Making the Writing Center a Writing Environment

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Introduction to the Writerless Writing Center
Surely I am not alone in the observation that writing centers are not where writers write. In my experience in the writing center at Grand Valley State University, it's only the regulars, who seem to trust the space and the staff, that feel comfortable enough to work here. In truth, when our regulars are quietly writing by themselves, it seems to make the staff a little uncomfortable. We ask, "are you all right? Do you have any questions?" when they know they can ask a question whenever. Our regulars are exceptions to an unwritten rule: no one really writes in writing centers.

This sent me down a path that ended up landing me a summer research project: "What Writers Need to Write: Environment and the Writing Process." As proponents of active and social learning, writing centers should adapt to become environments that allow writers to find their ideal writing spaces and processes. This way tutors can intervene during the writing process, and the writers can build their own self-sustaining communities. As Stewart Brand, author of How Buildings Learn, states: "An adapted state is not an end state. A successful building has to be periodically challenged and refreshed, or it will be turned into a beautiful corpse" (Brand 209). Brand's point extends to service spaces too, like a writing center's.

My research was multi-faceted. First, I did reading on writing center theory and practice, accomplished writers' accounts of their writing environments and processes, literature on the design of learning spaces, and some building design and utilization. This reading helped me to create a rubric for observing writing center spaces as well as survey questions. The rubric was used in observations at four writing centers in Michigan. I also interviewed the directors of those centers. Last, I wrote and disbursed a survey that went out to over 600 Grand Valley faculty, staff and students. My guiding research questions were: What do writers need to write well in their writing environment? And how can writing center pedagogy benefit from these findings? This article argues that it is important to understand what writers need in their writing environments to be productive and to make the writing center a good writing environment.

Why Collaborate as Writers in the Center?
Writing centers operate as collaborations between writers. The benefits of collaboration are throughout writing center and composition scholarship. In "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind,'" Kenneth Bruffee retells a study of M.J.L. Abercrombie, author and researcher concerning education. She noticed that medical students were individually diagnosing patients, and then "asked the whole group to examine the patient together, discuss the case as a group, and arrive at a consensus...What she found was that students learning diagnosis this way acquired good medical judgment faster than individuals working alone" (Bruffee 637). If medical students can work together toward one goal, a diagnosis, it seems a group of writing students could write in the presence of each other toward one goal: a completed paper. Of course, a group of students cannot always write one piece together, but there is something conducive to a group

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1. All participants were recently enrolled in a writing class or participated in a faculty/staff writing retreat.
of people working on the same assignment or even activity in the same room together. Bruffee goes on to explain some of the importance of students writing together: "Students' conversation about what they read and write is similar in as many ways as possible to the way we would like them eventually to read and write. The way they talk with each other determines the way they will think and the way they will write" (Bruffee 642). Writing centers could better realize themselves as places for students to write and talk about their writing if they provided an environment conducive to the act of writing.

Andrea Lunsford's "Collaboration, Control and the Idea of a Writing Center" discusses her wary conversion to the idea of collaboration in writing centers. Her students help her see the light: "Their collaboration was the most important and helpful part of their school experience" (94). Things that students learn collaboratively and/or within a group are more likely to fully engage the student: "Collaboration engages the whole student and encourages active learning; it combines reading, talking, writing, thinking" (Lunsford 95). Writing in the presences of others in the writing center could help writers to grow by making their own groups and having tutors available to them throughout the writing process.

Lunsford's findings resonated in my survey as well. Out of those asked in my survey whether they would like to option to collaborate with other writers while working, a significant portion of respondents--29% of students and faculty/staff--said they would like to collaborate with others while writing, 9% said sometimes, and 2% said maybe. On Grand Valley's campus, I cannot imagine a place where those who truly do want to write with others can go. But the question is: is the environment of the writing center truly conducive to writers writing in the presence of each other?

Reimagining Services: What Learning Space Scholarship Says
The field of learning space design places great importance on having spaces for people to be able to work together, and writing centers can benefit from this scholarship to reimagine how our spaces are used. Some of my building design and use literature showed that people feel comfortable learning in a space that they have control over, which is perhaps why so many in my survey prefer to write in their homes. It is literally their own space.

