assistants to conduct research in the writing center’s archive, collaboratively reconstruct a history of our center’s early years, and contribute their own documents to the archive at the end of the semester as a way of “talking back” to layers of writing center legacies (Wilde, Tetreault, and Franco). What started as a pedagogical

experiment has since become of hallmark assignment of our writing center curriculum. After conducting this project for several years now, we have come to see how it builds what Anne Ellen Geller et al. call a “community of practice,” in which “what [tutors] learn is not a static subject matter but the very process of being engaged in, and participating in developing, an ongoing practice” (13). Although there are numerous ways to cultivate such an environment, our three-year study of this project indicates that archival research facilitates a culture of constant, continual, and recursive thinking, one that is central to the work the writing center staff engage in daily. After providing a brief overview of relevant scholarship and the course project, we discuss three main “gifts” of the archive, to use the language of Susan Wells and Wendy Hayden. First, we share how the project cultivated relevant habits of mind. Next, we illustrate how archival work dismantles hierarchies. Finally, we review how this project helps sustain community in an environment where there is constant turnover.

An Archival Education

As Jessica Enoch and Pamela VanHaitsma observe, there has been a move for “scholar-*teachers* [to] tur[n] their attention from the archive’s role in research to its role in pedagogy” (216). Drawing from the scholarship of Jane Greer, Megan Norcia, and Wendy Hayden, Enoch and VanHaitsma identify several benefits of incorporating archival research into composition-rhetoric curricula, including experience with primary sources, constructing and contextualizing historical narratives, and consideration of audience (216-17). While the advantages of incorporating archival research into the undergraduate classroom have now been widely documented, how they enhance writing center work has been less frequently explored.

Writing center archives are often seen as valuable sites for writing center professionals, especially in times of transition when directorships change hands. As Stacy Nall explains,

The institutional knowledge contained in the archive may be especially relevant to [writing center directors] who, new to an institution, hope

to learn more about their centers' previous initiatives in order to successfully plan new ones. (105)

While we agree with Nall, archives can also serve as a fruitful resource for tutors, prompting reflection about a writing center's past, present, and future. As a particularly worthwhile endeavor for consultants to undertake—especially those just joining the community—archival research enables them to learn about their own writing center's past while reading and discussing broader narratives of writing center history. As Neal Lerner notes, “The rich history of writing instruction in higher education . . . can tell us a great deal about the challenges and opportunities we continue to face, whether we are teachers, researchers, or students” (1). Conducting research in writing center archives has the potential to make such struggles and successes even more visible, enabling writing center staff to understand their current context in revelatory ways.

Far from functioning as a neutral repository of documents, however, archives are curated to tell specific stories. As Nall points out, writing center archives are often comprised of administrative documents rather than artifacts that offer “multiple perspectives” (109). We echo Nall's concern, advocating for more inclusive archival practices that incorporate consultant voices and knowledge. As the members of our community who do the vast majority of our conferencing, archives should reflect their contributions and contain documents generated by and for tutors. Doing so is one step toward rectifying Elizabeth Boquet's observation that with “few notable exceptions . . . conclusions are drawn about peer tutors, information is produced for peer tutors, but rarely are these things created by peer tutors” (18). Archives can act as a platform through which tutors can make their mark on their community. Further, assistants repeatedly confirmed Sue Dinitz and Jean Kiedaisch's view that

As the folks at the boundary of theory and practice, tutors are well positioned to explore the connections between them, to tease out the subtleties, the complications, the assumptions, the omissions in our theory and our practice, and to see how one might shed light on the other. (75)

We hope to showcase this intellectual work in action through our tutors' own words while also advocating for including such artifacts in institutional archives.

It is important to acknowledge that we recognize not all institutions have an established writing center archive, let alone one that allows for student contributions. For this reason, we've included tips for building archives at the end of this article (see

Appendix A). But we also want to make clear that, as much as we believe archives are essential for writing center and writing program research and continuity, the project we describe in this article is not simply about archival exploration and contribution. More broadly, we want to underscore the importance of *staff education* within writing centers. Similar to Geller et al., we see this change of nomenclature as indicative of “a shift to a more ongoing and holistic orientation to writing center work” that moves toward cultivating a community of practice (136). In our experience, traditional training models primarily offer new consultants a rigid set of “best practices” for conferencing, often delivered in a top-down fashion: examine the assignment sheet; read the essay out loud; ask questions; have the student take notes; don't be directive, etc. In such a training model, there are so many scenarios and variables to cover that an archival project would likely be considered extraneous and superfluous. But in developing a curriculum for our staff, we open up more possibilities for creative practices that invite both assistants and directors to engage in new learning opportunities. In this way, we “practic[e] our praxis” (301), as Muriel Harris phrases it, using writing center pedagogy to educate all members of our team. By modeling what we value in helping people learn, we teach new assistants how to be members of the community, inviting them to see the effectiveness of writing center practices, while continuing to learn ourselves. The archival project we discuss in this article is one way that we work toward this goal.

