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The Interplay of Theory and Practice in Writing Center Work

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THE INTERPLAY OF THEORY AND PRACTICE

IN WRITING CENTER WORK

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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Indiana University of Pennsylvania

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Title: The Interplay of Theory and Practice in Writing Center Work

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This study examines the interplay of theory and practice in writing center work. It uses a pragmatic framework to better understand how three key writing center figures—Harvey Kail, Muriel Harris, and Jeanne Simpson—approach theory and practice. The study specifically examined 34 publications, 152 WCenter listserv postings, and 51 pages of interview.

Identifying ways for the writing center community to engage theory and practice addresses the tension between writing center theorists and practitioners. Although most writing center professionals recognize the value of both theory and practice, they tend to separate the two and favor one over the other. This separation and favoring results in parallel conversations in which many theorists and practitioners either ignore or talk past each other. Administrators and peer tutors are often skeptical of theorists who are seen as disconnected from the day-to-day realities of writing center work, while many theorists have become frustrated with the inability or unwillingness of many administrators and tutors to see how theoretical explorations can usefully inform the day-to-day realities of centers. Because of this, the field fails to benefit from the productive ways in which theory and practice inform each other.

Praxis is often used as a means to reconcile this tension, but requiring practice to serve as a laboratory for theory endorses a hierarchical relationship in which theory is superior to practice. This study instead uses the concept of action-and-reflection to consider questions of exclusivity and superiority. Doing so suggests the possibility of a more reciprocal relationship between theory and practice. Kail, Harris, and Simpson point to the possibility of using action-

and-reflection in a way that recognizes the pragmatic underpinnings of the writing center field. Employing action-and-reflection recognizes the pragmatic desire to remove obscurities and realize solutions while also emphasizing the necessity of reflecting on writing center work in rigorous, systematic, and communal ways. Such an approach does not necessarily alleviate the theory-practice tension, but it does encourage writing center administrators, peer tutors, and theorists to respond to the pragmatic call to removes obscurities, realize solutions, and better understand writing center work.

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I want to dedicate this dissertation all of the tutors and staff I have had the pleasure of working with over the past 15 years at Northwestern College, DePaul University, and the

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CHAPTER ONE

THE PROBLEM(S) WITH WRITING CENTER THEORY

"The beginnings of peer tutoring lie in practice, not in theory."e

--Kenneth Bruffee

"The whole thrust of the academic reform movement was to remove authority over knowledge from the hands of those whose main source of such authority was their practice . . . The removal was effected quite successfully—so successfully, in fact, that we are by now, some twenty years later, largely unaccustomed to entertaining the notion of practice as a mode of inquiry at all, as involving a series of steps that result in a contribution to a field of knowledge."

--Stephen North

In his book, *Lives on the Boundary,* Mike Rose (1989) claims that writing centers are marginalized within the academy because writing center work "is not considered a contribution to a discipline; in fact, much of what tutors do is considered 'remedial,' work that isn't even part of a disciplinary pursuit but preliminary to it" (p. 198). Writing center professionals are more than familiar with Rose's observation—over the past 30 years, the field has been dominated by an ongoing quest for legitimacy within the academy. This legitimacy has manifested in several ways, including the accumulation of quantitative research (e.g., Henson & Stephenson, 2009; Jones, 2001; Lerner, 2003; Lerner, 1997; Peters, 2006), the compiling of writing center histories (e.g., Boquet, 1999; Carino, 1995; Kelly, 1980; Lerner, 2009a), the pursuit of faculty status for writing center directors (e.g., Olson & Ashton-Jones, 1984; Simpson, 1985), and the formation of regional, overseas, and international organizations (e.g., Kinkead, 1996; Simpson, 2009).

But perhaps more than anything else, the quest for legitimization has resulted in the pursuit and privileging of theoretically-focused scholarship. The relationship between legitimacy and writing center theory was articulated in the inaugural issue of *The Writing Center Journal* (*WCJ*) when co-editors Lil Brannon and Stephen North (1980) warned that "if writing centers do not mature, do not establish themselves as part of the academic establishment . . . they will

surely, deservedly, wither away" (p. 2). Brannon and North believed that maturity and status would best be obtained through theoretical scholarship, which is why, they explained, the fledgling journal would look first for "essays that are primarily theoretical, that explore or explain the whys of writing center instruction" (p. 2). Indeed, an examination of the articles published in *WCJ* in the 30 years since reveals that the privileging of theoretical inquiry has not only remained consistent with the journal, but also with the writing center community as a whole. As Alice Gillam (2002) notes, "confirmation of the privileged status of theoretical inquiry in the writing center community comes from a review of the 18 individual essays that have received Outstanding Scholarship Awards from the National Writing Centers Association, the vast majority of which involve primarily theoretical or conceptual inquiry" (p. xxiii).

In many ways, the privileging of theoretical writing center scholarship is understandable. After all, writing center theory has been key in helping writing centers move beyond the service or remedial roles in academic institutions. Michael Pemberton and Joyce Kinkead (2003) claim that writing center studies developed into a legitimate area of scholarly inquiry that "has become increasingly sophisticated theoretically" (p. 1). The consequences of this development are impressive and should be celebrated: More than 60% of writing center directors have faculty status (Writing Centers Research Project, 2008), graduate students are writing dissertations and theses on writing centers at increasing rates (Lerner, 2009b), and composition and educational scholars are publishing in writing center journals and speaking at writing center conferences.

The Theory-Practice Tension

Despite its contributions to legitimization, the growth of writing center theory has had problematic consequences. Perhaps the greatest problem is the tension between theory and practice and, just as importantly, between theorists and practitioners. As Roskelly (1998) notes,

"Those who would name themselves primarily as teachers seem increasingly hostile to theory, increasingly frustrated by attempts, their own or outsiders, to make it govern or explain their practice. Practice is sometimes seen as the only worthwhile enterprise, and theory becomes almost a pejorative in some contexts" (p. 16). Elizabeth Boquet (2002a) provides evidence of this tension in her commentary on a WCenter listserv response to Nancy Grimm. She cites the following posting as an example of misguided criticism:

> But for the sake of discussion here, let me reduce it to an oversimplified form: [H]ey, if we have a theory, we can be like the other kids on the block. That . . . doesn't ring true for a number of reasons. No administrative or institutional pressure on writing centers is staved off by sending them reprints of articles on theories of writing centers. Nor are the faculty who want us to clean up their students' writings . . . Misunderstanding is misunderstanding is misunderstanding, and some talk and some friendly interaction will do more than pulling out theories to hand him. (p. 33)

Boquet states that she "was, and continues to be, perplexed by" this and other negative responses to Grimm (p. 33). She specifically wonders how "people can so readily separate this thing called 'theory' from this thing called 'practice' and how the call to see writing centers as sites of literacy research becomes connected with directors and tenure and institutional demands" (p. 33). In many ways, Boquet's defense of Grimm is appropriate and understandable, but it is important to note that in doing so, she fails to consider the larger issue at play, which is the disconnect between writing center practitioners and the theorists who often represent the field to the academy. bell hooks (1994), for instance, points out that theory is often seen as a useless "kind of narcissistic, self-indulgent practice that most seeks to create a gap between theory and practice so as to perpetuate class elitism" (p. 64). Boquet need not be perplexed by the postings because

they are not so much a response to what Grimm specifically writes but a response to what theory represents to many writing center practitioners: a narcissistic, self-indulgent practice that seeks to divide. Ellen Barton (2000) points out that theorists tend to create division through their use of negative argumentation. In the end, she pleads that the "contact zone between methodologies should no longer remain a war zone" (p. 405).

The tension between theory and practice has caused many writing center professionals to become skeptical of theorists who appear only to challenge and critique everyday writing center work. Most of these theorists—or at least the theories they espouse—are seen as disconnected from everyday writing center practice and, not surprisingly, are often ignored or challenged by writing center practitioners. For instance, in *Noise from the Center*, Boquet (2002b) critiques the assumption that centers should be quiet, structured, and controlled places, arguing instead that they should embrace the "noise" that is often seen as chaotic or disruptive. While Bouquet's argument was well-received on a theoretical level, some directors struggled to conceptualize how noise could be embraced in the day-to-day realities of their writing centers. As Julie Bokser (2003) points out,

> The fact is, though, there's a limit to how much noise we'll be able to productively channel, and for a reason Boquet probably doesn't anticipate. I'm simply too far from the noise. I am a writing center director and assistant professor of English. The writing center is in the basement (of course). My office is one floor up. Coincidentally, I'm directly above the center, but unless we drill a hole through the floor, it's much too far away.

The interesting aspect of this challenge is the claim that Boquet does not *anticipate* the potential disconnect between her theoretical argument and the day-to-day realities of writing center work.

The problem is not her argument, per se, but the opportunity she misses to identify how a theoretical claim may not recognize the day-to-day realities of writing center practitioners. In this instance, Boquet misses the opportunity to acknowledge how administrative structures and physical locations prevent practitioners such as Bokser from channeling noise from the center.

Ultimately, the divide between writing center theory and practice has resulted in a parallel existence between theorists and practitioners. Consider a recent WCenter listserv discussion about mandatory session reports for faculty. There were two types of responses in the thread—the first type focused the theoretical issue of student agency and the positioning of writing centers within an institution, while the second focused on more practical concerns such as FERPA laws and usage rates. Aside from the fact that the practical postings outnumbered the theoretical postings at a rate of 2:1, the most interesting feature of the discussion was how the two threads operated on parallel levels, failing to engage each other. This failure to engage is evident in postings from Harry Denny and Megan O'Neil, respectively. In his post, Denny (2011) quickly delves into a theoretical discussion about meta-awareness:

> I really enjoy the richness of this conversation . . . What's been interesting here in Queens and Staten Island is that the discussion has hinged on the teachable moments that come in reviewing the reports before they go out—getting the consultants to think about perceived audiences (as opposed to notions of busy work), getting them to unpack details but also to move toward larger sense-making as a collective or community. As a result, we have this dawning of the meta around the reports, and a renewed awareness that any one of us might need to be pushed to unpack our narratives and memories.

Later, Denny uses the issue of session reports as a springboard to a discussion of institutional positioning, eventually bringing in Nancy Grimm's work on cultural informants in writing center work:

> This thread also gets me thinking about how our own institutional positioning can compel us to respond to the question of reporting in very different ways . . . How can we treat these reports not just a teachable moments but as occasions (as someone posted) for advocacy? But we might also think about how our rhetoric can quickly reify the Other in our midst in ways that are both problematic and rife with potential. The faculty, the administration, the institution as these figures against whom we mobilize versus figures with whom we can collaborate, win over, maybe even subvert. This notion gets me thinking about Nancy Grimm's notion of cultural informants in the writing center.

In contrast, O'Neil's (2011) posting does not reference Grimm or any other theorists, nor does it address issues of meta-awareness, positioning, and advocacy. Instead, she is more interested in discussing the practical implications of sharing session reports with faculty:

> I'm very interested in this discussion. At my university, the Writing Center functions as a key point of communication between student, tutor, and faculty member, with all three vitally and yet differently interested in what happens during a tutoring session. We have traditionally alerted faculty when their students visit, sometimes at the explicit request of the faculty member. Our faculty tend to respond to tutor reports with encouragement, suggestions, and reminders for the next time the student visits, using the reports as an external and indirect method of finding out precisely what the student has or has not understood about a given assignment . . . While I understand

and to some extent agree (in the philosophical sense) that student agency is critical,

the single semester when the Writing Center did not send reports nearly resulted in

the Center shutting down because the traffic dropped by almost 80%.

Like Denny, O'Neil states her interest in the discussion, but unlike him, she quickly moves into a

discussion of the practical, describing her center's reporting process before stating her rationale

for sending session reports. She acknowledges the issue of student agency—stating that it is

critical and tricky to negotiate with faculty engagement—but she does not probe it. In the end,

O'Neil's decision to send session reports to faculty is practical. For her, session reports are not

about meta-awareness, positioning, or advocacy; they are about student traffic. And in this case,

because traffic drastically dropped in her center the semester they did not send reports, she

deems reports helpful and necessary. That is the bottom line for O'Neill. She sees no need to

examine her center's practices from a theoretical perspective or raise theoretical questions in the

way that Denny does.

These two postings exemplify how the writing center community appears to address the

theory-practice tension. Both Denny and O'Neil state their interest in the conversation about

session reports, but it is clear that they are having different conversations. Most writing center

professionals acknowledge the theoretical and the practical, but they tend to keep the two in

separate realms, finding themselves drawn to one or the other, which results in parallel

conversations in which they talk past each as Denny and O'Neil did in their respective postings.

Evidence of parallel conversation is particularly evident in the discussion, or lack thereof, of

writing center research. Gillam (2002) posits that the paucity of talk about research is mostly

attributable to the fact that "the material circumstances of many writing center directors . . . has

militated against a sustained conversation about epistemology, methodology, and hermeneutics"

(p. 4). In response to research calls, then, many directors struggle to comprehend how they can find the time or energy to conduct theoretical and empirical research on writing center work. As Harvey Kail (2000) notes, "The problem for me in answering [research] calls is that it is late in my day when I get around to thinking of the writing center director as the writing center researcher—very late in the day" (p. 27).

