

Story-Changing Work and Asymmetrical Power Relationships in a Writing Center Partnership

Ann Shivers-McNair and Joyce Olewski Inman

Shivers-McNair and Inman analyze and reflect upon the dissolution of a partnership between their institution's basic writing program and writing center. In their network reading of the partnership, the authors argue that their efforts to combat institutional discourses about students and faculty in two marginalized programs were complicated by asymmetrical relations of power. The authors conclude with reflections on possibilities for partnerships and collaborations between marginalized programs.

For four years, our basic writing program and the university's writing center collaborated in offering tutor-facilitated group workshops in the writing center during class time for students in the basic writing program. The program partnership ended last year, and we have since been reflecting on why our collaboration model was ultimately not sustainable. We believe that what we tried and failed to do was what Linda Adler-Kassner calls "story-changing work"—or reframing the discussion about writers and writing in our local context (29). Our motivation for forming the partnership came from our deeply-held beliefs about resisting negative institutional and public discourses about students in our basic writing course while also supporting them and offering them opportunities to connect with writing resources beyond our own program, and these beliefs, as Adler-Kassner explains, are at "the core of story-changing work" (29). But those institutional discourses—and their material effects on student placement and the allotment of institutional resources—are very powerful indeed, and we were not able to change the stories in ways that would have allowed our formal partnership to continue.

Still, our partnership with the writing center did succeed in raising interesting questions about the ways agency functions in a network of people, programs, bodies, and spaces involved

in story-changing work. After all, as rhetoricians such as Jeffrey Grabill have argued, our field would do well to “detect rhetorical activity as coordinated and distributed, as human and non-human, as performative . . . as a chain of agencies that is not bounded in the ways we have historically bounded rhetorical agencies” (204). We are compelled by contemporary theories of distributed agency, and we see them as useful lenses through which to analyze our failed story-changing work.¹ The work of changing stories is not reducible to the rhetorical and advocacy work of two writing program administrators; it encompasses a complex network of people, offices, programs, institutional and public discourses, physical places, and monetary resources. We reached out and listened to a range of institutional stakeholders in this network as we were forming the partnership with the writing center, and we had a fairly good idea how the network for our story-changing work was mapped. But what maps sometimes do not reveal—and what we still managed to underestimate—is the asymmetrical relations of power in the network. In our case, that asymmetrical power is visible and experienced in the contingent status of the faculty, staff, and students in our partnership. We offer a network reading of our writing center collaboration, in which regional, institutional, and programmatic discourses intersect and in which the success of rhetorical work is complicated by asymmetrical relations of power in the network.

To account for asymmetrical power in our story-changing network, we turn to Rebecca Dingo, who offers a satisfying method of feminist rhetorical analysis that pays attention to how rhetorics are networked and travel (7). In the network model Dingo offers, “power is not something agents have or do not have, instead that power is relational. . . . By networking arguments, rhetoricians can demonstrate the complex ways that rhetorical appeals reach a diffused yet linked audience while also accounting for how contiguous power relationships add meaning and force to arguments” (18). In our case, the rhetoric in our network traveled

disproportionately from the top (public and institutional discourses) down. Those public and institutional discourses forward the notion that basic writers and the programs that serve them do not significantly contribute to the university community. Thus, our own rhetorical force in our attempts at story-changing work was constrained by our location in asymmetrical relationships of power.

Indeed, as Chris Warnick, Emily Cooney, and Samuel Lackey note in their narrative of a failed studio program at College of Charleston, we realize that the failure of this collaboration ultimately reveals underlying problems with regard to the institutional structures we were working with and against. On a local level, our programmatic collaboration with the writing center ultimately revealed the contradictory nature of the role of basic writing at our institution. More specifically, the demise of our partnership forced us to consider the contingent nature of each of the stakeholders in our collaboration, the relationships of power and displacement that come with occupying spaces already occupied by others, the strengths and weaknesses of our first-year writing curriculum, and the questions and interventions that might have led to a more successful partnership. We believe that analyzing our failed story-changing work—and what that failure revealed—has significant implications for other basic writing programs attempting to form collaborations on behalf of their marginalized student populations. Following a network model of rhetorical analysis, with special attention to asymmetrical power, we will look at the stories that comprised our partnership.