Project Overview

At our institution's writing center, assistants participate in the archival research project (see Appendix B) as part of the two-credit, new staff education course during their first semester working in the writing center. The exploration begins a month into the course, after consultants have become familiar with some of the foundational perspectives on writing centers and have begun facilitating conferences.

During the first week of the project, we introduce the assistants to archival project. This introduction includes the following:

- pointing back to historical sketches of writing centers that they've read as part of previous weeks' coursework, including Stephen North's “The Idea of a Writing Center” and Andrea Lunsford's “Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of a Writing Center”
- highlighting the important moments included on our center's timeline in our staff handbook

- providing the finding aid for the collection
- discussing “Archival Research Tips” (see Appendix C).

After this overview, we ask assistants to brainstorm topics of interest for their archival exploration. As they share what they hope to explore, we group assistants with similar questions to work together in the archive.

Over the next few weeks, tutors and at least one director visit the archive for a two-hour period. Founded in memory of Connors in 2000 after his untimely death, this archive contains memorials of Connors and his work in the field of composition-rhetoric as well as material that speaks to the everyday operations of the center, such as staff meeting agendas, conference observations, annual reports, training materials, memos, email correspondence, and student papers. Together, consultants and directors examine artifacts, taking notes and photographs of interesting or important documents to share with the whole class.

After searching through the archival materials, consultants then print their documents and prepare a brief presentation for the class, explaining their interests, sharing artifacts, and reflecting on their time in the archive. Following the presentations, the class engages in a discussion of the research process, piecing together a history of the early writing center. We then ask tutors to write an “archival narrative,” which functions as a reflection on the archival exploration and class discussion. Finally, at the end of the semester, we ask them to choose a document—if any—from the work they produced to contribute to the archive and to write a brief explanation of their choice.

During the three years that we conducted this IRB-approved project, assistants allowed us to record and transcribe class sessions related to their archival research. They also granted us permission to use documents they generated as part of the exploration. The student excerpts that we use in this article come from these recordings and writings. Making their voices heard both through their archival contributions and this article is an important part of our project. As such, we do not use pseudonyms in this piece: all names referenced below belong to three generations of writing center employees.

Gift One: Cultivating Habits of Mind

In working toward a community of practice in writing centers, Geller et al. advocate adopting a “pedagogy of becoming,” an approach that emphasizes the infinite, recursive process of learning (59). Such an orientation toward staff education is important because, much like writing is more than a set of codified skills, so too is writing center work. Tutors are

constantly called upon to respond dynamically to the circumstances of the conference. A writing center education, we maintain, should reflect this reality. After conducting this project for several years, we came to realize that archival research functions as a way of relating the importance of adapting to the ever-shifting context of writing center work. This mindset can be achieved in many ways, of course, but we found archival research and its ability to engender creative and reflexive habits of mind to be a particularly effective approach.

Archival research often starts with questions born out of curiosity: Why is something the way that it is? How did it get to be that way? How has it changed over time? And how can knowledge of the past inform the present? But because the majority of our writing assistants had never been to the archives, we, the directors, had to help ignite that curiosity. Question posing was an essential first step of this process. We, the directors, introduced them to the finding aids that outlined the contents of the Robert J. Connors Writing Center Files, 1994-2010, and after reviewing the list of holdings, students formulated preliminary research questions that allowed them entry into the project. Some of the initial questions that assistants chose to explore include the following:

- When and how did the writing center get started?
- What strategies did early tutors utilize in conferences and how do they compare to our current approaches?
- Who were the students who used the center and what did they study?
- Who were the multilingual students and what were their major writing-related concerns?
- Who was Connors and how did he approach writing center work?
- How was the early writing center different from our current iteration?

After giving assistants a crash course in archival research methods, directors and tutors went to the archives to seek out answers to their questions. Although the directors had some familiarity with the collection, the consultants had not previously viewed these artifacts. Together, we all rolled up our sleeves and dug into the materials to get a fuller sense of our origin stories.