There is clearly a tension here. On one hand, theory appears to offer a type of credentialing for writing center professionals—helping them establish legitimacy both within the writing center field and the academy at large—and as Grimm, Boquet, Welch, and others have demonstrated, it offers a means for critique of writing center work. On the other hand, the everyday demands placed on writing center professionals often result in a dismissive or resentful attitude toward theory. The question, then, is: What should the writing center community do with this tension? Should they ignore it? Try to alleviate it? Or should they embrace it as a means to advance the field? These questions are important because many would agree both theory and practice are necessary in writing center work. Both need to inform each other, and, more importantly, help writing center professionals better understand the work they do. This understanding not only helps writing centers carry out their work more effectively, it also helps them explain and validate their work to an external audience, particularly skeptical audiences that impact the status, funding, and structure of writing centers and the people who work in them.

Perhaps a better approach to, or understanding of, the theory-practice quandary can be found by examining the relationship between reflection and action. In other words, can action-and-reflection inform each other, and if so, how? For example, does a person need to act first and then reflect on that action, or can reflection happen before action? Not only does this examination consider the question of mutual exclusivity, but it also explores whether the

relationship is egalitarian or hierarchical. That is, it considers whether or not action is superior or inferior to reflection.

One possible way to better understand how the relationship between reflection and action is enacted can be found by examining the work of individuals who, in different ways, have remained committed to writing centers, tutors, and the one-to-one while still finding ways to reflect on writing center work and contribute to the field. These individuals would have to be professionals who have been able to channel the theory-practice tension in productive ways, perhaps even bridging the theory-practice gap in the writing center field. They would have to be writing center figures who have had a substantial impact globally, although their position would differ from theorists. Instead of theoretical scholarship, the priorities for these individuals would be "teaching, service, service, service, and then research—on our service" (Kail, 2000, p. 28). This list of priorities clearly reflects a commitment to practice, but it also calls for research—or perhaps more accurately, reflection—on practice.

Taken further, these individuals would speak to a form of praxis in which practice and theory inform each other. Praxis has been traditionally understood as "the process of applying theory through practice to develop more informed theory and practice" (Doherty, 2005, p. 11). In the past half century, critical theory has embraced praxis as the process of applying theory to enact social change, particularly in the field of education (e.g., Freire, 1993; Freire, 1985; Freire, 1970; Lankshear and McLaren, 1993; Shor, 1987). In this system, theory informs and directs practice—if anything practice is considered the laboratory in which theoretical concepts are tested. But the praxis Kail refers to here is more reciprocal. In fact, one could argue that his list of priorities—the idea of researching service—is "bottom-up" in the sense that practice informs theory more than theory informs practice. This distinction is important when considering the

theory-practice tension in writing centers because it sheds light on both how and how much theory and practice inform each other, and in the process, where power, influence, and prestige lie. More importantly, it points to the unique ways in which individuals like Kail have been able to address the theory-practice tension in writing center work in positive, productive ways.

Design of the Study

The ultimate goal of this study is to examine the relationship between writing center theory and practice. More specifically, this study seeks to better understand the status of praxis in the writing center field. Doing so can help alleviate existing tensions between theorists and practitioners by encouraging them to converse with, and not talk past, each other. But more importantly, it will also help writing center workers better understand how to channel the theory-practice tension in productive ways by understanding how theory and practice interact with each other.

To achieve this understanding, the study examines the ways in which three key writing center figures approach theory and practice in their work. By better understanding how their approach to writing center work has situated them within both individual centers and the writing center community as a whole, this study will hopefully help the writing center community better understand and address the relationship between theory and practice. There are obviously several ways to examine the theory-practice relationship, but doing so through the work of individuals is productive because any examination of praxis must entail an examination of both theory and practice. Examining individuals, then, provides instances where both action-and-reflection is enacted. In other words, examining the career work of writing center individuals provides opportunities to examine how they have used theory and practice not only in their research and scholarship, but also in their everyday writing center duties.

This dissertation will explore the work of three key writing center figures—Harvey Kail, Muriel Harris, and Jeanne Simpson—with the goal of understanding how their approaches to theory and practice have informed their understanding and approach to writing center work, as well as how their respective methodologies have situated them within both their individual centers and the writing center community as a whole. The examination of these individuals will be guided by the following research questions:

1) What does an examination of the work of these key figures tell us about the interplay of theory and practice in writing center work?

2) What does an examination of the work of these key figures tell us about the current and future status of theory and practice in writing center work?

3) What can the writing center community learn from these three individuals in terms of approaching theory and practice productively?

The three individuals were selected because of their unique standing in the writing center field—each is established and well-known for his or her long-term commitment to writing centers and tutors, collectively accumulating more than 100 years of experience in the writing center field. Of course, this commitment manifests itself differently for each individual.

Perhaps more than anything, Harvey Kail is known and respected in the writing center field for his commitment to writing center tutors. Kail's scholarship focuses on writing center pedagogy and training, and he is well-known for bringing tutors to both Writing Center and National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing (NCPTW) conferences. Recently, Kail worked with Paula Gillespie and Brad Hughes to promote the Peer Tutor Alumni Research Project, which seeks to document and better understand how peer tutoring impacts tutors in their post-graduate lives (Kail, Gillespie, & Hughes, 2010b). Kail's commitment to undergraduate peer

tutors was formally recognized in 2004 when he received the Ron Maxwell Leadership Award, which is awarded by NCPTW to individuals who have made distinguished contributions to undergraduate student development through promoting collaborative learning among peer writing tutors.

Muriel Harris' influence on the writing center field is undeniable and, in many ways, unmatched. Harris founded the Purdue University Writing Lab in the mid-1970s and spearheaded efforts to develop one of the most admired and used Online Writing Labs (OWLs) in existence. But her influence, of course, extends beyond her local context. In 1977, she founded the *Writing Lab Newsletter (WLN)* and has served as its editor ever since. As Michael Pemberton and Joyce Kinkead (2003) note, *WLN* established "the basis of a new professional community and provided it with an important mechanism for cohesion . . . it was not until the creation of the newsletter that writing center directors and staff had a national forum for regular publication and professional contact" (p. 1). Moreover, Harris was a key player in forming the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA)—she hosted the first Writing Centers Association meeting at Purdue in 1984—and continues to be active in the organization today. What is even more remarkable is that despite this significant service, Harris was able to publish extensively: She has authored six books and edited three, written 32 book chapters, and published 40 articles in refereed journals. In addition, her engagement with the field includes presentations and addresses at conventions as well as WCenter listserv postings.

Still, it is important to note that most of Harris' work has focused on writing center pedagogy and administration. In fact, the only scholarship awards she received from IWCA were for works in these pragmatic areas: *Teaching One-to-One* and "Solutions and Trade-Offs in Writing Center Administration," respectively. As such, while Harris is respected in the writing

center community, this respect is largely based on her work as a practicing theorist. Fittingly, her work as a practicing theorist was formally recognized in 1984 when she was named the first recipient of the Muriel Harris Outstanding Service Award. The award, which is given every four years at alternate IWCA conferences, recognizes outstanding service that has benefited the international writing center community in significant ways.

Like Harris, Jeanne Simpson has had a profound influence on the writing center field as a practicing theorist (Simpson received the Muriel Harris Outstanding Service Award in 2000). But while Harris was equally devoted to the *WLN*, writing center pedagogy, and writing center administration, Simpson's work in the field has almost exclusively addressed administrative concerns. Ever since her dissertation, *A Rhetorical Defense of Writing Centers*, Simpson has been a staunch advocate for writing centers and concerned with improving the status of writing centers and directors at academic institutions. Indeed, much of her scholarship and published work attends to administrative concerns. Not surprisingly, Simpson has been very active with IWCA—she was a founding executive board member of the IWCA and helped draft the organization's constitution. She also wrote a position statement on working conditions for writing center directors and collaborated on "starter kit" materials for new directors. Simpson served as the IWCA Vice President and Program Chair from 1984 to 1985 and was IWCA President from 1985 to 1986.

Research Methods

This dissertation uses both conceptual and empirical inquiry methods in an attempt to gain a more informed understanding of the significance of these figures' approaches to theory and practice in writing center work. Gillam (2002) describes conceptual inquiry as a means to "justify, guide, or critique practice" while empirical inquiry strives to "understand, improve,

and/or change practice" (p. xvi). From a methodological standpoint, conceptual inquiry refers to "the broad nature of inquiry that includes theoretical speculations, historical investigations, hermeneutical/critical inquiry, or some combination of these approaches" while empirical inquiry includes case studies, ethnography, and practitioner inquiry (p. xvi). The conceptual methods used in this study consist of a theoretical exploration of the published work of Kail, Harris, and Simpson. The goal of this exploration is to gain a better understanding of what their work says about the relationship between writing center theory and practice.

Empirical methods included responsive interviews with the practicing theorists themselves. According to Rubin & Rubin (2005), responsive interviewing is a flexible, in-depth interviewing model that "emphasizes that the interviewer and interviewee are both human beings, not recording machines, and that they form a relationship during the interview that generates ethical obligations for the interviewer" (p. 30). Although responsive interviewing was used, there were some predetermined questions. Some of the questions were specific to the work of the individual, while others were asked of all the individuals. All participants had the opportunity to check transcripts of their interviews to ensure accuracy of representation, clarify information, and provide feedback.

Both conceptual and empirical inquiry suggests that Kail, Harris, and Simpson are each committed to pragmatism's call to find solutions with the institutions they are a part of. Additionally, it reveals an underlying valuing of practice and the experiential in writing center work. Indeed, the prioritizing of practice is a key reason why all three figures have been embraced by so many members of the writing center community for such a long time—the valuing of practice validates the approach of most writing center practitioners. Still, this is not to say that Kail, Harris, and Simpson reject theory. Instead, these individuals point to a form of

praxis in which practice and theory inform each other. Although critical theory embraced by Friere and others has embraced praxis as a system in which theory informs and directs practice, these individuals suggest the possibility of a relationship that is more reciprocal.

Issues of reciprocity are important in better understanding the theory-practice relationship, particularly in writing center work, because they have implications for where power, influence, and prestige lie. The following chapter will document how pragmatism's desire to clarify obscurities and realize solutions influences the ways in which different members of the writing center community prioritize either practice or theory. More specifically, it leads to questions about whether or not methodological egalitarianism is the best way forward for the writing center field, if it is even possible at all. Indeed, the pragmatic underpinnings of writing center work seem to suggest that an egalitarian epistemology of praxis is unattainable, which would in turn favor a "bottom-up" form of praxis.

CHAPTER TWO

PRAGMATISM AND THE THEORY-PRACTICE RELATIONSHIP

Any examination of the theory-practice relationship in the writing center field must begin with an understanding of pragmatism, a philosophical camp known for its emphasis on the concrete and experiential. William James (1907/1955) points out that the word pragmatism is derived from the Greek *πράγμα*, meaning action, from which the words "practice" and "practical" come (p. 43). Still, pragmatism is not synonymous with practical, but instead views "knowledge as an instrument or tool for organizing experience and is deeply concerned with the union of theory and practice" (Schwandt, 2001, p. 204). For some, then, pragmatism is largely concerned with determining and doing "what works," but for others it is more concerned with experiential knowledge, lore, or colloquial language.

Better understanding pragmatism is important to this study because pragmatism is a philosophical school that appeals to writing center professionals who find themselves consumed by the day-to-day challenges of writing center work. The catch is that many of these professionals embrace a form of pragmatism that pushes back against more abstract theoretical paradigms and methodologies present in the field. However, the pragmatism of William James and Charles Peirce encourages, if not necessitates, an embrace of both theory and practice. As Roskelly (1998) notes, the pragmatism championed by James and Peirce "explains how theories and practices work together" (p. 84). Better understanding pragmatism is important because it challenges the common assumption that pragmatism resists or dismisses theory. Indeed, Roskelly writes that to examine the history of pragmatism "is to recover a history and philosophy that teachers can use to question their own practices and beliefs and to give them theoretical support for the beliefs they continue to hold" (p. 3). He claims that without this philosophical

framework, teachers and writing center professionals "can easily become weary, cynical, or naïve about theory's connection to their lived experiences in the classroom" (p. 3). Instead of resulting in division, Roskelly believes pragmatism offers the potential for writing center professionals to move past their weariness and cynicism by providing a way for theory and practice to connect in beneficial ways. The question that arises, then, is what this connection might look like.

This chapter begins with an explanation of pragmatism's origins and foundational tenets—which were articulated Charles Peirce and William James—before transitioning to the educational pragmatism of John Dewey. It then applies Dewey's educational pragmatism to writing centers to set up an exploration of the epistemological and methodological differences in writing center work. This exploration begins with an examination of the strong appeal of Stephen North's (1984) "The Idea of a Writing Center" before using his *The Making of Knowledge and Composition* as a framework to explore the theory-practice tension in both the composition and writing center fields. Part of understanding this tension entails examining the ways in which writing center theorists have attempted to reform practitioners over the last 30 years. The success, or lack thereof, of reform attempts leads to questions concerning the necessity of a different form of pragmatism in the writing center field, a form that is closer to pragmatism's call for theory and practice to connect and work together. Hopefully, this form of pragmatism can be found through an examination of Kail, Harris, and Simpson.