The Expanded Composition Program

Scholars such as Mary Soliday, Kelly Ritter, and Jane Stanley have both called for and contributed to research in basic writing that is, as Soliday emphasizes, institutionally situated and

historically conscious (*Politics* 10). Ritter argues that in order to understand a basic writing program (or, indeed, any first-year writing program), we must see that such a program “is entirely dependent upon how its intellectual location is constructed by the university and how that university’s measurements and assessment mechanisms for first-year writers shape the curriculum far more than do the students themselves or their abilities” (11). In response to this scholarship, we begin with Joyce’s historical account of the way basic writing in our state has been framed at both the public and institutional discourse levels. In her analysis of public discourse surrounding *Ayers v. Fordice*, a prominent case regarding desegregation in institutions of higher learning, Joyce illustrates the ways in which Mississippi’s white middle class asserted segregationist values in arguing for higher standards for (and less access to) higher education (Inman “Standard”).

Such deeply-normalized discourse about standards circumscribes subject positions for both the students deemed basic and the programs and faculty who work with them. Joyce argues that “writing programs and classes designed for student demographics perceived to be on the borders of white middle-class America can be viewed as instruments of the state used to remind these students of their positions as ‘basic writers’” (“Standard” 314). Indeed, Stanley notes that such institutional designations influence both students and the faculty who work with them: she points out that students were not the only ones deemed “conditional” at UC Berkeley; so, too, were the College Writing Program and its faculty (132-33). We believe we faced a similar phenomenon at our institution: not only had our students been firmly reminded of their conditional status at the university, but (during this partnership, at least) we were both non-tenure track faculty members with little job security or status in our department (see Inman “Reflections”; Shivers-McNair and Lynch-Binieck).

It was from this position of conditionality that we attempted to enact story-changing work in our basic writing program. According to Adler-Kassner, such work “incorporates and proceeds from principles—ones held by those participating in the organizing, ones held by the organizer, or both,” and it “assume[s] that changing stories . . . must begin at the local level and is best done proactively” (92). While Adler-Kassner envisions the audience for this story-changing work to be departments, administrators, and the public, we identified an equally important audience for the story-changing work: the students who might take our classes. At a regional, research-extensive, public institution in Mississippi like ours, that student audience is richly diverse. Our first-year composition program enrolls more than 1,500 students per year. This first-year, first-time student cohort mirrors the state of Mississippi’s racial demographics with almost 40% of our students identifying as African American. In addition, 84% of our students are from Mississippi, and the remaining students are mostly from our immediately neighboring states. One-third of our first-year students score below a 20 on the English index of the ACT exam; the average ACT score is 22.5. In addition, 51% of our students receive federal Pell grants—an extremely high number compared to our sister institutions—and of these students over 80% receive the highest amount of funding allotted.

Of course, our administration is increasingly interested in retaining these students because, as Steve Lamos has pointed out, “retention and graduation statistics . . . are seen as directly related both to enhancing institutional excellence and to cutting costs” (164). Consequently, when Joyce and her former colleague, the then-director of composition, proposed a pilot of a stretch model of our first-year writing course, they were given approval. In the proposal, they presented the promising retention data from Arizona State University’s Stretch Program, upon which ours is modeled, and both the academic council (comprised of faculty) and the administration were persuaded. When the former director left the following year, Joyce

became acting director and Ann joined her as basic writing coordinator. By the end of the second year, and in response to the promising retention data we had now gathered on our pilot students, the administration had given us their blessing to move our pilot into full implementation. And that time the “blessing” included nearly half a million dollars in lines for five new instructors to teach in and support the Expanded Composition program. The provost who approved the program has often cited it in college-wide and faculty meetings as exemplary and a model for other departments in addressing the needs of (and, of course, retaining) students. We will always be grateful for this outspoken show of support for our work with these students; however, we are also aware that many of the problems we encountered during our pilot implementation can be traced back to asymmetrical power in the network in which our program was situated (especially the contingency of the people immediately connected to the program), as well as to different interpretations of what we were trying to do with our students.