We let the assistants take the lead, and as is the case with archival work, their questions multiplied and morphed as their understanding of the documents developed and deepened. Like a choose-your-own-

adventure story, our assistants did not know where their research would lead them. When consultants Sholanna and Colton went to the archives, their initial questions focused on the data that was collected on the early writing center. As they reviewed the annual reports compiled by Connors and they learned more about the precarious origins of the center, their questions evolved, focusing more on how the director handled the various obstacles that he encountered while trying to stabilize the center. Some assistants, though, found that their research questions shifted entirely once they began examining artifacts. Our consultant Martha went to the archive with questions about the early writing center's approach to conferencing and how the "philosophy" affected the local community, but as she explained, when she began sifting through tutor training syllabi and assignments, observation reports, and internship documents, she felt compelled to take her research in a different direction. Rather than exploring her initial questions, Martha examined the hiring practices of the early writing center—an approach that drastically differed from our current model. The experiences of Sholanna, Colton, and Martha illustrate the necessity of adaptability when conducting archival research, a habit of mind that is also essential for conferencing.

Alexis Ramsey et al. explain that

Archival research . . . is never a rigid process, nor should it be. Similar to the composing process itself, archival research is often recursive—subject to start and stops, revisions and reworking, throughout the lifetime of a project. (5)

As our staff sifted through archival documents, they learned to adapt their questions and burgeoning narratives, as with each artifact and perspective, a new possibility of the past emerged. In his archival journey that originally focused on the director, Brandon discovered an exercise that the director designed for a staff meeting after an unknown but unfortunate incident occurred with a student named Monica. The handout asked assistants to read a piece by Helen Fox on cultural issues in academia and reflect on experiences in which they may have felt "othered or stigmatized." It also asked them to consider how they thought Monica "might think the staff felt about her or thought about her after reading the [email]." Adapting his interests in response to his discoveries, Brandon, working with Patty, one of the directors, spent his time in the archive attempting to unravel this mystery, reviewing appointment books, student work, meeting notes, and staff evaluations. Together, Brandon and Patty weighed different possibilities while attempting to compose a cohesive narrative of this event. Although they made some headway, they still had

unanswered questions about what happened. In an interesting turn of events, assistants from the staff education course the next year took up the challenge of exploring Monica and the email. Their collective efforts allowed them to find new documents and consider new possibilities. This experience illustrates, as Connors observes, that "All of historical work . . . is provisional, partial—fragments we shore against our ruin. We are trying to make sense of things. It is always a construction. It is always tottering" (21).

The precarious nature of archival work, Wendy Hayden explains, can elicit frustration from students "when [they are] unable to identify a precise source that would answer their research inquiry" (412). There were moments when we observed similar tendencies in our assistants. Many of the questions that they brought to the archive were only partially answered, while some tutors did not find any artifacts related to their initial questions. As noted, these experiences required flexibility from our assistants, by either altering their line of inquiry or changing course entirely. But these situations also asked tutors to exercise patience and lean into their discomfort of not knowing. Brandon and Patty, for example, never determined precisely what transpired with Monica and the staff. Although the assistants the following year added to the narrative that Brandon and Patty had begun to craft, the staff had to face the limitations of the archive: it did not contain documents that fully explained what happened with Monica and the email. Our assistant Yussra approached the limitations of the archive from a different, although equally important, perspective. She found herself wondering, as she says,

whether the documents left behind were really the documents that *should have* been left behind. If I traveled back in time, would I really find that most students loved the writing center? I hope so, and I don't really doubt it, but still the past unsettles me.

Her observation highlights the rhetorical nature of the archive, reminding us that archival collections are constructions that advance particular narratives—ones that are innately limited and biased. As these two positions illustrate, archival work requires assistants to accept inevitable uncertainty, and as Hayden explains, "make peace with how the archives can refuse any 'answers'" (412). But learning to sit with the uneasiness of not knowing, we believe, encourages assistants to focus on "becoming knowledgeable rather than being knowledgeable," which is essential for writing center work (Geller et al. 68).

After our tutors had explored the archives in small groups, the staff reconvened around the "big table" to share documents and begin piecing together a working narrative of the past. As assistants passed around

photocopies of artifacts, they contemplated the connections between the documents, taking into consideration their previous knowledge of writing centers, both locally and broadly. In so doing, they created a fluid narrative of our writing center's history, one that was open and adaptable to the new information they learned from their peers. Watching them, for example, attempt to make sense of an email in which the director reprimanded two assistants for missing a class presentation was particularly worthy of note. "Was [Connors] a 'strict' director?" our assistant Josh asked the class. Offering the information she gleaned from reviewing his annual reports, Sholanna relayed Connors's concerns with stagnant numbers and shrinking budgets. This information led the class to reason that the he was upset with the consultants who missed the appointment because they could have potentially cost the center much needed clients and institutional support. As this anecdote illustrates, deciding on *the* history of our writing center was not—and could not be—the endgame for the archival project. Rather, in accordance with a pedagogy of becoming, we emphasized the journey of collaboratively speculating, questioning, and contemplating possibilities.