Understanding Pragmatism

Charles Sanders Peirce is credited with introducing pragmatism to philosophy in the late 1800s through his claims that because human beliefs are really rules for action, "to develop a thought's meaning, we need only determine what conduct it is fitted to produce: that conduct is

for us its sole significance" (James, 1907/1955, p. 43). William James (1907/1955) built on

Peirce's work[1], championing pragmatism as a means to filter out unnecessary, abstract

philosophical arguments:

> It is astonishing to see how many philosophical disputes collapse into insignificance
> the moment you subject them to this simple test of tracing a concrete consequence.
> There can be no difference anywhere that doesn't make a difference elsewhere—no
> difference in abstract truth that doesn't express itself in a difference in concrete fact
> and in conduct consequent upon that fact, imposed on somebody, somehow,
> somewhere, and somewhen . . . A pragmatist turns his back resolutely and once for all
> upon a lot of inveterate habits dear to professional philosophers. He turns away from
> abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad a priori reasons, from
> fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins. He turns
> towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action and towards
> power. (p. 45)

Ultimately, James believed that pragmatism is an attitude of orientation, or an attitude "of

looking away from first things, principles, categories, supposed necessities; and of looking

towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts" (p. 47). That is to say, it was an orientation that

focused on identifying what happened, what worked. Roskelly points out that James'

pragmatism "is deeply concerned with use and consequence" (p. 85). James believed that

pragmatism was a philosophy oriented to results and should always be connected to the

experiential.

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[1] While Peirce intended pragmatism as a theory of conception and meaning, James carried the notion of effects into a theory of truth—Peirce opposed this so much that he changed the name of his theory to pragmaticism. Still, both Peirce and James are categorized as pragmatists (Noddings, 2007, p. 25).

With its privileging of observable consequences and concrete facts, it is not surprising that pragmatism's development coincided with the proliferation of scientific inquiry and, more specifically, the scientific method in the late 19th century. In fact, Robert Burch (2013) claims that Pierce's championing of pragmatism in many ways derives from his life's work as a practicing physical scientist and his belief in "the superiority of the scientific method over other methods of overcoming doubt" (Pragmatism and the Scientific Method section, para. 1). Likewise, James (1907/1955) writes that a pragmatic conception of all truth follows the example of geologists, biologists, philologists, and other scientists who always "take some simple process actually observable in operation . . . and then to generalize it, making it apply to all times, and produce great results by summating its effects through the ages" (pp. 49-50). Indeed, pragmatism's concern with consequence, use, and human action supports science's championing of tested conclusions and verifiable data (Roskelly, 1998, p. 86). For both Pierce and James, science reflected pragmatism's call to determine truth and seek solutions through observation of known experience, or an orientation to concrete results.

The connection between pragmatism and science is particularly evident in the work of John Dewey. In fact, Dewey himself had trouble with the word pragmatism because of its pejorative associations; instead he preferred the term *naturalism* (Noddings, 2007, pp. 25-26). Recent writers, however, have settled on the term *pragmatic naturalism* to describe Dewey because the "term has the merit of conveying both the emphasis on naturalistic explanation and the focus on effects through a method of inquiry that involves hypothesis testing" (p. 26). Regardless of the term, it is clear that Dewey's (1910b) philosophy aligned with both pragmatism and scientific inquiry:

> Naturally, the pragmatist claims his theory to be true in the pragmatic sense of truth;
> it works, it clears up difficulties, removes obscurities, puts individuals into more
> experimental, less dogmatic, and less arbitrarily skeptical relations to life; aligns
> philosophy with scientific method; does away with self-made problems of
> epistemology; clarifies and reorganizes logical theory, etc. (p. 9)

As Richard Rorty (1992) observes, Dewey's "central argument was that the use of new means changes ends, that you only know what you want after you've seen the results of your attempts to get what you once thought you wanted (Rorty, 1992, p. 68). For Dewey, then, truth as "what works" is the theory of truth that is most beneficial because we have seen the unfortunate results of believing otherwise (Rorty, 1998, p. 305). This argument itself is indeed very pragmatic, drawing upon the tangible consequences of other abstract epistemologies. Dewey's pragmatism is interested in observable results, and for Dewey, epistemologies that are not interested in results are not only erroneous, they are harmful.

Dewey's Educational Pragmatism

Not surprisingly, Dewey's pragmatism has significant implications for education. However, discussion of his work in composition studies has been minimal. Stephen Fishman (1993) posits that this is because Dewey says so little about writing and writing instruction. But as Janet Emig (1980) claims, Dewey is everywhere in the field and has laid the groundwork for contemporary composition research. Thus, "understanding Dewey is essential for understanding ourselves, for understanding the discussion among competing theories of writing which has been the field's focus the past twenty-five years" (Fishman, 1993, p. 315). Perhaps the best way to engage Dewey's thoughts on writing, then, is through an examination of his educational philosophies. Indeed, despite a recently renewed interest in his philosophical work, Dewey is

still most often referenced for his thoughts on education. Noddings (2007) observes that Dewey "has been hailed as the savior of American education by those who welcome greater involvement of students in their own educational planning and activity" and lambasted by others "who felt that he infected the schools with epistemological and moral relativism and substituted socialization for true education" (p. 24). Regardless of their opinion, Nodding claims that most people who carefully study Dewey's work "usually agree that his contributions to education thought are considerable; his work should not be ignored" (p. 24). As Williamson Evers (1998) notes, the progressive education championed by Dewey has never gone away and continues to permeate all types of educational systems and levels.

Ultimately, Dewey (1920) believed that the main goal or aim of education was more education. He argued that education's emphasis on future preparation—of learning and acquiring certain things for future use—is antithetical to growth and thus antithetical to the aim of education:

> If at whatever period we choose to take a person, he is still in process of growth, then education is not, save as a by-product, a preparation for something coming later. Getting from the present the degree and kind of growth there is in it is education. This is a constant function, independent of age. The best thing that can be said about any special process of education, like that of the formal school period, is that it renders its subject capable of further education: more sensitive to conditions of growth and more able to take advantage of them. Acquisition of skill, possession of knowledge, attainment of culture are not ends: they are marks of growth and means to its continuing. (pp. 184-185)

This stance of education for education's sake did not sit well with many of Dewey's critics, who believed education was an enterprise with a specific aim. Dewey spoke of education as synonymous with growth, but critics asked where or what the student was growing towards. Dewey's response was that direction was antithetical to the concept of growth, and thus counterproductive to realizing it: "Dewey insisted that growth to its own end; that is, to ask 'growth towards what?' is inconsistent with the concept of growth. Growth tends toward more growth, he said, and we must not make the concept rigid by specifying its direction" (Noddings, 2007, p. 26).

At first glance, Dewey's opposition to direction appears to contradict the pragmatic tenet of discovering workable solutions. But it is important to note that Dewey believed that educational activities should have aims or goals because both students and teachers are trying to accomplish something. However, for Dewey "these aims are not fixed, and there is no grand, ultimate aim beyond continued education. As long as a particular aim functions adequately to guide our activity, we retain it" (Noddings, 2007, p. 28). This last point—that we retain aims that adequately guide our activity—is important because it points to Dewey's pragmatic approach to education:

> When it fails to give such guidance, we abandon it and substitute another, more relevant aim. Hence aim functions as means-ends planning. If we are steadfast in our aim, as an end-in-view, and our chosen means do not seem likely to culminate in the desired end, then we must consider different means. In other cases, we reconsider the aim itself. (p. 28)

Essentially, Dewey viewed education as an ongoing experiment in which teachers and students intelligently apply existing knowledge to inquiry. Then, as they test their hypotheses, they "may

discard or revise some of the material with which [they] started" (p. 33). What we are left with are two points that are central to Dewey's theory of knowledge and pedagogy. The first point argues that humans rely upon experience to guide inquiry: "First, human beings at every stage of maturity use material from prior experiences to guide present inquiry. This is knowledge in the pragmatic sense because it has real effects. It explains what the inquirer is doing" (p. 34). The second point is "that genuine problem solving involves undergoing the consequences of one's hypothesis making and testing" (p. 34). For Dewey, then, learning is both pragmatic and theoretical. To gain knowledge, individuals must generate hypotheses from world experiences, and, just as importantly, they must test those hypotheses for tangible effects.

Deweyan Pragmatism and Writing Center Work

Fishman (1993) argues that three Deweyan educational principles are particularly influential in composition studies: 1) education as primarily a social endeavor; 2) education as a communal endeavor that requires a common experience and purpose; and 3) education as both passive and active perception (p. 316). In discussing these tenets, Fishman highlights pragmatic influences of Dewey in composition, particularly his understanding of community and the common good. For instance, in applying Dewey's claim that the main aim of education should be more education, he writes that Dewey would say that "students should leave their composition courses wanting to do more writing" (p. 317). Fishman also points out that Dewey would want students "to know how writers get their work published and enter the conversation of larger forums" (p. 318). Each of these ideas align with Dewey's pragmatic naturalism view of community as a multifaceted and integrated system in which different organs are mutually responsive and contribute "in unique ways to the shared purpose of keeping the body alive" (p.

319). Dewey believes that an effective education should produce tangible results with benefits that extend beyond students.

Although these three Deweyan tenets have significant implications for the composition classroom, Dewey's pragmatism has just as much to say about writing centers, particularly concerning writing center research and research methodologies. For Dewey (1910a), inquiry begins and ends with experience because it "includes the reflection that sets us free from the limiting influence of sense, appetite, and tradition," and welcomes and assimilates "all that the most exact and penetrating thought discovers" (p. 156). Louise Phelps (1988) notes that Dewey's endorsement of empirical research critiques any theory that does not begin with or refer back to experience (p. 209). Phelps writes that one of Dewey's criticisms of philosophy is that it "denies cognitive content to ordinary experience (and thus fails to recognize the source of its own abstraction)" (p. 209). Phelps goes on to describe how Dewey's experimental method "reintegrates reflection and experience so that they complement and incorporate each other" (p. 210). For Dewey,

> Experience is the source for the refined methods and products of philosophy (for which we may read Theory in composition). At the same time it is the testing ground (praxis) where reflective concepts can be experimentally verified. The process of verification involves taking theoretical concepts as designating abstract meanings that can be tested for their power to illuminate and enlarge primary experience when they are reinserted into personally experienced contexts. (p. 210)

Dewey (1920) is not opposed to non-empirical inquiry, but he believes non-empirical inquiry "fails to use refined, secondary products as a path pointing and leading back to something in

primary experience" (p. 6). Again, the pragmatic emphasis on experience is strongly evident; for Dewey, experience should be the foundation of all research.

This expectation is evident in the writing center field, which is engulfed by a validation-by-practice mindset that also dominates the composition community. As Sidney Dobrin (1997) claims, most compositionists believe that "grounding theory in that practice is the only means of validation of particular theories" (p. 153). He notes that these compositionists believe "theories argue away from real life and deny direct application to specific situations" (p. 5). This pragmatic frustration with theory is evident in Lad Tobin's (1993) call for more practitioner inquiry on writing relationships, a call that is the result of his frustration with "macrotheories" that fail to explain what happens during writing conferences:

> We have leapt over relationships to macrotheories about social construction, discourse communities, women's ways of knowing, sociocognitive theory, and cultural critique. But none of this theory gets at why Polly and I both felt the way we did during those final seconds of her conference. I think we need a way to talk about these issues—without, of course, forgetting that our primary job is to help our students become better writers. My argument in this book is that we can accomplish this by looking more carefully than we have so far at the interpersonal classroom relationships—between student and teacher, between the student and other students, and, finally, between the teacher and other teachers—that shape the writing and reading process. (p. 5)

Tobin uses his experiences as the impetus for further practitioner-based research on writing relationships, believing that research should begin and end with experiences. Doing so, he

argues, will result in better teaching, a pragmatic benefit that is not realized in abstract theories of writing (p. 15).

Like Tobin, many writing center professionals have examined relationships in writing center conferences as a means to clarify obscurities and discover solutions that work. For instance, Anne DiPardo's (1992) oft-cited article, "'Whispers of Coming and Going': Lessons from Fannie," examines a semester-long relationship between Morgan, an African American tutor, and Fannie, a Native American student. Morgan's frustration and discouragement with the collaborative strategies she learned in tutor training leads DiPardo to conclude that writing center professionals "must serve as models of reflective practice—perennially inquisitive and self-critical, even as we find occasion both to bless and curse the discovery that becoming students of students means becoming students of ourselves as well" (p. 143). Phelps (1988) claims that "Dewey's experimental method takes everyday experience itself for the laboratory in which philosophical concepts are tested" (p. 209). For DiPardo, the relationships formed in writing centers foster a fertile research laboratory.