Because we were aware of the contingency of our actual program and of the marginal subject positions created for students in courses marked as remedial, we knew we needed to engage in story-changing work to push back against the deep stigmas associated with courses that might smell of remediation. In the original proposal, Joyce and her former colleague emphasized the importance of the potentially de-stigmatizing effect of offering credit for the first semester of the course and implementing the same curriculum and outcomes as the one-semester version of the first-year writing course. Furthermore, students enrolled in the program during the pilot years via directed self-placement in consultation with their academic advisors and/or their first-year writing instructors and in response (we hoped) to our letters, brochures, and cheerleading appearances to plug for the program at summer orientation events for first-year students. We cheerfully and repeatedly insisted to skeptical students that this was not a remedial

course; instead, we advertised that

Students in these classes will benefit from having more time to develop critical writing and reading strategies that will be crucial throughout their academic careers. The expanded format also gives students more opportunities to interact with the Writing Center, the Speaking Center, the University Libraries, their instructor, and each other—all while earning three elective credits and satisfying the English 101 requirement! (Expanded Composition Flyer)

Despite our best efforts, we were never able to recruit more than six sections of students into the Expanded Composition program, and when the time came to move into full implementation, which would now include students who had previously been directed by state mandate into another non-credit-bearing course, we reluctantly agreed, additionally, to placing all students in the originally targeted demographic (using, unfortunately, ACT English subscores) into the program, with a challenge exam option.²

During those three pilot years, with five or six sections of the stretch course each year, that promised interaction with the writing center in the form of our formal partnership was a crown jewel of our efforts to appeal to our students, or at least so it seemed. Joyce and her colleague developed the partnership in consultation with the writing center director and coordinator with the goal of bringing students into the center for special peer-review-oriented events throughout their time in the expanded program. Indeed, this formalized collaboration was part of what was promised to students enrolled in the expanded program: “More of what you’re looking for” (Expanded Composition Flyer). And while we will return to this notion in our narrative, it is important to posit at the outset that we were two contingent faculty members

working to retain the most contingent of our student body by asking them to move from one marginalized space to another marginalized space (the writing center inhabited a similar marginalized space given both its perceived role in remediating writers and its positioning on the borders of academe and student affairs) with the unspoken promise that this would somehow legitimize them to the rest of the university community. In fact, though, this kind of story-changing work, for people and programs who have not been granted legitimacy by an institution, is never a given.

Collaborating with the Writing Center

What Stephen North wrote some thirty years ago in “The Idea of a Writing Center” is still very true: “Misunderstanding is something one expects—and almost gets used to—in the writing center business” (433). Just as our basic writing program was engaged in the work of addressing negative faculty and student perceptions, our institution’s writing center was engaged in the work of addressing student and faculty misperceptions ranging from ignorance and ambivalence to fear and disdain of a center that purported to work with writers but refused to edit students’ documents for them. Indeed, in addition to reframing university expectations pertaining to tutoring services, the writing center had recently been elevated in status, moving from a small closeted space in the English department to a new physical space on the first floor of the university’s primary research library as part of the university’s Quality Enhancement Plan dedicated to improving students’ speaking and writing skills. Our mutual efforts to combat the negative perceptions associated with providing assistance to emerging writers, in part, created the institutional conditions that, we believe, made the story-changing work of the partnership between our expanded program and the writing center seem intellectually, politically, and materially advantageous to both parties.³

Many program directors have issued calls for cross-curricular partnerships: Rachel Rigolino and Penny Freel explain their desire for an “intensive” studio model in which “both individual tutoring as well as workshop sessions [are incorporated] . . . in such a way that these elements, while distinct from time spent in the classroom, were part of a holistic pedagogical approach” in support of a “seamless” support program (53). Jeanne Simpson argues that “the boundaries between what ‘should’ happen in a writing center and what does happen and what might happen are porous to say the least” (4), and Neal Lerner, in making the case for exporting the writing center method, argues that “writing in the boundaries of classroom structures can indeed offer ‘profound impact,’ particularly if the peer-to-peer learning that has long been a feature of laboratory methods of writing is present” (196). Edited collections such as *Writing Groups Inside and Outside the Classroom* (Moss), *On Location: Theory and Practice in Classroom-Based Writing Tutoring* (Spigelman), and *Teaching/Writing in Thirdspaces: The Studio Approach* (Grego) document the popularity, as well as the perks and pitfalls, of bringing writing center tutors and tutoring into WAC and WID classrooms and into basic writing studio classrooms.