The intellectual nimbleness that is necessary for archival research, we found, is analogous to the work that we ask consultants to do in writing center conferences. When assistants begin a session, they often don't know much about the student with whom they will work. Tutors don't know where the student has been, what successes and challenges they have experienced, or even where they want to go with their writing. Just as consultants must adapt their narratives to the documents and perspectives they encounter, so too must they modify their approach to conferences according to the circumstances of the session. Grounding discussions of writing center practice in the context of the archive gave the staff a new way to think about their techniques, contributing to the pedagogy of becoming that we aim to foster in our writing center.

Gift Two: Working Together to Dismantle Hierarchies

In addition to cultivating intellectual flexibility, the design of our archival project offered new ways to discuss the collaborative nature of conferences. But this collaboration, we also found, allowed us to subvert common hierarchies that exist within writing center spaces, as it helped cultivate a community of practice that put all members on a level playing field. Such efforts are necessary, for although collaboration is a main tenet in writing center work, new tutors may have

few examples of productive, democratic collaborations. While collaborative assignments may intend to show students the social nature of learning and knowledge production, they often end up reaffirming a hierarchical, individualistic view of educational success. It is paramount, then, that directors provide writing assistants with opportunities to experience collaboration in ways that directly counteract the effects of a hierarchical learning model. The archival project, in our experience, was one particularly effective way to challenge that structure.

In the context of writing center spaces, directors are often perceived as experts, and consultants, particularly new ones, are seen as novices. Yet in order to live out a true community of practice, we must work to dismantle this hierarchy so that all members of the writing center are viewed as equals. In such a model, both directors and tutors explore writing center-related issues to improve upon the work that we all do. While we strive to prioritize collaboration in all of our staff education events, we have found the archival exploration project to be an especially fruitful way to foster a cooperative community within our writing center. As outlined in the previous section, archival work depends on utilizing several habits of mind and engaging in a process of exploration. Although we, the directors, have more archival experience, the process of constructing of history is iterative and ongoing. The artifacts are made new to us through the interpretations of the assistants, as evidenced by Patty and Brandon's search for Monica. Despite our experience, we often find ourselves engaging in the archival exploration as new learners, drawing on the same skill sets we intend our tutors to acquire, and feeding off of each other's and the tutors' questions and curiosities. The effects of this genuine collaboration are perhaps, though, most evident during the post-archive discussion around the "big table." In this space, the writing assistants take the lead, sharing their discoveries and working together with the directors to construct a narrative of our past. In the archives, we address very narrow questions of the past, but when assistants and directors come together to share our findings, the pieces begin to create a bigger picture that has shifted over the three years of conducting this project—from focusing on the struggles of the early writing center to tutor training practices to interpersonal communication to equity and access issues. These broader themes illustrate how our discussions are constantly in flux, shaped by our assistants and current concerns in the writing center. In this way, directors and consultants alike utilize habits of mind that are essential to a productive community of practice.

But the design of our archival project also asked assistants to collaborate with directors and archivists to continue developing the writing center's history and future. Because we invite tutors to contribute their own artifacts to the archive, they actively participate in shaping future narratives of the past. Recognizing this, our consultants see their role as a great responsibility. Our tutor Liz articulated her sense of responsibility in her reflection of the project, explaining,

We in the writing center today are controlling the direction that the writing center's history will take. The archival contribution is a tangible reminder of this, but how we conduct ourselves in every conference, staff meeting, and chat around the table is a small chunk of the center's continued history, too.

But assistants' contributions are also a meaningful source of pride. After writing about the "additional respect" she gained for writing center pedagogy after her visit to the archive, Emma shared,

I feel that my work has an impact on the future of the writing center, and where the future of the writing center goes from here. I love the idea that someday, in twenty more years, writing assistants will look back on the work we are doing today and use it to help their own understanding of the writing center.

Typifying common consultant responses, the reflections of Liz and Emma illustrate the value of reinforcing tutors' authorship and participation in the archive. There is a sense, then, that archival exploration project makes writing assistants aware of the necessity of collaboration not just now, but also with the assistants who come after them.