But the pragmatic desire to examine relationships in writing center work sometimes pushes against the rhetorical detachment that theory often requires. That is to say, theory often requires language that removes the personal, thus discouraging an examination of relationships. As bell hooks (1994) points out, the gap between theorists and practitioners is largely the result of language: "The only work deemed truly theoretical is work that is highly abstract, jargonistic, difficult to read, and containing obscure references" (hooks, p. 65). James Raymond echoes this sentiment when he writes, "What's most disagreeable about theory is its jargon" (qtd. in Dobrin, 1997, p. 16). Using a pragmatic lens, Tobin (2004) points out that theory often requires a discursive disconnect between theoretical jargon and the personal self:

For years—in high school, college, graduate school—I wrote only traditional

academic discourse. I never told a story, revealed a private thought, doubt, or anxiety,

or used highly colloquial language . . . I had written myself so completely out of those

texts that producing them was a kind of out-of-body experience; by publishing

academic essays, I had finally gained entry into an exclusive club. The price, though,

was high: I had invited myself to leave. (p. 3)

The pragmatic values Tobin expresses here are clear. For years, he believed that writing theory

meant that he needed to write out experience, but eventually, he realized that to make sense of

his teaching—to try to clear up difficulties and remove obscurities—he needed to write about his

lived experiences, and he needed to use colloquial, accessible language to do so. Predictably,

Tobin's decision to write in this way was met with both "very positive support and very angry

criticism" (p. 3).

The debate surrounding personal, colloquial writing, however, has not developed in the

writing center community, mostly because most writing center scholarship incorporates the

personal. Indeed, some of the most-cited work in the writing center field is not only written in a

personal, accessible, and conversational manner, but also includes significant—both in frequency

and importance—references to personal experiences and contexts (e.g., Kail, 1983; North, 1984;

Simpson, 1985; Ede, 1989; Lunsford, 1991; Kiedaisch and Dinitz, 1993; Cooper 1994; Shamoon

and Burns, 1995; Grimm, 1999; Boquet, 2002b; Geller, Eodice, Condon, Carroll, & Boquet,

2007; Condon, 2012). On the surface, this rhetorical preference testifies to an epistemological

unity concerning the value of pragmatism and practitioner inquiry in the writing center field. But

the presence of the personal in writing center scholarship has not reconciled the theory-practice

tension that exists. After all, critical theorists such as Boquet, Grimm, Eodice, and Lunsford

write almost exclusively in a personal manner, but their work still challenges or seeks to reform practitioners. The tension between practice and theory, then, appears to extend beyond language, suggesting that there are underlying epistemological and methodological differences at play. Better understanding the different ways in which knowledge is generated in the writing center field is thus helpful in illuminating this tension.

Epistemological and Methodological Differences in Writing Center Work

One way to better understand the methods by which knowledge is generated in the writing center field is through an examination of Stephen North's (1984) "The Idea of a Writing Center," an essay that was overwhelmingly popular in the field for notable period of time. Indeed, even though its influence has somewhat waned in recent years, Boquet and Learner (2008) write that the essay has defined the writing center field and served to "identify, justify, and legitimize the work that writing centers do" (p. 171). Still, while the essay was indeed a galvanizing force in the field, Boquet and Lerner claim that its influence has not necessarily been positive. In fact, they argue that it has "become an impediment to the scholarly moves for which [North] himself called" (pp. 171-172). As such, an examination of the essay offers a "narrative of the field's epistemological trajectory" and serves as a "cautionary tale of the ways in which one scholar—or perhaps more to the point, one article or even one line—can come to define a field" (p. 172).

The epistemological narrative that "Idea" offers is one that speaks to the power of the experiential and, by extension, lore. Boquet and Lerner (2008) note that the article offers a way for writing center workers to "assert an identity and discuss the need for change while confirming, ultimately, the struggle to bring change about" (p. 179). Ultimately, North's article is a rant to administrators and faculty who fail to understand writing center work. North's

frustration comes from experiences that most writing center workers can relate to and thus makes it conducive to lore. But as Boquet and Lerner point out, the popular reception and proliferation of "Idea" resulted in the field's scholarship imbalance in which North's message was reified into lore:

> This particular article exerted undue influence and either did not leave enough space—or others did not enter spaces that were left by it—in any substantive way . . . Research in this area has been dominated by lore and speculation, controlled in many ways by the words of its founding father, and confined to specialized journals, and largely to one journal. (pp. 185-186)

Boquet and Lerner end their article with a call to research that extends beyond this resulting lore. They claim that writing centers are sites "rich with promise for understanding the everyday practices that students bring to their academic writing as the writing center on our very own campuses" (p. 186). Of course, this call—the call for writing centers to move beyond lore—has been heard before and will likely be heard again. The question is, why? Why is the writing center field susceptible to an epistemological and methodological imbalance that results in repeated research calls for the field to move beyond lore?

Ironically, North (1987) addresses this question in *The Making of Knowledge in Composition*, which provides an epistemological overview of the composition field. The book is helpful in understanding the different epistemological forces operating in the writing center field and, by extension, how those forces contribute to a theory-practice tension. North offers a taxonomy of three knowledge-making groups in composition: practitioners, scholars (i.e., historians, philosophers, and critics) and researchers (i.e., experimentalists, clinicians, formalists, and ethnographers). By examining how these different camps function both independently and

interdependently, he sheds light on the development of the theory-practice tension in composition, a development that in many ways parallels the development of writing center field.

Not surprisingly, North's (1987) depiction of practitioners strongly aligns with Dewey's pragmatic approach to inquiry and research. For North, practitioner inquiry begins with the practical purpose of making "the otherwise overwhelming complexity of experience more manageable" (p.33). Still, he is careful to point out that practice is not the same as practitioner inquiry—although it is tempting to say that practice is inquiry whenever it produces "new" knowledge, the fact that practitioners are continuously facing new practical problems and making new knowledge is problematic from a phenomenological standpoint. As a result, practice becomes inquiry

> (a) when the situation cannot be framed in familiar terms, so that any familiar
>
> strategies will have to be adapted for use; (b) when, although the situation is
>
> perceived as familiar, standard approaches are no longer satisfactory, and so new
>
> approaches are created for it; or (c) when both situation and approach are non-
>
> standard. (p. 33)

North argues that the logistics of teaching mean that "the time and energy required to respond to practice as inquiry are mostly devoured by the impossible numbers" (p. 34). Still, despite these demands, practitioner inquiry does occur. And when it does, it entails the following steps: 1) identifying a problem, 2) searching for cause(s), 3) searching for possible solutions, 4) testing solution in practice, 5) validation, and 6) dissemination. While these steps should not be considered a tidy, lock-step formula—North notes that there is little pressure among practitioners regarding methodological uniformity—the approach outlined here testifies to the overwhelming influence of pragmatism in practitioner inquiry. In fact, he suggests that practitioner inquiry is

driven by pragmatic evaluation: "Either the solution works, in which case the inquirer goes on to identify a new problem; or it doesn't, in which case the investigation recycles (new trial solution, renewed search for causes, reframed problem) or is abandoned" (p. 51). This value echoes Dewey's claim that all research should come back to experience, to what works or does not work.

North also notes that practitioner inquiry is not complete unless validation and dissemination occur, which, for practitioners, happens through lore. According to North, lore is driven by a pragmatic logic—it is concerned with what has worked, is working, or might work—and experientially structured—traditions, practices, and beliefs of which it is constituted are best understood as being organized within an experienced-based framework (p. 23). In other words, "because lore is fundamentally pragmatic, contributions to it have to be framed in practical terms, as knowledge about what to do" (p. 25). To become part of lore, practitioner findings must be published, and most publishing occurs through talk. Talk is the preferred means of dissemination for practitioners because of its practicality and reciprocity: "Not only does [talk] inform the community about what has been done, but then it helps the investigators assess it, too" (p. 51). North states that publishing through talk may be understood as ranging along a continuum:

> On one end is what we would be inclined to call the very informal, the talk most
> characteristic of Practitioner work in general—conversation in the hall or staffroom,
> over coffee in the cafeteria, and so on. Under most circumstances, this will be the
> most lore-ish form of Practitioner publication: experientially structured, pragmatically
> reasoned . . . At the other pole—in terms of oral publication, setting writing aside for
> the moment—are the highly formal, almost ritualized professional conference

presentations. These will be least lore-ish . . . Obviously the less formal kinds of talk

are the most common; and they represent Practitioner knowledge at its most

authentic. (p. 51)

Still, some lore does find its way into print, appearing in newsletters, electronic listservs,

specialized journals, or even textbooks, which represent a "catechetical version of lore" (p. 52).

In fact, well-known practitioners such as Muriel Harris, Mina Shaughnessy, Donald Murray, and

Peter Elbow have managed to maintain an extraordinary visibility and authority "by virtue of

their power as writers within a Practitioner culture that is . . . primarily oral" (p. 22). These

visible practitioners, "along with that of maybe a few thousand or so Practitioners who have

written with any comparable regularity or visibility over the past two-and-a-half decades make

some effort to represent in their work both lore's experiential structure and its pragmatic logic"

(p. 52). Despite these efforts, however, North argues that the lore one finds in print should not

be considered typical of either practitioner knowledge in general or practical inquiry in

particular. He goes as far as to claim that these visible practitioners are not always the best

representatives of practitioner inquiry: "Practitioners are for the most part not highly visible this

way. They are rather, one might say, Composition's rank and file" (p. 22). Similarly, North

claims that authentic practitioners who report on their inquiry through writing move away from

their pragmatic and experiential power base and, in the process, look "like bad Scholars or

inadequate Researchers, and further undermine the public perception of Practitioner authority"

(pp. 54-55). By staying committed to the pragmatic language of experience, these practitioners

lose credibility in arenas dominated by the detached, abstract jargon of theory.

North's claim that practitioner inquiry is often misrepresented in print publication speaks

to the low standing practitioner inquiry has in the field—practitioners feel pressured or

compelled to convey their findings in ways ill-suited to practitioner inquiry. North posits that this pressure is the result of the field becoming "largely unaccustomed to entertaining the notion of practice as a mode of inquiry at all, as involving a series of steps that result in a contribution to a field of knowledge" (p. 21). Patricia Bizzell (1997) alludes to the inadequacy of practitioner inquiry in a discussion of Paulo Friere and liberatory pedagogy, noting that theory and theorists can direct practitioners "more quickly down a productive path toward new approaches" (p. 4). For her, practitioner inquiry basically amounts to "trying every key on the bunch, doggedly, one after the other" until one that fits the lock is found (p. 4). Bizzell's comments reflect the mindset that practitioners are individuals in need of reform—that practitioner inquiry is not a particularly effective or efficient means of generating useful knowledge, and thus, practitioners should employ different research methodologies.

Because they believe practitioners need reforming, North claims that scholars and researchers employ two models of reform. In the conservative model, knowledge is controlled by the non-practitioners in a hierarchical structure—practitioners are viewed as laboratory technicians that apply knowledge generated by scholars and researchers: "The traffic is pretty much one way. Researchers and Scholars find out what there is to know, and then pass that knowledge along to the Practitioners. Indigenous Practitioner knowledge and method are a concern only insofar as they may obstruct the introduction and application of the new, imported knowledge" (p. 331). The liberal model, on the other hand, imports "both knowledge *and* method as a means of rescuing the Practitioners" (p. 331). Instead of merely passing on new and better knowledge, the liberal model seeks to empower practitioners by teaching them how to make this new and better knowledge themselves.

Despite these pleas, practitioners often resist both conservative and liberal models of reform. The irony in this is that even though both reform models follow pragmatic tenets, most practitioners have resisted each one for pragmatic reasons. As North observes, if practitioners follow the conservative model, then they (a) abdicate their role as knowledge-makers and (b) become recipients of an increasingly large, disorganized, and disconnected body of knowledge (p. 335). Similarly, practitioners have resisted the liberal model because it causes them to abandon practitioner inquiry, which they have embraced as a pragmatic research methodology that both provides solutions and acknowledges their everyday experiences. Practitioner inquiry would not be sufficient in the liberal model—practitioners would need to adopt additional research methods.

Reforming the Writing Center Practitioners

The requirement to adopt additional research methods has been problematic in the writing center field. Like composition, most writing center professionals are practitioners who embrace practitioner inquiry and lore. And like composition, the writing center field includes scholars and researchers who challenge lore and other practitioner approaches to writing center research and work. As writing centers transform from marginalized service entities to an academic society, then, the methodological differences that were once disguised or ignored for the sake of unity have begun to clash. Much of the tension has resulted from the attempts of non-practitioners to correct or reform writing center practitioners.