What is perhaps a distinguishing feature of our partnership was the decision to locate the tutoring in the writing center space rather than in the classroom and the decision to frame those events as a special, extra benefit of being in the program (in the language of the flyer and in our own talk about the partnership) rather than as a curricular or assessment mechanism. Using student-paid composition fees, we paid graduate writing tutors to work specifically with our expanded students. The first semester we offered the course, we held after-hours “Writing Center Events” dedicated to students enrolled in the Expanded Composition program. The Writing center liaison, a position to which we return below, attended each section of the expanded program to explain our goals for the sessions that were strategically scheduled between students’ early sketched ideas for their essays and

their first formal drafts, and students would sign up for twenty-minute individual tutoring sessions with tutors who had been trained specifically regarding the assignment at hand and the instructors' desired outcomes. We were excited about the possibility of these extra events and how they might function as part of our story-changing efforts aimed at students, and we marketed them as part of the expanded program package. We had a sixty percent student no-show rate.

Melissa Nicolas, in her discussion of a partnership in which students in basic writing courses formed writing groups with students in an upper-level English class, describes sensing an “uneasiness” that she attributes to “the program’s conflation of two related collaborative learning models: peer response and tutoring, and even within the category of tutoring, there was an uncritical collapsing of the boundaries between curriculum-based tutoring and writing center tutoring” (113). Though the nature of our partnership was different, and though, as we have argued, our marginal institutional positions and story-changing work were also bound up in our own uneasiness, the uncritical conflations and collapsings were, indeed, a factor. In addition, it may be that our attempts to create, as explained by Morgan Gresham and Kathleen Yancey, “a learning space rather than a teaching one” simply were not accepted by students because the format did not emphasize collaboration in ways that made sense to them (15). In the case of our first peer review model, the high no-show rate may be attributed to these unexamined boundary issues. Students may have internalized an idea of the writing center as a place where they could go of their own volition and with their own agenda, not as a required class assignment. There is also the distinct possibility that this narrative version of the writing center event—an opportunity to have your essay reviewed in a brief, speed-tutoring manner—simply reinforced students’

perceptions of the writing center as a space of remediation. And we, as administrators, may have failed to acknowledge the affective issues faced by many of the students in our program: many of them worked and/or took care of families in the evenings.

These events turned the corner, however, when we decided the no-shows simply made the events unproductive for students and financially draining for the department. We decided to try again, but this time we worked with the writing center to design in-class tutor-led workshops. Students were put into groups, and one student from each group volunteered to submit his or her essay to the group and the writing center tutor assigned to the group prior to the event that was to be held during regular class hours. We were amazed at the effectiveness of these workshops and students' positive responses. Each group finally had the opportunity to experience a productive workshop that modeled how to effectively respond to a peer's writing. Leading up to the second year of the pilot, we decided that all writing center events would involve small group, during class workshops but that we would vary the types of workshops and workshopping activities with each event and assignment.

We will return to why we believe these workshops were successful with the majority of our students, but it is important to point out that this was one of our most successful moves in terms of story-changing work. We believe that in this particular cross-section of the network, our new collaboration seemed to allow students to see the writing center as a space that encouraged collaborative invention—not just a space for remediation because they were no longer using the writing center services as a space for last minute revision or editing advice. Consequently, our goal was to offer two guided workshops in the writing center space during class time every semester, and for three years our collaboration with the writing center allowed us to meet this goal successfully. In addition, the apparent success of these workshops allowed both our program and the writing center to begin crafting a new institutional narrative about collaborative

retention efforts geared toward our at-risk student population. In the remainder of this article, however, we explore more fully the factors we believe led to the collapse of our collaboration with the writing center after the expanded program moved from the successful pilot project to what might be viewed as a less-than-successful full implementation, as well as what other programs might learn from our attempts to grapple with what are actually very common concerns in basic writing programming.