Through the kinds of collaborative practices described, established hierarchies are disrupted, triggering what Lauren Fitzgerald calls the "authorizing" effect (27). In her International Writing Center Association keynote address, Fitzgerald asks:

What would happen . . . if undergraduate writing tutors stopped citing the giants of writing center studies—the Bruffees, Norths, and others I've mentioned here? And what if, instead, the giants on whose shoulders peer writing tutor-researchers stood were those of other peer writing tutor-authors? What kind of authorizing would happen then? How would the boundaries of the field and our collective understanding of what we do be redrawn? (30)

The reprioritization of expertise that Fitzgerald describes becomes possible through exposure to other "peer writing tutor-authors." In reading documents of previous assistants as well as sharing their work with future ones, this authentic collaboration allowed tutors

to experience authority in novel ways. They feel authorized to engage more critically with past practices, oftentimes pointing out problems they had with previous approaches. Sameer, for example, was "glad" that the writing center has ended its practice of collecting SAT verbal scores from visiting writers. After digging up the documents related to this issue, he was impressed by how past undergraduates expressed their opposition. This finding sparked a fantastic conversation about the interrelationship between theory and practice, particularly in regard to assessment in writing center work, illustrating the necessity of exchange between administrators and assistants. We need to know each other's experiences and ideas in order to develop effective practices. Collaboration is an essential aspect of the work we do to support student writers.

This kind of open exchange, we found, led to a number of tutors posing questions about what else the writing center should be doing and what areas they can continue to grow. Natalie wondered, "what else does the center need to improve on? What more are we striving for?" She offered some preliminary answers to these questions, and the document she contributed to the archive seeks to pushback on some writing center commonplaces. Similarly, Yusra chose to contribute a piece in which she openly questions and explores the efficacy of some of the advice we directors had offered about avoiding praise in conferences. As she explained in a written reflection, her initial research on the issue led to an in-class discussion on the topic, helping the group arrive at a more nuanced understanding that "praise can take different forms, some less helpful than others." Her example illustrates how the questions assistants pose and their explorations of practice help drive our collective knowledge forward.

Gift Three: Addressing Turnover in Peer-Staffed Writing Centers

In working toward a community of practice, our staff gains valuable knowledge, which we continue to develop throughout the semesters and years, but time is a double-edged sword in writing centers. The typical patterns of the academic year have taught us that May will signal changes in the staff, when we sometimes lose up to three-quarters of our personnel when they graduate. While we are excited to see where our assistants go next, we can't help but also mourn the loss of their experience and insight. Our tutors reveal that they, too, are concerned about staff turnover and sustainability. In his reflection, Connor notes, "Because of the three-year tenure concept for a lot of writing centers, these places always find themselves in

motion.” But asking assistants to submit their own work to the archive, as we discuss in this section, helps to address this gap. In this way, their contributions provide what Nall describes as “a valuable institutional memory,” which allows future consultants “to better understand the position” they are assuming (104). Their artifacts will be shared with future generations of staff, people who visit the archive, and—via this article—the writing center community at large.

One of the challenges to what Jackie Grutsch McKinney calls the “ever-beginner culture in writing center studies” (84) is the perpetuation of the writing center grand narrative, which she describes as the dominant belief that “*writing centers are comfortable, iconoclastic places where all students go to get one-to-one tutoring on their writing*” (3). Grutsch McKinney asks, “[I]f the majority of those engaging in writing center discourse stay for only a few years, do they—do we—ever move beyond this [grand narrative]?” (85). Looking at our assistants’ archival contributions, we see traces of that narrative, but they also push back, reconsider, extend, complicate, and step outside of it. In the piece that she contributed to the archive, Marie, for example, reminds us of the vulnerability that students may feel when sharing their writing. Because conferencing becomes a common occurrence to consultants, “We tend to forget that not everyone is comfortable,” she explains. “I know I was terrified when I had to start conferencing with my English teacher.” Relatedly, Natalie’s archival selection encourages new staff to always question the status quo. As she writes, “writing assistants, and any professionals in the center, should be questioning the way that the center is run. In order for the writing center to improve and continue to blossom, it is essential to examine the way things are done at the center and strategize how things can be improved.” The thoughts and reflections of Marie and Natalie, among others, help answer Grutsch McKinney’s call for writing that draws attention to our points of difference (89) and “instantiations of counterstories to the grand narrative” (86). Our tutors’ contributions remind us that this important intellectual work can be done by those new to the community; in fact, sometimes their fresh perspective can help dislodge the comfort that is the writing center grand narrative, revealing assumptions and encouraging new ways of approaching our work.

When assistants submit their artifacts to the archive, they are keenly aware that they are circulating their acquired knowledge to those who come after them. As Brandon explains,

We know that history is studied because having as much knowledge about the past as possible allows us to see what we have yet to learn. So I see my

contribution as a window to my knowledge, so that the next assistants can simply pick up what I learned and spend more time learning, well, new stuff.