Historically, most reform attempts in the writing center field have followed the aforementioned liberal model—non-practitioners have challenged practitioners to incorporate other research methods—and in particular, to move beyond lore—with the goal of empowerment for both individual practitioners and the field as a whole. For instance, in the inaugural issue of

The Writing Center Journal, co-editors Lil Brannon and Stephen North (1980) argued that the best way for writing centers to establish themselves as members of the academy was through research, and fortunately, they argued, writing centers provided ample research opportunities: "And it is in [writing centers] that great new discoveries will be, are being, made: ways of teaching composing, intervening in it, changing it. Writing centers provide, in short, opportunities for teaching and research that classrooms simply cannot offer" (p. 1). But just four years later, Thom Hawkins (1984) lamented "there is not only an abundance of ignorance about the way writing centers have shaped classroom teaching, but writing center professionals themselves suffer a knowledge gap" (p. xii). Hawkins further argued that "if writing centers are to continue making substantial contributions to classroom practices and curricula, if they are to reach a productive and long-lasting maturity, they must do more than patch together fragments of successful practices" (p. xiii). Similarly, Peter Carino (1998) lamented that research on writing center technology was plagued by the "success story" genre that "begin[s] by raising concerns about technology, usually to ease humanist anxieties and then move to an ameliorative narrative of successful pedagogical implementation" (p. 502). Both Hawkins and Carino challenge writing center practitioners to use better methodologies in researching writing center work.

By the 21st century, the opinion, or at least discussion, of writing center research had become more positive, and, perhaps more importantly, hints of methodological tolerance began to appear. In distinguishing between conceptual and empirical inquiry, Alice Gillam (2002) categorizes practitioner inquiry as a form of empirical inquiry that entails case studies and ethnography:

> The term *conceptual inquiry* . . . captures the broad nature of inquiry that includes
>
> theoretical speculations, historical investigations, hermeneutical/critical inquiry, or

some combination of these approaches. Similarly, the term *empirical* . . . can be used

to refer to a broad category of research that includes case studies, ethnography, and

various forms of practitioner inquiry. (p. xvi)

A year later, Michael Pemberton and Joyce Kinkead (2003) claimed that Muriel Harris and the

Writing Lab Newsletter had established "writing center studies as a legitimate area of scholarly

inquiry, given shape to a new field of study that has become increasingly sophisticated

theoretically, educated hundreds of writing center professionals, and helped to envision the

nature of writing centers and the direction of writing center scholarship in the millennium to

come" (p. 1-2). The endorsement of *WLN* is significant because the publication embraces a

variety of mixed methodologies—practitioner inquiry, case studies, testimonials, theory, surveys,

etc.

Of course, tolerance or inclusiveness is not necessarily the same as egalitarianism. For

instance, former *Writing Center Journal* editors Melissa Ianetta and Lauren Fitzgerald (2009)

believe that recent writing center research testifies to "an exciting future of writing center

studies, a time when the traditions of lore are reconciled with empirical evidence" (p. 10). While

couched in encouraging language, this comment testifies to a liberal model of reform in which

practitioner inquiry is not sufficient; to establish credibility and add to the field's body of

knowledge, writing center practitioners must move beyond lore and toward empirical evidence.

Perhaps the most well-known example of practitioner reform came from Nancy Grimm (1999),

whose *Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times* considers "the conflicting

function of writing centers" with the goal of disrupting "the good intentions not only of the

people who don't understand the value of writing centers but also, most important, of the people

who think they do" (p. x). Grimm believes that this disruption makes people uncomfortable and

that "uncomfortable people will search for more complicated understandings of what writing

center work entails" (p. x). And for Grimm, theory is key to disruption: "Because theory is

powerful, it often overtakes practice, alienates us from our intentions, silences what we know

about what we do, and subjugates the daily knowledge that might challenge it" (p. ix). Still,

while theory does disrupt and complicate understandings, Grimm makes a point of connecting it

back to practice:

> Theorizing is often dismissed as something that might be useful for ontological
>
> discussions but not for practical decision making. As an example of the effect of the
>
> theorizing on daily lives, look at the feminist consciousness raising that occurred in
>
> the late sixties and early seventies . . . Theorizing itself does not solve daily writing
>
> center problems, but because it multiplies the perspectives we bring to problems, it
>
> can change practices. (p. xiv)

In this passage, Grimm is making a pragmatic-based argument for the value of theory, claiming

that theory ultimately informs and changes practice. She reinforces this idea by bringing

theoretical understandings into contact with daily writing center practice in order to extend

decisions about practice beyond consideration of local context" (p. xv). For Grimm, theory may

not always clarify obscurities, but it can be used to realize the workable solutions that

pragmatism calls for.

Grimm's attempt to reform practitioners through theory has been followed by several

writing center theorists. For instance, in *The Everyday Writing Center*, Geller, Eodice, Condon,

Carroll, & Boquet (2007) follow Grimm's goal of using theory to challenge and disrupt the

everyday practices of writing center work. The authors claim that in its desire to seek practical

solutions, the writing center community has reduced the complexity of tutoring, a reduction they believe is exemplified by practical matters such as tutor certification:

> As new staff education manuals land on our desks, as discussions of CRLA certification for tutors surface again and again and again on the WCenter listserv, we sense a move toward knowledge as containment, as commodity, and a move away from the genuine moments of collaboration that lead to knowledge-(re)creation. In some ways, this move toward certification simply reduces the complexity of tutoring. (p. 8)

The authors go on to argue that instead of ignoring or mitigating challenges, writing center professionals should view challenges—both concrete and abstract—as opportunities to reconsider writing center work:

> If we attempt to ignore these negative influences on our work and on our students, we reify troubling institutional impulses in other ways: participating in or somehow supporting rote training, standardized texts, and obsessive bean-counting, for example. How does the writing center function as an institutional space that lets us step in and speak to those matters? Could what Nancy Grimm terms our "good intentions" be keeping students from building their own cultural capital in safe and productive ways? (p. 8)

Like Grimm, the authors make a pragmatic-based argument for theorizing writing center work. In the book, they use a variety of theories (i.e., trickster, queer, race, etc.) that may eventually lead to workable solutions, even if they initially fail to clarify obscurities. Indeed, like Grimm, they state their desire to connect theory with practice, writing that "within and among chapters, readers will find theoretical explorations woven into descriptions of life on the ground in the

writing center, as we make an effort to use the hows to illuminate the whys and the whys to illuminate the hows" (p. 9). Again, what we see here is an attempt to reform practitioners by using a liberal model that encourages them to move beyond lore and question everyday practices and assumed solutions.

The idea of questioning and problematizing everyday writing center work is also evident in Harry Denny's (2010) *Facing the Center: Toward an Identity Politics of One-to-One Mentoring*. Like Grimm and Geller et al., Denny attempts to reform practitioners through a liberal approach that calls for more theorizing and examinations of everyday writing center work. For Denny, "what-to-do" questions assume that centers can "bank and replicate without regard to local context or culture or without deep thinking in collaboration with a staff and other stakeholders—faculty, students, and administrators" (p. 2). He goes on to argue that the idea of replicable solutions is of little "utility outside the everyday realities of our sites and experiences" (p. 2). The liberal approach to reform here is articulated by arguing against the applicability of a solutions-based approach. Denny instead argues that asking questions that challenge and complicate writing center work is ultimately more pragmatic because they lead to better understandings of what happens in writing centers that in turn empower writing center practitioners. He applies this argument to lore, claiming that instead of reinforcing writing center narratives of what is already known to work well, he wants "to tell another tale, a set of tales in fact, rooted in a phenomenon that cuts across writing centers, that resists easy answers and offers up tough questions, that invites problem-posing and believing and doubting" (p. 2). In this passage, Denny reaches out to practitioners by recognizing the value of lore. However, he also challenges practitioners to produce a lore that extends beyond the retelling of replicable solutions.

A Different Form of Pragmatism?

Twenty-five years ago, North (1987) posited that in order to survive, the composition community would need to embrace or, at the very least, pursue methodological egalitarianism. To do this, he argued, the field needed to address the different communal allegiances of each knowledge-making group (p. 372). North claimed that other communities traditionally responded to practitioner priorities by creating a dependency that sold a brand of knowledge while at the same time ignoring or devaluing lore. This approach, North argued, was futile for everyone:

> The end result, of course, is that the little that is spoon-fed gets absorbed into lore in a form likely to be rejected by its contributor, and neither side is any richer for the contact . . . This pattern has to change, and at both ends. Practitioners will have to make the same efforts as other communities to become methodologically aware and egalitarian, while the other communities must treat practice with much greater respect. (p. 372)

Recognizing the pragmatic—a desire to clarify obscurities and realize solutions—underpinnings of the writing center field, many writing center theorists have attempted to reform practitioners by challenging them to reconsider everyday writing center practices. As Boquet (2002a) discovered in responses to Grimm, practitioners have responded to these reform efforts with resistance or ambivalence. Whether it is theorists' attempts to reform practitioners and their methodologies or practitioner resistance to anything that fails to provide immediate solutions, and remove obscurities, the writing center field's overall commitment to pragmatism too often results in division or a parallel existence between theorists and practitioners. Even though most

theorists (Denny, 2010; Geller et al., 2007; Grimm, 1999; Carino, 1998; Hawkins, 1984; Brannon & North, 1980) have followed a liberal model of reform, the results have been similar.

But as Roskelly (1998) notes, the pragmatic tenets of James, Peirce, and Dewey suggest that "inquiry is both a communal and a contingent process, operating in local contexts and among groups as well as individual, and its method is therefore necessarily collaborative, with action tested by many in a variety of circumstances" (p. 84). For Dewey (1916/1944), because educators are "partners in common undertakings, the things which others communicate to us as the consequences of their particular share in the enterprise blend at one into the experience resulting from our own special doing" (p. 186). Dewey believed that educators have a responsibility to share their experiences and findings with each other. Doing so contributes to a body knowledge generated and tested from experience. As Rodgers (2002) claims, a central criterion to Dewey's pragmatism is that requirement that reflection happens in community and interaction with others (p. 845). Ideally, communal reflection will contribute to a meaning-making process that contributes to deeper understandings.

Dewey's expectation of communal reflection suggests the need for a form of pragmatism in the writing center field that acknowledges both theory and practice. Indeed, Roskelly (1998) suggests this in responding to Ann Berthoff about the possibility of teaching:

> A real answer to Berthoff's question might indeed be required, from teachers themselves, from their practices in their classrooms, from the public they serve, and . . . from theory, which has changed and challenged traditional ways of thinking about pedagogical enterprise . . . The interpretive turn Berthoff would encourage demands that a theory embrace consequences and that practice acknowledge theoretical agendas, influences, alternatives. (p. 13)

This claim seems to argue for a form of methodological egalitarianism in which both theory and practice inform each other. But is methodological egalitarianism the best way forward for the writing center field? That is, does it offer the best potential to address the theory-practice gap? Or, given the pragmatic underpinnings of writing center work, is a "bottom-up" form of praxis a more fitting, effective alternative? That is, does the writing center field's pragmatic underpinnings prevent it from realizing a truly egalitarian epistemology of praxis? Distinguishing between reciprocal and "bottom-up" is important when looking at Kail, Harris, and Simpson. Namely, do these figures approach the theory-practice relationship through methodological egalitarianism, or do they prefer a form of praxis in which practice informs theory or vice versa? The answers to these questions have implications for how the field understands the interplay of theory and practice in writing center work, and by extension, how it can use both to better understand and communicate what happens in writing centers.

CHAPTER THREE

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

The goal of this study is to examine and better understand the interplay between theory and practice in writing center work. While few can deny the importance of theory in offering a type of credentialing for writing center professionals that helps establish legitimacy both within the writing center field and the academy at large, theory is often perceived by writing center professionals as inadequate in helping them meet everyday demands and challenges. Fair or not, the use of writing center theory to critique has resulted in a tension between theory and practice and, just as importantly, between theorists and practitioners. This tension has caused many writing center professionals to become skeptical of theorists who appear to challenge and critique everyday writing center work. Theorists and the theories they purport are often seen as disconnected from everyday writing center practice and are thus ignored or resisted by writing center practitioners.

The tension between writing center theory and practice has resulted in a disconnect between theorists and practitioners. Most writing center professionals acknowledge both the theoretical and the practical, but they tend to first separate the two and then favor one over the other. This separation and favoring results in parallel conversations in which many theorists and practitioners either ignore or talk past each other. The question for the field, then, is what to do with these parallel conversations and the ensuing tension. More specifically, the field needs to better understand how theory and practice interact with the goal of approaching this interaction more productively. An examination of writing center dissertations suggests that there is space for other epistemologies and methodologies in the field, but how do these different approaches fit with the pragmatic underpinnings of writing center work?

This study attempts to explore these and related questions by examining the ways in which three key writing center figures—Harvey Kail, Mickey Harris, and Jeanne Simpson—approach the interplay between theory and practice. The three individuals were selected partly because they are each established and well-known for their long-term commitment to writing centers and tutors, collectively accumulating more than 100 years of experience in the writing center field. But more importantly, they were selected because they speak to pragmatic approaches to writing center work, albeit each in different ways. Their respective approaches have substantially impacted the writing center community, particularly concerning how the field views theory and practice. They are not considered theorists, but at the same time, they are not considered practitioners either. These individuals have, in different ways, remained committed to writing centers, tutors, and the one-to-one while still finding ways to reflect on writing center work and contribute to the field.   They have been able to channel the theory-practice tension in productive ways have had a substantial impact globally, although their position differs from theorists. Instead of theoretical scholarship, these individuals' priorities reflect a commitment to practice, but it also calls for research—or perhaps more accurately, reflection—on practice. In the end, all three approach writing center work in a way that speaks to a form of pragmatism that engages theory and practice in some manner.