Contingent Stakeholders

As we have mentioned throughout the article, Joyce and Ann were both in contingent, administrative positions as we worked to develop the collaborations that we believed could sustain our program. Joyce was serving as a non-tenure track, interim director of composition and visiting instructor, and her first year in this position involved completing her dissertation. This meant that while she had all of the responsibilities of a WPA at a mid-size institution, she had none of the authority that can traditionally accompany the position—by virtue of degree or position. She was responsible for moving the programmatic changes for expanded composition through various institutional bodies, but she could not vote as a member of the department. Similarly, Ann was a visiting instructor and the basic writing coordinator, but as a recent graduate of the MA program, her role was even murkier in terms of public conversations about our program. In addition, the director of the writing center held a similarly contingent position, as a twelve-month, non-tenure-track faculty member whose institutional home is split between the English department and the office of the provost. Consequently, the three of us collaborated to begin the story-changing work necessary to provide basic writers at our institution with opportunities for agency despite having little legitimate agency ourselves. In retrospect, though, we did not fully anticipate the ways in our relative powerlessness in the network would limit this story-changing work.

The effects of contingency reached beyond those of us administering the various components of our collaboration. Our expanded courses were taught by full-time faculty, but none of these instructors are tenure-track faculty members. There is an unspoken stigma surrounding faculty who are not research faculty, and it does not go unnoticed by students or administrators that tenure-track faculty rarely teach classes devoted to struggling students. In addition, the tutors employed by the writing center were all graduate instructors or part-time, hourly employees. As we discuss later, these tutors were often caught between our goals, the goals of individual instructors, and the goals of the writing center—and as graduate students, they had little agency from which to express their concerns. In addition, pivotal to the success of our collaboration was the role of the writing center liaison: a graduate student who would both teach a section of the expanded course and work in the writing center as a tutor, thus embodying the link between the two institutional and administrative communities. This practice aligned with the writing center's existing practice of having an experienced tutor serve as a "senior tutor" with some administrative responsibilities in addition to tutoring work.

The liaison was responsible for supporting the cohort of tutors who elected to work with the program and for making students feel comfortable with the idea of the writing center. The liaison was to represent the writing center to these students, visiting classes to introduce the collaboration and being present at all of the tutoring events to provide students with one more face they might recognize as part of the expanded community and serve as a resource for tutors and instructors. This position proved to be, like so many graduate student WPA appointments, both an exciting professional development opportunity and a frustrating reminder of a graduate student's contingent status. Each of the liaisons was put in a position of having to serve two masters—responsible to both Joyce and Ann and to the writing center director—all while also fulfilling the tenuous role of a graduate student whose funding could be cut and whose

academic progress was determined by our colleagues. We were lucky to work with talented graduate- student administrators who did their best to facilitate the story-changing work. However, the contingent status of this particular position—indeed, of all of our positions—in the network was even more evident as we began our full implementation given the extra demands of additional students (the program grew by almost 500% with the move from the pilot semesters to full implementation) and new, non-tenure-track faculty members.

The failure of our collaboration revealed the contingent nature of all our positions all too clearly, as we attempted to explore ways to continue our partnership in spite of the difficulties we were experiencing. What we realized, and what we share below, is that not only does contingency lead to a lack of voice, but it also results in stakeholders who do not feel they have the authority to be completely honest about how a situation is or is not working for them and their constituents. In this way, the asymmetrical power in our network distorted our story-changing work. Our programmatic goal of creating a community of writers with our most at-risk students was interpreted and framed differently by each of these stakeholders, but the contingent nature of all of our positions meant that these interpretations were never discussed in productive ways. This asymmetrical power in our network was most evident as the program grew and we struggled to appase all parties: administrators, instructors, tutors, and students.

Space and Asymmetrical Power

In “Not Just Anywhere, Anywhen,” John Paul Tassoni and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson describe the evolution of a studio program at their institution and argue that their experiences forced them to consider “the relationship of space and place in working for institutional change and as crucial concepts in the teaching of writing” (69). They explore their own roles as story-changers and change agents and remark that since “institutional spaces are

never transparent, unclaimed, or uncontested, remaking the landscape of the university involves problems of power and colonization” (69). This idea that institutional spaces are marked and contested is thought-provoking in its relationship to space and ownership for our program. As we note above, our collaboration with the writing center included tutor-led, group workshops during class times in the physical space of the writing center. In other words, we asked our instructors to leave their own classroom spaces and to encourage their students to participate in group peer review in a space over which they had little control. Similarly, we asked the writing center to open early for our classes and to close their doors to other students in order to welcome expanded students and their instructors into their space. We were, to borrow Tassoni and Liewiecki-Wilson’s analysis of their own space issues, subordinating “the terrain of other institutional, cultural, social, and pedagogical places, on which our own aims encroach[ed]” (76).