And while he realizes that learning to be a writing tutor is not as easy as reading documents and acquiring all the secrets of writing center pedagogy, he recognizes that his contributions will make a significant impact on future tutors. Not only do these archival materials help to pass on various gifts, but as Brandon remarks, they also “giv[e] us a sense of being in the ‘tribe.’” build community.

Indeed, many of our assistants write explicit invitations for new staff to become part of the community. Kate explains of her archival contribution that it “provides some insight to what our writing center community is like.” Her contribution, a letter to future writing assistants, emphasizes the role of reflection—for the writer and tutor within a conference, for the writing assistant after the conference, for the staff—and encourages consultants to always reflect “with the other assistants at the [‘big table’] in order to improve your role as an assistant. You will feel better talking about the conference you just had and will always receive some great advice!” Such letters, as previously mentioned, had a meaningful effect on our tutors, a point that Madison underscores in the narrative of her archival experience:

When I went into the archives for our project, I found the letters to writing assistants the most interesting and helpful documents to look at. It shows the history of our welcoming atmosphere and gave me a better appreciation for what we strive for. It would be nice to have documents from writing assistants to further show how our friendly environment can be inclusive of not only new staff, but new writers.

Madison, in fact, was so moved by the letters that she asked Molly, one of the directors, why the documents aren’t shared at the beginning of the staff education course or during orientation. Molly was surprised by the oversight. Of course those letters should be shared, especially because of the invitations to join the community and to question the work we do. And so, the next fall, they were. The numerous examples of writing assistants emphasizing the role of collaboration speak to the importance of a community of practice as a touchstone and point of sustainability when turnover is relatively quick and high. What the writing center lacks in consistent staffing is tempered by a shared way of viewing learning in the center. By helping smooth the transition into the center and consciously inviting new tutors to join the community through their archival contributions, our previous consultants can

kickstart the process of the new staff sharing their own perspective, ideas, and knowledge.

Claiming a Writing Center Education

Although we recognize that archival research deviates from traditional writing center tutor “training” courses, we were inspired by Geller et al.’s reminder “to be curious . . . to read widely and to find points and patterns of intersection across disciplines not to feel bound by what has been written precisely about writing centers or about composition and rhetoric” (11). Impelled forward, we began the process of designing the archival research project that we have described in this article. At the time of its inception, we could not have anticipated the kind of impact that this project would have on assistants, administrators, and director—how, in addition to learning about our past, archival research would cultivate mindfulness, decenter authority, and help ease tutor turnover. Because archival artifacts are interpreted through an individual’s own terministic screens, writing center staff can continue to learn from one another as we uncover and contemplate our findings and negotiate their meanings. And the possibilities for understanding the past will only continue to grow as we incorporate documents produced by our own assistants into the archival collection, thereby extending the legacy of our community. Guided by our consultants’ voices, we hope to continue to listen, learn, adapt, and grow, as we actively work toward claiming a writing center education.