Research Methods

This study will use both conceptual and empirical inquiry methods in an attempt to obtain a more informed understanding the interplay of theory and practice in the writing center field. It will specifically explore the work of Harvey Kail, Muriel Harris, and Jeanne Simpson with the goal of understanding how their approach to theory and practice has informed their understanding and approach to writing center work, as well as how their respective approaches

have situated them within both individual centers and the writing center community as a whole. The examination of these individuals will be guided by the following research questions:

1) What does an examination of the work of these individuals tell us about the interplay of theory and practice in writing center work?

2) What does an examination of the work of these individuals tell us about the current and future status of theory and practice in writing center work?

3) What can the writing center community learn from these individuals in terms of approaching theory and practice productively?

Conceptual methods used in this study consisted of a theoretical exploration of the published work of the practicing theorists, including books, articles, and listserv postings. The goal in this exploration was to gain a better understanding of what these figures say about the relationship between writing center theory and practice. Empirical methods involved interviews of the figures themselves. Because responsive interviewing was used, there was flexibility in the type of questions that were asked. Additionally, follow up interviews were used when appropriate, and all participants had the opportunity to review transcripts of their interviews to check for accuracy of representation, to clarify information, and to provide feedback.

Each figure was asked to discuss their respective approaches to writing center work throughout their career. They were also asked to share their personal views on the interplay of writing center theory and practice and how these views have either influenced or been influenced by their approaches to writing center work. However, each interview also entailed specific, unique questions that address some of the themes raised in their respective work, themes that related to pragmatism, theory, practice, and research. The following sections provide a list of

selected works that were conceptually examined and a list of both common and unique interview questions applicable to the study's research questions.

Harvey Kail

Kail has not been prolific in terms of published work or scholarship throughout his career. Because of the limited number publications, all of Kail's published work addressing writing centers, collaborative learning, and peer response were examined. Still, these limited number of works offered much insight into his approach to writing center work and, more specifically, the interplay of theory and practice. They were also relevant because of their popularity and standing in the writing center field, as well as the 20-year period of time they spanned.

1) Articles:

- Kail, H. (1983). Collaborative learning in context: The problem with peer tutoring. *College English*, *45*(6), 594-599.

- Kail, H. (1983). Evaluating our own peer tutoring programs: A few leading questions. *Writing Lab Newsletter*, *7*(10), 2-4.

- Kail, H. (2003). Tutor training and writing centers in Europe: Extending the cross-cultural dialogue. *Writing Lab Newsletter*, *27*(6), 5-8.

- Kail, H. (2010). What they take with them: Findings from the peer writing tutor alumni research project. *The Writing Center Journal*, *30*(2), 12-46.

2) Books:

- Kail, H. (2001). *Collaborative learning: Prentice Hall resources for writing*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

3) <u>Book Chapters</u>:

- Kail, H., & Allen, K. (1982). Conducting research in the writing lab. In M. Harris (Ed.), *Tutoring writing: A sourcebook for writing labs* (pp. 233-245). Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, and Company.

- Kail, H., Gillespie, P., & Hughes, B. (2007). Nothing marginal about this writing center experience: Using research about peer tutor alumni to educate others. In W.J. Macauley, & N. Mauriello (Eds.), *Marginal words, marginal work?: Tutoring the academy in the work of writing centers* (pp. 35-52). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

- Kail, H. (2003). Initiation, separation, and return: Tutor training manuals and writing center lore. In M. Pemberton & J. Kinkead (Eds.), *The center will hold: Critical perspectives on writing center scholarship* (pp. 74-95). Logan, Utah: Utah State UP.

These selected works testify to Kail's commitment to collaborative learning and peer tutoring as it almost exclusively focuses on collaborative learning theory, peer tutor training, peer tutor development, and writing center research. In addressing these issues, Kail is able to acknowledge and address pragmatic issues and pressures, but at the same time, they are not a priority for him. For instance, he is concerned about writing center goals, assessment, and evaluation is influenced by political and central administration pressures, but ultimately, he is driven by an intrinsic desire to better understand what happens in peer tutoring programs. Kail continually invites—or nudges—the pragmatic, skeptical writing center administrator to research, or at least explore, what happens in a writing center. This invitation appeals to pragmatic concerns, at least initially, but in the end, he appeals to the opportunity that writing

centers have in terms of discovering and publishing what happens in collaborative, peer-centered learning environments.

Like Harris and Simpson, Kail's work draws upon personal experiences and anecdotal evidence. Experiential knowledge—and the lore that follows—is important to Kail, but at the same time, so is theory. Unlike Harris, who often serves as a translator and applicator of theory, and Simpson, who almost exclusively draws upon the personal and anecdotal, Kail uses theory as a discussion starter and then progresses by weaving it throughout his discussion. A particularly interesting example of this is his desire for peer tutoring and collaborative learning to become part of academic lore. Yes, Kail appears to accept the pragmatic call to clarify and find solutions, but at the same time, he is also open considering the role theory plays in helping us do so.

An initial examination of Kail's work lent itself to the following interview questions:

- Your work acknowledges administrative pressures and concerns, thus aligning with writing center figures such as Harris and Simpson. But at the same time, you appear to be more concerned with an intrinsic desire to better understand what happens in peer tutoring programs. For instance, in "Evaluating Our Own Peer Tutoring Programs," you write, "We have time to think about all of these and other perhaps more germane questions in the next few years, but we must, I believe, begin to ask and genuinely answer them if we are to respond in a fruitful way to the question that our colleagues and institutions ought to be asking us: IN WHAT SPECIFIC WAYS IS YOUR PEER TUTORING PROGRAM MEETING AND NOT MEETING ITS GOALS? The reports that we will write or are currently writing to college Deans, Departmental Chairpersons, educational policy

committees and each other will become the academic lore of peer tutoring and the teaching of composition. We need to make it as accurate and interesting a story as possible." (p. 4). This and other passages suggest that your work is less concerned with securing funding/status within an institution and more concerned with examining, researching, exploring, discovering, etc. Is this accurate?

- The above passage also points to your concern with lore, which appears to be important to you. It appears in much of your work, particularly your chapter in *The Center Will Hold*. Why is lore valuable? How does lore function and how should the writing center community approach it?

- Your work also draws on conceptual theory, personal experience, and other forms of scholarship/research. Is this intentional? Why do you think this is?

- Taken further, I'm interested in your thoughts on the relationship between these different methodologies? For instance, in "What They Take with Them," you, Brad, and Paula write, "We theorize peer tutoring as a form of liberal education for peer tutors themselves. And we support this claim with empirical evidence that this is deep learning that endures years, even decades, after graduation" (p. 14). Is this how research should work, or more specifically, how theory and empirical research should work?

- You have spent the last five plus years conducting research through PWTARP. In your first publication on the project, you, Brad, and Paula write, "Based on what we have learned so far in our focus groups and surveys of tutor alumni, we think that training and employing peer writing tutors suggests a persuasive argument for a central, not marginal, place for the writing center in the academy" (p. 35). Is this

the primary reason why you believe the project is a valuable endeavor for both you personally and the writing center community as a whole? Or is there something else?

- The origins of PWTARP appear to have come from informal conversations with tutor alumni. The three of you write, "As we compared notes and heard similar stories from other directors, we decided that we wanted to inquire systematically into and document the long- and short-term effects of tutoring for the tutors" (p. 38). Over the years, what has been your motivation for research? What has drawn you to certain research projects, or made you say, "I want to look into that more"?

- In "Conducting Research in the Writing Lab," you and Kay Allen offer four benefits to conducting research in the writing lab: 1) It can improve your teaching, 2) It can help educate/persuade administration, 3) Staff development and involvement, and 4) It may lead you to greater insight into the composing or teaching process. Do you still believe this? Is there anything you would add or change about this list?

- How have, and how can, writing centers influence what happens in an institution?

- How have, and how can, writing centers influence what goes on in writing classrooms?

- What writing center figures would you align yourself with in terms of your approach to writing center work and scholarship/research?

- What do you believe is the biggest concern for the writing center community moving forward? Or, what do you think the writing center community should focus on in the next ten years?

Obviously, this list of questions was not exhaustive—additional questions referencing specific works and quotes were asked, as were follow-up questions to initial responses. However, both the common and unique questions attempt to explore the ways in which writing center theory and practice influenced the work of Kail, and by extension, the entire writing center community.

Both these works and questions speak to Kail's strong and unique commitment to pragmatism. For instance, Kail is committed to research, but he does not necessarily follow the practitioner desire to realize clear answers or solutions. He instead assumes that an honest exploration of writing center work will lead to narratives that provide solutions without making solutions the primary goal. Kail subscribes to a form of pragmatism that assumes if we explore what is happening and share our stories, the task of finding solutions will take care of itself. This approach is pragmatic in the sense that it acknowledges real, meaningful consequences (i.e., the issues and pressures writing center workers face), but, at the same time, it is not obsessed with them. Kail's pragmatism is guided by an underlying desire to better understand what happens in peer tutoring programs, an understanding he believes will lead to a stronger, more effective lore.

Additionally, Kail is pragmatic in the sense that he seeks connections. His desire to better understand what happens in writing centers results in a methodological inclusiveness that connects theory and practice, as well as theorists and practitioners. Again, this inclusivity challenges the dichotomy or division between theory and practice, and in doing so, challenges the assumption that pragmatism prioritizes one over the other. Finally, it is important to note that Kail's pragmatism does not necessarily require the Deweyan expectation that all effective inquiry begin with and return to experience. His belief that writing center lore includes theoretical explorations, anecdotal experiences, and empirical research appears to ignore

Dewey's criticism of abstract epistemologies and methods. And it is this unique form of pragmatism that makes Kail's work so important in answering the research goals of this study.

Muriel ("Mickey") Harris

Like Kail, Mickey Harris embraces a unique form of pragmatism that speaks to the interplay of theory and practice in writing center work. Harris' pragmatism has manifested itself over the past 40 years in a seemingly infinite number of publications. Indeed, one of the first words that comes to mind when examining Harris' career work is prolific. She has authored six books, 32 book chapters, and 40 articles—this is in addition to her editorial work and contributions to WCenter, the main listserv for the writing center community. To keep the scope of this study within manageable parameters, not all of her published work was examined. However, the following works that were examined provided a picture of how her approach to pragmatism and writing center theory and practice has both remained consistent and evolved over four decades:

1) <u>Articles</u>:
- Harris, M. (2001). Centering in on professional choices. *College Composition and Communication*, *52*(3): 429-40.
- Harris, M. (2000). Preparing to sit at the head table: Maintaining writing center viability in the twenty-first century. *Writing Center Journal*, *20*(2): 13-21.
- Harris, M. (1995). Talking in the middle: Why writers need writing tutors. *College English*, *57*(1): 27-42.

- Harris, M. (1992). Collaboration is not collaboration is not collaboration: Writing center tutorials vs. peer response groups. *College Composition and Communication*, *43*(3): 369-83.

- Harris, M. (1991). Solutions and trade-offs in writing center administration. *Writing Center Journal*, *12*(1): 63-79.

- Harris, M. (1990). What's up and what's in: Trends and traditions in writing centers. *Writing Center Journal*, *11*(1): 15-25.

- Harris, M. (1985). Theory and reality: The ideal writing center(s). *Writing Center Journal*, *5*(2): 4-9.

2) <u>Books</u>:

- Harris, M. (1986). *Teaching one-to-one*: *The writing conference.* Urbana, IL: NCTE.

3) <u>Book Chapters</u>:

- Harris, M. (2007). Writing ourselves into writing instruction: Beyond sound bites, tours, reports, orientations, and brochures. In W.J. Macauley, & N. Mauriello (Eds.), *Marginal words, marginal work? Tutoring the academy in the work of writing centers* (pp. 75-83). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

- Harris, M. (2006). Using tutorial principles to train tutors: Practicing our praxis. In C. Murphy, & B. Stay (Eds.), *Writing center resources for writing center administrators* (pp. 301-310). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

- Harris, M. (2002). "Writing center administration: Making local, institutional knowledge in our writing centers." In P. Gillespie, A. Gillam, L.F. Brown, &

B. Stay (Eds.), *Writing center research: Extending the conversation* (pp. 75-89). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

▪ Harris, M. (2002). "What would you like to work on today?": The writing center as a site for teacher training. In B. Pytlik, & S. Liggett (Eds.), *Preparing college teachers of writing: Histories, theories, programs, and practices* (pp. 194-207). Oxford: Oxford UP.

▪ Harris, M., & Fischer, K. (2001). "Fill 'er up, pass the band-aids, center the margin, and praise the lord: Mixing metaphors in the writing lab." In J. Nelson, & K. Evertz (Eds.), *The politics of writing centers* (pp. 23-36). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

▪ Harris, M. (2000). Making up tomorrow's agenda and shopping lists today: Preparing for future technologies in writing centers. In J. Inman, & D. Sewell (Eds.), *Taking flight with OWLS: Research into technology use in writing centers* (pp. 193-202). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

▪ Harris, M. (1999). "Diverse research methodologies at work for diverse audiences: Shaping the writing center to the institution."c In K. Shirley, & I. Weiser (Eds.), *The writing program administrator as researcher* (pp. 1-17). Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Heinemann.