This “encroachment” may be best illustrated by exploring the role of the tutors for our expanding expanded program. For, as much as tutors gamely adapted to often-unpredictable terms of their workshop sessions and persevered through marathon stretches of back-to-back sessions, especially in the full implementation year, there was an unspoken but palpable feeling of relief at the dissolution of the partnership. From the very beginning, in our meetings with tutors, there was a lot of cheerleading with inspirational anecdotes from sessions. And as former writing center tutors ourselves, we know the value of this. It is important for tutors to tell their stories, and these shared narratives can be a way of processing and understanding experiences. (Those stories were not all positive, it should be noted; there were complaints about the rowdiness of students during the first semester, especially, or their unpreparedness, and those complaints seemed to increase in volume and seriousness over the three years.) Ann, as the person to work most closely with the tutors for the longest period of time, always relayed the

positive comments she heard from her students and the instructors, and again, there was immediate value for that.

However, it is perhaps not surprising that the partnership strained with the new scale of full implementation. As the sheer logistics of scheduling sessions became far more complicated, so too, did the time commitment demanded (probably unjustly) of the fourth and final writing center liaison, who as mentioned previously, was a full-time graduate student also teaching a section of the expanded course. And with the additional expenses for compensating the liaison for the increased work and tutors for the additional hours came increased scrutiny from the English department chair, who had significant power over both the program's budget and the allotment of graduate students as tutors in the writing center. And with all this added strain on the writing center came a new group of writing instructors who felt increasingly empowered to make changes to the assignments and to the kinds of material they asked their students to bring into the writing center for partnership workshops. While this, on a theoretical level, is perfectly within both the instructors' rights and within the scope of the writing center's mission to focus on strategies rather than drafts, the practical reality was frustration from the tutors and the writing center administrators at what they perceived as instructors' asserting too much authority in the writing center's space.

This is perhaps physically exemplified in a complaint that arose, understandably, from tutors who were uncomfortable with instructors' physical intrusions into their tutoring spaces during the sessions (standing too close to the groups or eavesdropping). These instructor positions would be an understandable classroom practice and also, as an instructor later explained to me, an attempt to make sure students were being respectful to tutors by not

playing on their cell phones. In the partnership workshops, though, this instructor practice was deemed out of place. Indeed, sometimes instructors were invited to meetings with tutors, and sometimes their absence was resented, and other times they were specifically not invited to meetings with tutors. Though none of them said it directly to us, which is surely a function of the program hierarchy and yet another embodiment of the power imbalances in our network, we imagine that instructors found their role in the partnership workshops to be murkier than they would have liked, and it is perhaps not surprising that none of them seemed terribly sorry to see the partnership dissolve.

Changing Curricula

During our first two years of piloting the program, there were only three instructors teaching in the expanded program (including the two of us, albeit in separate years): in year one, the other two instructors were graduate students, and in year two, the other two instructors were contingent faculty. Even in our own tenuous positions, we had more security and authority than did our colleagues, and this may very well explain why they rarely questioned the curriculum of the expanded program itself, which we had designed in collaboration, or the nature or terms of the writing center partnership. From an instructor's standpoint, this partnership could be felt as an incursion on their own authority as teachers. After all, in addition to being required to teach the pilot program's curriculum, they were also required to devote class periods to writing center workshops (regardless of their own views of peer review, the writing center, or institutional collaborations) when we scheduled them. This also meant we all had to coordinate getting our students to relatively the same drafting stage in a project at the same time to coincide with our workshops in the writing center. These workshops were, necessarily, scheduled before the beginning of the semester.