Works Cited

- Boquet, Elizabeth. “Intellectual Tug-of-War.” *Stories from the Center: Connecting Narrative and Theory in the Writing Center*, edited by Lynn Craigie and Meg Woolbright, National Council of Teachers of English, 2000, pp. 17-30.
- Connors, Robert. “Dreams and Play: Historical Method and Methodology.” *Methods and Methodology in Composition Research*. Edited by Gesa Kirsch and Patricia Sullivan. Southern Illinois UP, 1992, pp. 15-36.
- Dinitz, Sue, and Jean Kiedaisch. “Creating Theory: Moving Tutors to the Center.” *Writing Center Journal*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2003, pp. 63-76.
- Gannett, Cinthia, Elizabeth Slomba, Kate Tirabassi, Amy Zenger, and John Brereton. “‘It Might Come in Handy’ Composing a Writing Archive at the University of New Hampshire: A Collaboration between the Dimond Library and the Writing Across the Curriculum/Connors Writing Program 2001-2003.” *Centers for Learning: Writing Centers and Libraries in Collaboration*. Edited by James Elmborg and Sheril Hook. Association of College and Research Libraries, 2005, pp. 115-137.
- Geller, Anne Ellen, Michelle Eodice, Frankie Condon, Meg Carroll, and Elizabeth Boquet. *The Everyday Writing Center: A Community of Practice*. Utah State UP, 2007.
- Enoch, Jessica, and Pamela VanHaistma. “Archival Literacy: Reading the Rhetoric of Digital Archives in the Undergraduate Classroom.” *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 67, no. 2, 2015, pp. 216-242.
- Fitzgerald, Lauren. “Undergraduate Writing Tutors as Researchers: Redrawing Boundaries.” *Writing Center Journal*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2014, pp. 17-35.
- Greer, Jane. “Undergraduates in the Archives: Researching Girls’ Literacies as Feminist Activism.” *Peitho*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2009, pp. 1-8.
- Grutsch McKinney, Jackie. *Peripheral Visions for Writing Centers*. Utah State UP, 2013.
- Harris, Muriel. “Using Tutorial Principles to Train Tutors: Practicing our Praxis.” *The Writing Center Director’s Resource Book* edited by Christina Murphy and Byron Stay, Routledge, 2006, pp. 301-310.
- Hayden, Wendy. “‘Gifts’ of the Archives: A Pedagogy for Undergraduate Research.” *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 66, no. 3, 2015, pp. 402-426.
- Lerner, Neal. *The Idea of Writing Laboratory*. Southern Illinois UP, 2009.
- Lunsford, Andrea. “Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of a Writing Center.” *The Writing Center Journal*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1991, pp. 3-10.
- Nall, Stacey. “Remembering Writing Center Partnerships: Recommendations for Archival Strategies.” *Writing Center Journal*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2013, pp. 101-121.
- Norcia, Megan. “Out of the Ivory Tower Endlessly Rocking: Collaborating across Disciplines and Professions to Promote Student Learning in the Digital Archive.” *Pedagogy*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2008, pp. 91-114.
- North, Stephen. “The Idea of a Writing Center.” *College English*, vol. 46, no. 5, 1984, pp. 433-446.
- Ramsey, Alexis, Wendy Sharer, Barbara L’Eplattenier, and Lisa Mastrangelo. (2009). “Introduction.” *Working in the Archives: Practical Research Methods*. Edited by Alexis Ramsey, Wendy Sharer, Barbara L’Eplattenier, and Lisa Mastrangelo. Southern Illinois UP, 2009, pp. 1-10.

- Thompson, Isabelle, and Jo Mackiewicz. "Questioning in Writing Center Conferences." *Writing Center Journal*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2014, pp. 37-70.
- Wilde, Patty, Molly Tetreault, and Sarah Franco. "Talking Back: Writing Center Assistants Renegotiate the Public Memory of Writing Centers." *Pedagogies of Public Memory: Teaching Writing and Rhetoric at Museums, Archives, and Memorials*. Edited by Jane Greer and Laurie Grobman. Routledge, 2015, pp. 105-116.
- Wells, Susan. "Claiming the Archive for Rhetoric and Composition." *Rhetoric and Composition as Intellectual Work*, edited by Gary Olson, Southern Illinois UP, 2002, pp. 55-64.

Appendix A

Creating an Archive

The kinds of educational practices for which we advocate in this article do not require an archive that is formally situated. Although partnerships between writing centers and college libraries can be beneficial, we recognize that these arrangements are not always possible. For this reason, we offer some suggestions about how writing centers can construct their own archives.

Gathering Potential Documents

Selecting the documents to include is one of the first points of consideration when building an archive of writing center materials. In our experience, annual reports, conference observations, training materials, staff meeting agendas and minutes, email correspondence, and hiring documents have proven to be particularly valuable additions to a writing center archive. These kinds of artifacts can offer directors and assistants a more thorough understanding of the writing center's past, including the successes and challenges that the center may have previously encountered.

Documents created by writing center tutors, including conference notes, research projects, photographs, self-evaluations of conference practices, letters, and other general ephemera, are also valuable contributions to archival holdings. Such documents offer viewers an opportunity to see everyday life in the center, but as we discuss in this article, asking students to select more detailed projects has proven to be a powerful pedagogical experience. This gave them the opportunity to make their voices heard, but it also offered a more seamless approach to tutor education, as it gave new assistants a chance to learn from their predecessors.

Additionally, if proper permission is obtained, documents composed by those who visit the center can also be a beneficial contribution to writing center archives.

Student papers, intake forms, evaluations, etc., can offer tutors a sense of trends of student usage, assignments, writing styles, etc. We see great potential in folding these materials into future archival projects.

Organizing and Storing Artifacts

After assistants and directors gather potential documents to include in the archive, they will need to categorize the documents. Although there are many meaningful organizational schemes that can be employed, artifacts arranged chronologically and according to event or genre (student letters, education course, meeting minutes, etc.) provide the reader with some context for understanding the materials.

The finding aid should name and briefly describe the artifacts using key words that represent the material. Further, the finding aid should clearly explain where the artifacts are located, so that those wanting to utilize the collection can easily find what they are seeking. Because finding aids can potentially obscure archival holdings, we recommend that it is tested before it is widely used to ensure that it accurately depicts the artifacts and their location.