▪ Harris, M. (1999). Selecting and training undergraduate and graduate staffs in a writing lab. In L. Myer-Breslin (Ed), *Administrative problem solving for writing programs and writing centers* (pp. 14-29). Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

- Harris, M. (1999). A writing center without a WAC program: The de facto WAC center/writing center. In J. Blumner, & R. Barnett (Eds.), *The interdisciplinary partnership: Writing centers and writing across the curriculum programs* (pp. 89-103). Westport, CT: Greenwood.

- Harris, M. (1998). Writing center theory. In M.L. Kennedy (Ed.), *Theorizing composition: A critical sourcebook of theory and scholarship in contemporary composition studies* (pp. 364-71). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

4) WCenter Postings: This study analyzed Harris' posts over an 18-month period from December 2010 to May 2012.

An initial examination of these works found that Harris relies heavily on anecdotal evidence and experiential knowledge, but at the same time, consistently references writing center and composition scholarship. In fact, Harris often functions as a translator, reporting what scholars and researchers have found and speculating how writing center workers can use these findings and theories in their everyday work. Common topics are tutor training, writing center administration, and the value of writing centers.

In her exploration of these topics, Harris employs both experience and theory, although experience takes priority. While she appears to view theory as foundational, ultimately, what is most important is finding a solution: "what works." Still, at the same time, Harris recognizes that there are no absolutes—that every situation is different and every solution entails trade-offs. In the end, she is a strong advocate of flexibility and argues that the specifics aren't always important as the ultimate goal of growing centers and helping writers.

Harris' work also demonstrates a strong commitment to the argument that writing center administration is research. Part of this position is grounded in her advocacy role for the writing

center field, particularly in terms of securing faculty or full-time status for writing center administrators, but part of it is also based on her belief in the value of experiential knowledge. Harris strongly contends that the knowledge writing center administrators gain through their everyday work and practices is a valuable form of research. This research is both anecdotal (i.e., "Here's what worked well for our center or for this tutor") and systematic (i.e., surveys, usage numbers, etc.), but the one constant is that it is both pragmatic and local. It is also reflective of Harris' belief that writing centers must ultimately look inward or —local—there is no generalizable solution or approach that works best for everyone.

Finally, Harris' work is consistent. While the topics may change, the epistemological and theoretical underpinnings of her work do not. The one notable exception is her approach to composition theory. Initially, she embraces process theory, particularly the work of Donald Murray, but beginning in the early 2000s she starts to advocate a more post-process approach to composition. But again, there appears to be a pragmatic value in this shift, as a post-process view aligns more closely with her belief in the uniqueness of each writing center. Fittingly, Harris' most recognized role as a spokesperson and cheerleader of the writing center community (and indeed, the overwhelmingly positive rhetoric of her work greatly contributes to this role) appears to be based on her belief that writing centers are valuable because they are collaborative and attend to the individual.

These aforementioned themes in Harris' work lent themselves to the following interview questions:

- You will always be remembered as the first and foremost editor of the *WLN*, which is now in its 40th year, has published something by nearly every recognized name in the field—as well as more articles by tutors than any other publication—and is

the most widely read publication in the field. Is the *WLN* the accomplishment you are most proud of?

- Much of your work functions as a representation of the writing center community to the academy at large, or more specifically, to the Composition and English communities. You appear to be speaking on behalf of writing centers, justifying their existence or arguing for their value—and relatedly, raising concerns/complaints. Is that a fair assessment? If so, do you still feel compelled to do so?

- Your work is overwhelmingly positive about writing centers and the writing center field—why is that? Is there a need for criticism? If so, who should fill that need?

- Relatedly, are there any frustrations you have with the writing center field? Any criticism, even if couched in a constructive manner?

- Your work relies upon anecdotal stories and experiential knowledge, such as your article in the *WCRM* and articles such as "A Writing Center without a WAC Program," "Selecting and Training Undergraduate Staffs," and "Centering in on Professional Choices." What is the respective value in anecdotal/experiential knowledge?

- But at the same time, you often draw on composition and writing center scholarship, serving as a reporter, translator, or applicator for your practitioner audience. We see this particularly in "Mixing Metaphors in the Writing Lab." What is the value in abstract theoretical knowledge?

- Is one type of knowledge or research more valuable than the other? Also, how have you approached each in your work as a writing center administrator and scholar?

- You appear to be committed to identifying solutions and best approaches to writing center work, but at the same time, you also push against uniform solutions or absolutes. Can you reconcile this tension, or is it something best left unresolved, particularly for the writing center community?

- You have stated that the composition classroom and composition teacher training fails to recognize the individual writer—in other words, that it resorts to a generalist pedagogy that often fails to meet the needs of individual writers, which again, speaks to the effectiveness and need of writing centers. But it's difficult to be individualized in a classroom in the way a writing center can be individualized with each writer, isn't it? How could composition teachers be more attuned to individual writers in their classrooms?

- In your work, you consistently argue that writing center administration is research. In fact, at times, this appears to be one of the issues you are most passionate about. What kind of research would you like to see, and why?

- How have, and how can, writing centers influence what happens in an institution?

- How have, and how can, writing centers influence what goes on in writing classrooms?

- What writing center figures would you align yourself with in terms of your approach to writing center work and scholarship/research?

- ▪ What do you believe is the biggest concern for the writing center community moving forward? Or, what do you think the priorities of the writing center community should be for the next five or ten years?

Harris' commitment to exploring issues such as administrative concerns and tutoring methods demonstrates a pragmatic desire to find solutions. But her form of pragmatism is more complex than that, especially in comparison to Kail. If Kail believes in a methodological egalitarianism in which all research contributes to lore, Harris more consistently argues for research that comes from everyday writing center work. While not as explicit as Dewey, she endorses the argument that all inquiry should come from and return to experience. Her work incorporates theory and empirical research, but it ultimately defers to the experiential more consistently than Kail's does. That said, both Harris and Kail subscribe to a pragmatism that resists dichotomies and is open to incorporating whatever means necessary to better understand and communicate writing center work. And they are both pragmatic in their heavy reliance on everyday, local experience. Both may be open to a variety of research approaches, but they prefer to stay within a writing center context.

Where the two tend to differ, however, is in their focus. Harris more consistently embraces the pragmatic concern to find concrete, meaningful solutions. And this commitment is partly responsible for her prominence in the writing center field. Harris is continually active in settings that allow her to help out and answer the questions of writing center practitioners. She is comfortable with groups and the back-and-forth of casual interactions;, she works steadily at maintaining her profile, and members of the writing center community—veterans and newcomers—find her to be easily approachable. Her goal is to draw on the experiential to provide as many solutions as possible for writing center practitioners, a goal that requires her to

maintain an active presence in the conversations of the field. This active desire to connect with a wide audience demonstrates pragmatism's desire for connection, but it does so in a different way than Kail.

Jeanne Simpson

Although not as prolific as Harris, Simpson has consistently published throughout her writing center career. The following selected texts testify to Simpson's concern with administrative issues—they were selected because of their concern with finding solutions as well as their presence in writing center articles, books, and anthologies:

1) Articles:

- Simpson, J., & Kinkead, J. (2000). The administrative audience: A rhetorical problem. *Writing Program Administration*, *23*(23), 71-84.

- Simpson, J. (1996). Slippery Sylvans sliding sleekly into the writing center— or preparing for professional competition. *Writing Lab Newsletter*, *21*(1), 1-4.

- Simpson, J., Braye, S., & Boquet, B. (1994). War, peace and writing center administration. *Composition Studies, 22*(1), 65-95.

- Simpson, J. (1993). The challenge of innovation: Putting new approaches into practice. *Writing Lab Newsletter*, *18*(1), 1-3.

2) Book Chapters:

- Simpson, J. (2006). Managing encounters with central administration. In C. Murphy, & B. Stay (Eds.), *Writing center director's resource book* (pp. 199-214). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

- Simpson, J., & Maid, B. (2001). Herding cats or lining up ducks: The politics of writing center accreditation. In J. Nelson, & K. Evertz (Eds.), *The politics of writing centers* (pp. 121-132). Portsmouth, NH: Boynton-Cook.

- Simpson, J. (1998). Assessing needs, identifying an institutional home, and developing a proposal. In B. Silk (Ed.), *The writing center resource manual*. Emmitsburg, MD: National Writing Centers Association Press.

- Simpson, J. (1995). Perceptions, realities, and possibilities: Central administration and writing centers. In B. Stay, C. Murphy, & E. Hobson (Eds.), *Writing center perspectives* (pp. 48-52). Emmitsburg, MD: National Writing Centers Association Press.

3) <u>WCenter Postings</u>: This study analyzed Simpson's posts over an 18-month period from December 2010 to May 2012.

Drawing on her experiences as a writing center director and academic dean, Simpson exclusively addresses writing center administration in her work. Simply stated, her top concern is determining what's best for the survival of writing centers—and writing center administrators. She repeatedly argues that writing center administrators need to stop playing the marginalized victim card and start working with administration. Much of her work, then, offers practical strategies for writing center administrators to play the "administration game." She specifically argues that writing center administrators do a better job of understanding their local institutional context and remember that centers are part of the institution, not necessarily a department. Simpson is also a strong proponent of writing center assessment (of needs, opportunities, and outcomes) and accreditation. In the end, she encourages writing center administrators to

embrace the mindset and language of administration, adopting a "win-win" approach where writing center pedagogy informs and supports an institution's mission.

Simpson's work rarely references theory or scholarship of any kind—citations rarely appear. This isn't to say that she does not acknowledge the value of theory, but her work is dominated by addressing pragmatic administrative issues. Whereas Harris functions as a translator by summarizing scholarship and offering possible pragmatic applications of research findings and theoretical arguments, Simpson provides solutions without a theoretical context. Like Harris, she relies heavily on personal experience, but at the same time, she rarely provides details of those experiences in the manner of Harris. Instead, she offers a type of generic "lore" or stereotypes that operates under the assumption that the reader will understand or accept her claims as truth. In fact, her rhetoric assumes an air of superiority. Whereas Harris consistently commends and encourages, Simpson consistently and explicitly provides cautionary advice, relying on an ethos that is largely based on references to her work in both writing center and central administration.

An initial examination of selected Simpson work led to the following questions:

- Your work, at times, implores writing center administrators to suck it up, play the game, and pull their heads out of the sand. For instance, in "Learning Admin-Speak, you write, "Rather than work against the institution, we need to acknowledge that we are part of the institution and can be effective change agents. Our success in writing programs can translate to success for the university at large. By communicating well with the administrative culture in the terminology of administration, we stand to gain resources and respect." (p. 72). In "War, Peace, and Writing Center Administration," you write, "For writing centers to fret

about marginalization and/or victimization is to waste time. Define the specific problem and find a solution is my response" (p. 156). Have you gotten push back over the years for saying this?

- There's an interesting line in "War, Peace, and Writing Center Administration" that is striking and reads as something you are passionate about—you state that all writing center problems and solutions should be framed in terms of service to the students or the whole thing is a sham (p. 156). Do you still believe this? If so, why is it important for writing centers to focus on service to the students?

- You talk about institutional homes for writing centers in your work. In the same article, you caution against affiliation with English departments: "The assumption that writing centers have a natural affiliation with English departments needs to be questioned. Given the institutional posture of many English departments vis-à-vis writing, the more natural thing to do is to get away from an English department as fast as possible and get a larger, institutional profile. Most of us who direct(ed) WCs came out of English departments and are comfortable with the career development notions they represent. We blend our experience with our aspirations. But to our peril" (p. 157). Do you still believe this? Can you elaborate on the peril of blending experience with aspirations?

- As a follow-up, a couple of years later, in the *WCRM*, you write, "There is no one optimum placement of a center within the administrative structure of an institution. Context is crucial in this issue" (p. II.2.11). Do you still believe this? Can you comment on this?

- In the same article, you write that you have a pragmatic soul: "Will you do a better job of making the writing center operate if you perceive your work as subversion, even if others don't perceive it that way at all? Maybe so. This begins to become a hall of mirrors, and my pragmatic soul cringes" (p. 155-156). What does pragmatism mean to you, particularly in a writing center context?

- In "The Challenge of Innovation," you state, "If we elect to follow the path of institutional service I have described, doing our bit on committees and councils and so on, our scholarship may suffer. There is only so much room for activity in a day. And yet the content of the scholarship, where so many good ideas now reside, is read mostly by people who already believe and know. As a rhetoric of institutional change, it is more ceremonial than deliberative" (p. 3). This appears to imply that scholarship or theory isn't very effective because it is a form of preaching to the choir. To reach different audiences requires a commitment of time and energy, as you say. Have you seen this approach pay off in some way? Can you point to any success stories?

- Your work relies upon anecdotal stories and experiential knowledge in both writing center and central administration. What is the value in anecdotal/experiential knowledge?