A way to integrate some feelings of ownership into a writing space other than the home is a program used at other universities called "flyspace" (Learning Spaces 28.1) where students reserve a room for themselves for a period of time. A program like this will probably not allow for complete or immediate control of the physical space; however, those who reserve the room can at least have the feeling of control because the space is absolutely theirs for a certain period of time. Moreover, if there is a group of students in one place without a teacher or a leader that also lacks hierarchical point in the room, it allows those using the space to trade hierarchical positions within their group, allowing even an even further and deeper feeling of control within a space.

2. Here, collaboration, meaning writing in the presence of others, not writing the same piece together.
3. Such as a podium.
Lunsford's work supports this idea: "[A collaborative] environment rejects traditional hierarchies" (95). One would presumably feel more comfortable adapting a space to their personal needs without some sort of impeding hierarchy. It would be simpler to make changes, even small ones, in a space without an overwhelming sense of permanence. Buildings are used more frequently if they are considered temporary (Brand 28). It seems that if one feels that the space/building they're in was made for a specifically for one purpose, that user does not feel empowered to modify it. Small things like moveable seating and tables in a writing environment allow users to feel in control.

By interviewing directors of writing centers, I came to understand that not everyone encourages or even wants writers to be writing in their space. It's not part of their vision, need, or desire for a space. One director described the main role of the writing center as providing "the role of feedback. It isn't study hall. [There are] incoming freshman and the perception is that the writing center is a supervised time away and I can get my homework done. And that's not how [I] conceive of the writing center." Feedback is an integral part of the writing center, but if the writing center can become a space where focused writers come to write, it would become something far more productive and serious than study hall.

All of these seemingly separate findings have implications for the writing center: a space design that allows and even encourages collaboration could help a range of different writers with different learning styles and needs. Having options for services offered at our writing centers shows writers that tutors and directors know their needs are myriad. If we can relax, and allow people to sit in the space and write, and learn about the space themselves, adapt to it, and/or encourage users to adapt the space to themselves, they could grow to understand their needs for space and learning, as well as grow as writers.

**Writing at Home, or Something Like It**

There is immense value in assessing, reevaluating, and reimagining what a space, not just a service, provides for its users. Author Stewart Brand suggests that users of a building should come together to evaluate that building from time to time to ensure that its users are getting what they need from this building and/or space. It would give users a feel of control and ownership. By asking people to discuss their needs and wants as a group, it will strengthen that group of users as a unit and strengthen their connection the building as long as it is adaptable enough to be able to make the suggested changes. Discussing the needs and wants as a group can make everyone feel more empowered to use that space. It helps make a community. My first recommendation then, is that writing center staffs and students explore their spaces as writing space.

Still, what's the value for writing centers to become an ideal writing environment for its users on top of all of the other services it provides? First, it would be easy, many centers already have great collaborative aspects to their writing centers. Therefore, making the writing center a space for writing, as well as collaboration, would be worthwhile. Jacob Blumner director of University

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4. This has implications for a space too, not just in the grand scale of an entire building.
of Michigan-Flint Campus' writing center brought up ideal workspace: "We have to talk with students about the ideal workspace. [We have to think] how are people using the space [and] do students really know what they need in a space?" This got me thinking that the writing center could be a place for discussion and modeling of an ideal writing environment for its users. Understanding environments that make writers either productive or unproductive allow writers to grow and develop. The value that I see in making the space more friendly to those who wish to write instead of going just to get writing help is that it shows writers that we understand the many facets of their process. It would put directly into practice our understanding that there's more to writing than idea generating, reorganizing, synthesizing a thesis, revision, and proofreading. While all writing center staff and faculty know this, making the space a place that truly encourages and fosters good, productive writing puts our understanding of the many needs of a student writer into practice and obvious perspective. Also, if people feel comfortable enough to come to the writing center as a writing space, I imagine that they would also feel comfortable to get help and utilize the other services the writing center offers.