There are many options for storing archival documents. We recommend first contacting campus libraries to inquire about housing documents in their special collections. This makes the materials accessible to a wide audience. If such a partnership is not possible, artifacts can be held in folders and boxes in the writing center. If space is a concern, several electronic storage options exist. Blogs/websites (e.g., Wordpress, Tumblr, WIX, etc.) or electronic storage systems (Google Drive, Microsoft OneDrive, etc.) can store digitized materials. In addition, Omeka and Collective Access are both free, open-source cataloging tools that can be used to create online archives.

Appendix B

Archival Exploration Project Assignment

This project will introduce you to the Writing Center Files in the University Archive. Through exploring the archives and engaging with the documents you find there, you will learn a bit about the history of the center and its institutional context. In class, small groups will sign up for specific times to visit the archives. Small groups will be created primarily around a similar interest in specific aspects of the archives. Your group will brainstorm a set of questions to guide your exploration

Part I: Archival Exploration Photos

The archival exploration itself will take place outside of class time, based on the archives' hours and your group's availability to make the trip.

1. As a group, write out responses to your group's questions (hand written is fine).
2. As your group explores the archives, photograph documents that you use to answer your questions or that you find particularly interesting. You can borrow Molly's camera if you'd like, or you can use your camera on your phone. Then, email your photographs to Molly to print out before class.

You'll use the photos to help provide an overview to the whole class of your group's findings in the archive.

Part II: Archival Exploration Narrative

In a 500-word narrative, describe your archival experience. In what ways, if any, was this experience meaningful to you as a writing assistant or to your understanding of writing center theory and practice? You might reference specific materials from the archives (staff observations, student evaluations, writing assistant letters, ESL training, staff meeting agendas, etc.). You might incorporate thoughts or reflections from our whole group conversation about the archival exploration. Consider, too, how this assignment has affected the way you see the work you do in the center as contributing to our writing center narrative.

Part III: Archival Contribution Explanation

Choose an artifact from the work that you have completed this semester that you would like to contribute to the archives. Write a 1-2 paragraph explanation as to why you've chosen this particular artifact to contribute. Consider the following questions in your explanation: Why did you choose these documents? How might they be of interest and value to future writing assistants? How does contributing to the legacy impact your writing center work?

Note: While this assignment is mandatory, you will choose whether or not your archival contribution is placed in the archives. At the top of your explanation, write "Place in the archives" or "Don't place in the archives." **Submissions will be held in the writing center for five years before they are placed in the archives.

Appendix C

Archival Research Tips for Visiting the Writing Center Files

Before the Archive

1. Brainstorm topics about the center that are interesting to you. What questions do you have about past assistants, practices, problems, and successes? Record these questions.
2. Review the finding aid to give you an idea about what kinds of artifacts are housed in the writing center files. Do you identify files that align with your initial research questions? What new questions can you develop after reviewing the finding aid? Do you have any questions about the finding aid or the archival materials?
3. Bring pencils and/or your computer to take notes of your observations and thoughts while you are sifting through the archival materials; also record the box number, file number, and artifact dates for documentation purposes.
 - Many archives, including the ones at this institution, do not allow use of pens.
4. Bring a digital camera to the archive to photograph artifacts of interest.
 - Photographing documents allows you take the artifacts “home” with you and share them with your classmates.
 - If necessary, you can also manipulate digital images in ways that may help you read the documents more clearly.

documents. Sharing your discoveries are key to the collaborative aspect of this project.

3. Ask questions—ask Molly, Sarah, Patty, or the archivists. We can help point you in the direction of helpful artifacts or fill in gaps of the narratives. And if we don’t know, we will help you find out!
4. Remember that the writing center doesn’t exist in a vacuum. Keep in mind some of the scholarship that Molly had you read for class. How does your hypothesis confirm, complicate, and/or contradict these larger narratives?
5. More than anything, have fun in the archives—let yourself “play” as you conduct your search. You never know what you are going to find when conducting archival work, which is part of the fun of this kind of research!

In the Archives

1. When reviewing the archival documents, look for possible answers to your questions. It is important to remember, though, that these “answers” will likely not be explicitly stated; further, they probably won’t be found in one document. As you review archival artifacts, aim to craft a *working* narrative that attempts to answer your question. This narrative will continue to shift and evolve as you examine more documents and share your ideas with your peers and directors.
2. Talk with your peers and with the directors as you review your documents in the archive. We are working together to construct narratives of the past, so let everyone know what interesting, unusual, strange, troubling discoveries you make as you review