Remarkably, as it now seems in retrospect, we managed to accomplish this coordination in most cases. By the end of the second year, though, the instructors who were now more familiar with our students and the program had become more empowered to individuate their expectations for the students and for the tutoring sessions—much to the dismay of the writing center administrators and tutors. In our final meeting of the second year, we agreed, at the request of the writing center administrators, to emphasize to instructors that these sessions were not about focusing on specific, project-related outcomes or instructor requests but, rather, about modeling the process of peer review. This view aligned with the writing center's own mission to focus not on particular drafts but on writing strategies and processes, and it also aligned with a more practical concern expressed by the tutors: their frustration with instructors' increasingly specific requests pertaining to the focus of the workshop sessions.

But from the perspective of an instructor—a role we both also inhabited—we can see how the move to customize the partnership workshops was, on some level, an act of agency and resistance to a top-down imposition of curriculum. David Martins and Thia Wolf describe the problems that arose when faculty in a WAC program were required to work with writing center tutors (some graduate, some undergraduate) in first-year WAC sections: faculty were skeptical or reluctant to change their teaching methods and, because of their status, ended up being more accommodated; tutors were put in difficult positions. Laurie Grobman and Candice Spigelman cite this study as evidence that “classroom-based writing tutoring should be implemented at the classroom teacher's request, not imposed administratively from above,” a recommendation we have now taken to heart (221). And this may be, furthermore, a consequence of what Jeanne Gunner describes as a WPA-centric model that “divid[es] instructor[s] from course material” (13) and has a demoralizing effect on instructors (11). Never was this tension more clear than in

the final year of the partnership, when two significant changes took place: (1) we moved into full implementation of the expanded program and attempted to scale up the partnership model from six sections to twenty-one sections, and (2) we hired full-time, experienced instructors to teach in the program (though there were still graduate students and adjunct faculty teaching sections, the instructors covered most sections).

In retrospect, we realize that these tensions were perhaps unavoidable; after all, we had not only encroached on the physical spaces of the writing center and instructors' classrooms in our efforts to create a collaboration with the writing center, but the scheduling of writing center visits gave instructors very little leeway in terms of curriculum design and pacing. Our goal for the expanded class was to ensure that students received assignments similar to those they would receive in the traditional first-year writing class—a class almost completely taught by graduate students who have the freedom to deviate from a common syllabus after their first semester in the program but who rarely choose to do so. And while all faculty had significant input into curriculum as we shaped syllabi for graduate instructors to follow, we realize that we were unintentionally restricting faculty via both the assignments we suggested and the writing center schedules we required. We recognize that even as we were attempting to resist power imbalances in the network, we were also perpetuating them.

Analyzing and Reflecting on our Failures

Unfortunately, our ability to systematically test our hypothesis about the role collaborative writing center workshops played in encouraging more sophisticated responses from students was limited by the conflicting interests of our own roles in the partnership. In Ann's case, as a researcher, she wanted to record and observe as many partnership sessions as she could, but as a teacher, she felt compelled to exclude her own sections from the study, and as an

administrator, she felt compelled to be available to support the liaison and the instructors. Especially in the final year, Ann often tutored partnership sessions herself (again, not for her own sections) when we were unable to recruit enough tutors to cover the sessions. And, by this point, Joyce's role was as the peripheral administrator—serving as an advocate for the program at the upper administrative level and the senior (but still tenuous) WPA diplomat between the department chair and the writing center administrators. We had, in the end, two basic means of collecting information on the partnership: a student satisfaction survey administered at the end of each academic year and a qualitative case study of peer review that Ann conducted during the final year of the partnership.

We did, however, collect empirical data on the partnership by means of an end-of-year survey that included a question asking students to rate the partnerships with the writing center, Speaking Center, and libraries.⁴ Each of the four years of the partnership, more than 90% of students described the writing center events as either “outstanding” or “very good” (Expanded). By this measure, at least, peer review sessions in the partnership appeared to be a success. And given the fact that students' interests and perspectives on the partnership were otherwise not sought out beyond informal class polling and reflections after events, it would be difficult to discount the significance of their response to the sessions. And while in the interest of space we will not explore the results of Ann's study, we do believe it illustrates the ways our collaboration with the writing center may have modeled agency for students in productive ways. What Ann discovered, in her case studies of students' experiences in group workshop sessions was that both tutors and students, as well as this different configurations of

classmates, adopted remarkably flexible approaches to negotiating agency in tutoring sessions.