Some of the only literature I could find that delves into the writing center as a space itself is Jackie Grutsch McKinney's article "Leaving Home Sweet Home: Toward Critical Readings of Writing Center Spaces," which argues that writing centers shouldn't feel like home: "What we ought to stop doing is using description [of writing centers] to fortify a narrative of home simply because it allows us to imagine that our spaces are (or should be) friendly simply because we use a particular code to inscribe them as such" (18-19). She notes the most commonly used items in her writing center at Ball State University as: "computers, Kleenex, a stapler, cleaning spray, pencils, trash cans, breath mints, bulletin boards, our telephone, forms, the front desk, a coat rack, and our worn copies of The Everyday Writer handbook. These items don't tell a coherent story of another place, and they don't remind me of home" (18). But I argue that the idea of home is at least a wide descriptor. It implies many things; it's adaptable. While it is correct that there are many implications of home that are not necessarily positive in a writing space, the adaptability of home must be alluring because 56% of faculty/staff and 56% of students who took my survey prefer writing in their homes. While Grutsch McKinney makes some good points concerning the dangers of making a space too much like home, we have to take into account our users' needs and preferences. As one writing center director told me, "We need to collaborate with our users to find out what kind of space they want. They want a space like home."

Working against the metaphor of "home," which implies ownership of and adaptability by the users of the space, stands in opposition to some of Brand's ideas, which are admittedly centered on building design. However, Brand mentions several examples of buildings built for such specific purposes that they are not usable once there more needs arise, especially within an institution, like a college or university.

Brand has negative feelings about institutional design: "Institutions aspire to be eternal...Instead of opting to long term flexibility...[they seek] to embody their power in physical grandeur...The building tries to stand for the function instead of serving it" (Brand 44). This points directly to the issue many writing centers face: the writing center stands for the function of writing, but in most cases does not serve the function of writing. Many writing centers serve the function of conversation about writing, but not necessarily the physical act of writing itself.
While I can see how a writing space that feels too much like a home can be an issue for a writer, I think there should be some comforts beyond tissues. There needs to be some comforts, but not so many that it becomes too difficult to be productive. What could give a writing center an edge then? While researching, I came across a blog that said: "The library adds value to the equation...offering an experience you can't replicate at home, borne of a community" (Thinkering Spaces in Libraries). And that's where I think the writing center itself can become a place where good writing can happen: focusing on community-building through collaboration.

Creating Homey Collaboration
Given my reading, writing center visits and survey results, it seems that writing centers should have a healthy mix of learning space design along with several of the classic writing center design ideas to become a truly collaborative space. If we can create a place that bolsters all kinds of collaboration, not just student to tutor collaboration, I believe we will find ourselves with ideal writing centers. If some are uncomfortable with a homey writing center, what if it had a reasonably comfortable feel with the added touch of several things that are not available at home? If writers can have the feelings of control in a space other than their home where they can also connect and work with other writers and students, they might be able to some excellent work. And while one space could never be the ideal writing space for everyone, there would be an immense value in writers being able to come together to discuss what kinds of environments work for them and being able to go out and create those environments for themselves.

Reimagining how we use a spaces changes the space itself and the practices within the space. For a writing center, this means we would have to change how we train our tutors and how current tutors see themselves, and more importantly how they see the writing center. But the physical changes themselves would not have to be drastic.

Of course, writing centers cannot just get space whenever they want or need it. However, there are some small things that can be added to a writing center to make it a writing environment, where students could write in the presence of each other. Movable seating, tables, and partitions allow students to create a space around their needs. Lots of electrical outlets add flexibility for each writer, and free printing of drafts allow students to remain for on-paper editing or tutoring in the same place they're drafting. Literary books and magazines could provide students with a way to take a break, or to get inspiration from other writers. Something we're considering at GVSU is much like flyspace: allowing groups of students to reserve nearby conference rooms for an hour or so to write, with or without the help of the tutor. That way, students have control of the space for that time, and have help nearby if they need it. These changes are small, but they will make the writing center a more writer friendly area.

The writing center is a collaborative space to begin with, and I see great potential in expanding that collaborative process even further to build a community of writers who work together. Writing is a social act in the sense that it is a conversation between writers and their audiences. The ultimate writing space allows for conversation on the page and off of the page, with other

5. This gives writers adequate room to spread out their materials for easy access to sources and notes.
writers engaging in similar acts and conversations. The writing center already provides integral services that adding the element of a pleasant, inspirational, and collaborative writing space gives so much more importance and versatility.

Works Cited