Just as important as these successes, however, has been our analysis of this collaboration and its failures. Our analysis, perhaps not surprisingly, is comprised of paradoxes; it resists a simple fix that would have allowed our partnership to continue. First, as long as our work—and our partnership—was seen as addressing the problem of basic writing and basic writers, as opposed to working towards reframing the institution’s understanding of and response to changing educational landscapes and student demographics, the number of institutional colleagues who would see themselves as allies of such work will likely be limited. But this reframing work would be very difficult, given the fact that basic writing exists in institutions to address a problem (however constructed) and given our own contingency and the contingency of our colleagues and students.

This leads us to a second paradox: given the issues of contingency and institutional structures and discourses, what can we learn from this failed collaborative effort? There are certainly concerns about the subject positions created for students, tutors, and instructors in our partnership that are larger than our local, institutional context: concerns about deeply ingrained attitudes about students who are labeled as basic writers, concerns about views of the writing center, concerns about the labor conditions of tutors and of instructors. It could be tempting to extrapolate from this local, material incident a notion of causality: that such a partnership necessarily has “inevitable, intended functions” (Horner 125). Instead, though, we want to heed Bruce Horner’s call to “examine the specific ways in which an institutional form has led to certain effects: to see, in other words, how such forms, in specific instances, have worked strategically” (125). We do not mean to suggest that such a partnership cannot or should not work—at our institution or any other. Indeed, the dissolution of our formal, administrative partnership

creates more space for instructors and students to envision their own ways of partnering with the writing center, if they so choose. The resulting partnerships will be, we imagine, more flexible, more student-centered, and more sustainable than the former partnership. But we can also read our experience as a way to better understand and critically inhabit those institutional networks in our future efforts. And we can assist in the cultivation of such partnerships by telling our story and encouraging potential partners to identify and welcome the authority of those who often do not feel at liberty to voice their opinions and needs within the traditional academic institutional structure.

Notes

¹ See, for example, Thomas Rickert's *Ambient Rhetoric* and Diane Davis' *Inessential Solidarity*.

² In our proposal for full implementation, we explained that

there are two major problems that adversely affect the success of our first-year students in these two demographics [ACT English subscores below 16 and ACT English subscores from 17-19]. Students who are required to take ENG 099 continue to have problems passing the ENG 101 course. Their lack of success is due, in part, to the pacing of the ENG 101 class. The Department of English has felt for some time that these students would be best served by the slower pace of the Expanded Program, but the IHL requirements for ENG 099 made this impossible. The second problem involves students' understanding of the significance of the composition sequence to their college careers. We felt it important to pilot the Expanded Program in a way that allowed students to place themselves in the class; however, in spite of our attempts to brand this program as an alternative that would provide students with the highest chances of success, we were unable to convince students to enroll in the Expanded pilot in large numbers. (Proposal I)

Our original proposal made the case for including the second demographic (albeit via directed self-placement) after institutional data revealed that they were failing both the non-credit-bearing

class (English 099) and the one-semester first-year writing class (English 101) at troubling rates.

³ In fact, the material circumstances of our institution—especially contingent positions without support for research—make extended collaboration with our colleagues in the writing center no longer feasible.

⁴ The survey question reads, “Based on your experiences in Expanded Composition, how would you rate the overall value or usefulness of these other components of the class? (If you aren't sure, please mark Not Applicable.)” Students were given a Likert scale of Outstanding, Very Good, Good, Poor, and Not Applicable to rate their experiences in the writing center, as well as in the speaking center, in the libraries, in our multimedia writing studio, and in our once-a-semester, program-sponsored movie nights. None of the other program components received nearly as high ratings as the writing center.

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Ann Shivers-McNair

Ann Shivers-McNair is a PhD student in language and rhetoric and Assistant Director of the Expository Writing Program at the University of Washington. Formerly, she was a visiting instructor and Basic Writing Coordinator at the University of Southern Mississippi.

Joyce Olewski Inman

Joyce Olewski Inman is an Assistant Professor and Director of Composition at the University of Southern Mississippi.