- Conversely, your work rarely references other forms of writing center scholarship or research. Is this intentional? If so, why? If not, why do you think this happened?

- How have, and how can, writing centers influence what happens in an institution?

- How have, and how can, writing centers influence what goes on in writing classrooms?

- What writing center figures would you align yourself with in terms of your approach to writing center work and scholarship/research?

- What do you believe is the biggest concern for the writing center community moving forward? Or, what do you think the priorities of the writing center community should be for the next five or ten years?

Simpson's strong commitment to addressing administrative concerns through her own experiences speaks to a practical form of pragmatism that clarifies obscurities and provides solutions, as well as a desire to rely on experience in doing so. And this use of pragmatism clearly appeals to many writing center practitioners. But this approach to pragmatism has caused Simpson to basically ignore theory in her work. While Simpson shares Harris' pragmatic desire to provide solutions, she differs from Harris by finding those solutions solely in the experiential, thus ignoring pragmatism's desire to connect theory and practice. In many ways, this approach is more restrictive than Dewey's pragmatism—Simpson not only begins with and refers back to experience in her work, she never leaves experience.

While Simpson's approach to pragmatism has helped her connect with a particular audience, it has resulted in myopic, defensive stance that separates theory and practice. Indeed, Simpson's message has remained largely unchanged over the past 30 years, a commitment that has limited her ability to explore other areas of writing center work. By focusing on her administrative experience as a means to find solutions in working with central administration, Simpson resists exploring other areas of writing center work and using other methodologies that will help her explore writing center work. Again, this form of pragmatism contrasts with both

Kail and Harris, and thus sheds additional light on the interplay of writing center theory and practice.

Pragmatism, Theory, and Practice

Using pragmatism as a framework, the following chapters examine the aforementioned works and interviews of Kail, Harris, and Simpson in more detail with the goal of better understanding how each approaches theory and practice in writing center work. Using pragmatism as a framework is helpful because it affects how each figure approaches the interplay of theory and practice. In other words, all three figures employ a unique form of pragmatism that not only affects their approach to writing center work, but also their ability to connect with writing center professionals and impact the writing center community. Ideally, identifying the form of pragmatism each figure employs will lead to ways in which the writing center community can better understand the interplay of theory and practice in the field and, just as importantly, determine how this understanding can help writing center professionals approach theory and practice more productively.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE INCLUSIVE REFLECTION OF HARVEY KAIL

Harvey Kail has directed the Writing Center at the University of Maine-Orono for 26 of

the past 34 years—he spent five of those years as chair of the English department and three years

directing the Writing-Across-the-Curriculum (WAC) program. Kail's scholarship focuses on

writing center pedagogy, collaborative learning, and tutor-training, and each year he and his

tutors present at Writing Center and National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing (NCPTW)

conferences. His commitment to undergraduate peer tutors was formally recognized in 2004

when he received the Ron Maxwell Leadership Award, which is awarded by NCPTW to

individuals who have made distinguished contributions to undergraduate student development

through promoting collaborative learning among peer writing tutors. In addition to NCPTW, Kail

is known for his work with Paula Gillespie and Brad Hughes on the Peer Writing Tutor Alumni

Research Project (PWTARP), which seeks to document and better understand how peer tutoring

impacts tutors in their post-graduate lives (Kail, Gillespie, & Hughes, 2010b).

Compared to other recognized writing center figures, Kail has not been as prolific in

terms of published scholarship, but his work and career offer much insight into the interplay

between theory and practice in writing center work. This insight is particularly focused on

collaborative learning theory, peer tutor training and development, and writing center lore. In

focusing on these issues, Kail is able to address practical issues without being driven by them. In

other words, while he cares about writing center goals, assessment, and evaluation and

acknowledges political and central administration pressures, Kail is ultimately driven by an

intrinsic desire to better understand what happens in peer tutoring programs. He invites the

practical, skeptical writing center administrator to research—or at least explore—what happens

in a writing center. At least initially, this invitation appeals to practical concerns, but ultimately, Kail appeals to the opportunity that writing centers have in terms of discovering and publishing what happens in collaborative, peer-centered learning environments. Kail's work entails theory, but it also draws upon personal experiences and anecdotal evidence. In fact, he often interweaves both experience and theory throughout his work. And it is Kail's ability to look to and use practice and theory that makes him a key figure in any attempt to better understand the interplay between theory and practice in writing center work.

The Significance of Lore

Kail's inclusion of both practice and theory is indicative of his resistance to dichotomies and preference for inclusivity and comprehensiveness. This approach is particularly evident in his understanding of lore. Lore, which Kail (2003a) defines as "our collective knowledge of ourselves" (p. 74), is a recurring theme in his work. Kail believes lore is established through the stories that are continuously told in academia in ways that define actions and understandings. Thus, the power of lore has been, and continues to be, key for writing centers in terms of their perception and legitimacy among faculty, administrators, and students. Kail (2012) attributes the establishment and growth of writing centers to "the narratives that we tell each other and the narratives that we tell our colleagues." In fact, he wonders if writing centers would have gained any traction in the late 1970s and early 1980s without lore: "This was a long time ago when people didn't really know much about writing centers at all. We needed to be storytellers. We needed to tell our story in a way that other people found compelling" (2012). Kail believes that the ability to tell writing center stories effectively was key in convincing administrators, faculty, and students that writing centers were legitimate and worthwhile, particularly since little data or writing center research existed at the time.

Kail argues that it is essential to understand that lore, particularly writing center lore, comes from a variety of sources and in a variety of ways, ranging from conversations among tutors to listserv discussions to conference presentations to journal manuscripts. Furthermore, he recognizes that the diverse contributors of writing center lore also extend beyond the writing center community. In "Evaluating Our Own Peer Tutoring Programs: A Few Leading Questions," Kail (1983b) calls for writing center administrators to view center reports (i.e., usage reports, budgets, student surveys, faculty surveys, tutor evaluations, PWTARP responses, etc.) as contributing to the lore that will define peer tutoring and composition instruction for years to come. He writes that the "reports that we will write or are currently writing to college Deans, Departmental Chairpersons, educational policy committees and each other will become the academic lore of peer tutoring and the teaching of composition. We need to make it as accurate and interesting a story as possible" (p. 4). Kail does not believe that lore merely consists of the stories writing center workers tell each other, although that is definitely one aspect of it; he instead believes that writing center lore is created through a variety of means both within and beyond the writing center community, ranging from published books and articles to the conversations about writing centers that take place in committee meetings and faculty offices.

Of course, the fact that lore moves beyond writing center walls leads to a complexity in the lore writing centers seek to create. In other words, lore is not merely a matter of making up compelling stories that others will believe. Indeed, Kail acknowledges that the ability of writing centers to tell their story in compelling ways is not always easy because of the competing counternarratives, particularly the counternarrative of writing center as remedial lab. This counternarrative is well-established in academia, as many writing centers originated as remedial labs or "fix-it" shops for deficient students. As Robert Moore (1950) writes, during the 1940s,

writing clinics and laboratories became "increasingly popular among American universities and colleges as remedial agencies for removing students' deficiencies in composition" (p. 388). The idea of writing center as remedial lab was reinforced during the open-admissions era of the 1970s; the proliferation of writing centers during this time came with the expectation that centers would address the deficiencies among the sudden influx of students. Elizabeth Boquet (1999) writes that "the theme of crisis intervention is repeated over and over again in the scant histories written about writing centers during the 1970s, as writing centers were created largely to fix problems that university officials had difficulty even naming, things like increasing enrollment, larger minority populations, and declining (according to the public) literacy skills" (p. 472). Still, with the advent of writing center organizations, conferences, and journals in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the idea of writing center as remedial lab was challenged, perhaps most poignantly by Stephen North's (1984) "The Idea of a Writing Center." This challenge continued to gain traction throughout the 1990s, 2000s, and today, but, as Kail (2012) points out, the counternarrative of writing centers as remedial service entities remains:

> Something's going on in writing centers that's really unique, that's really unusual. And we need to get that story out. But it's a hard story to tell because we also bear kind of a counternarrative, if you will, and that's the writing center as remedial lab. We've been burdened with this from the beginning—it's really in our roots . . . But as we've developed, we also got another narrative going which is that, the idea of sitting down, writer and reader, having a conversation about that writing, that's not a remedial activity, that's the way professional writers work. So, we've got a lot of stories out there about writing centers, and if we want to change the narrative, we have to articulate that. Easy to say; not easy to do.

Part of the difficulty in addressing the counternarrative of writing center as remedial lab concerns the different audiences that need to hear writing center narratives: students, administrators, and faculty. And for Kail, the latter audience presents the biggest challenge: "When you introduce a third person into this diad of teacher and student and you put a peer tutor in there you've you got a much more complex deal . . . People are still very anxious that a peer tutor will undercut their authority or get in the way of their pedagogy." Kail's statement here is important because it points to a close relationship between lore and theory. On the surface, the assertion that writing centers must address the remedial lab counternarrative seems obvious enough—most writing center administrators know that it is important to continuously communicate to students, administrators, and faculty that writing centers are places where all writers can receive feedback on their writing. But Kail delves deeper here by identifying why faculty struggle to buy into this narrative. Granted, one can argue that faculty concern about tutors undermining their authority is not as prevalent as it once was, but what is interesting about Kail's comments from a practice-theory standpoint is his ability to use theory and experience to better understand a pragmatic concern. Kail tries to understand why faculty resist the current narrative of writing center work by identifying complex, theoretical issues of power/authority and pedagogy.

This transitive relationship between reflective practice and theory is evident in *Collaborative Learning* when Kail (1994) articulates how his experiences as a writing center administrator help him understand the recursive forces at play in peer tutoring and collaborative learning:

> As I worked through, relationship by relationship, what I now saw as the systematic context of peer tutoring, I found that by training students to be peer tutors I was also to some degree instructing my colleagues on how to teach composition, and that

composition students and faculty members were teaching my tutors how to be tutors

and the tutors were, in turn, teaching me how to be a peer-tutor trainer. Not lineal but

recursive, the complex syntax of peer tutoring turns back on itself in a series of

infinite loops of influence; cause and effect, teaching and learning chase each other

around and around; and students and teachers through the locus of the writing lab find

themselves to some degree bound up in a wholly new institutional relationship. (pp.

597-598)

In many ways, the fluid transition from the telling of narratives to more complex discussions is

indicative of how lore fits into Kail's understanding of reflective practice and theory, and more

specifically, his resistance of dichotomies. This distinction is important because it points to

Kail's underlying belief in the power of lore to fundamentally shape understandings. But not just

understandings of writing centers—Kail (1983a) believes writing center lore can extend beyond

writing center work to shape understandings of the teaching and learning of writing:

I stress over time, because what I am talking about here falls finally into the realm of

academic legend, the stories that students (and faculty) tell each other about their

lives in educational institutions. If the lore of academia comes to include a tradition of

student tutors as part of the official audience of other students' writing, it is my guess

that we will have fundamentally changed our ideas of what teaching and learning

writing actually involves. (p. 599)

For Kail, writing center lore is important in terms of usage, funding, and respect, but ultimately,

writing center lore is important because of its power to influence how writing is taught and

learned.

But how do we truly know that writing center lore influences how writing is taught and learned, and how do we know how it influences? Kail recognizes the criticism of lore—specifically the argument that lore is not research-oriented or data driven—but he does not agree with it. For one, he claims that lore is not created by happenstance but is created through stories that are repeatedly told to the point that they become a kind of a structure in and of themselves (2012). Kail believes that there is a truth to the narratives that cannot be created, that lore consists of the "kinds of experiences people have in the writing center." In other words, writing center lore is reliable because it comes from writing center experiences that resonate with others in the field.

An example of how lore functions as a credible source of understanding can be found in Kail's (2003a) examination of writing center tutor training manuals. He asserts that because they shape the way tutors and tutor trainers come to the literacy work they do in writing centers, "tutor training manuals are among the most important texts for authorizing writing center lore, our collective knowledge of ourselves" (p. 74). For Kail, writing center training manuals "make available to researchers a particularly concentrated source of information about tutor training practices, and because tutor training is at the center of so much of writing center life, these texts also provide a relatively complete picture of the educational theories and loyalties that have shaped the development of writing centers since the early 1970s" (p. 74). Viewing training manuals as a reliable source of the theories that shape writing center work results in a lore that functions "as a kind of master narrative, and educational creation myth, if you will—a tale of the writing center tribe" (p. 74). Because of this value, he proceeds to examine three selected tutor training texts "as if they were narratives rather than manuals, read them for their story rather than focusing exclusively on their exposition and advice" (p. 74). In the end, Kail draws three

conclusions, or themes, about writing center lore that are communicated through tutor training manuals:

- By reuniting the learner with the teacher, the writer with the reader, one-to-one conferencing can humanize both participants and demystify the writing process.

- By systematically introducing students to each other as credible writers, thinkers, talkers, and listeners, peer tutoring can change students' lives and reinvigorate campus literacy.

- By creating a knowledgeable and flexible academic culture around one-to-one conferencing and collaborative learning, writing centers can thrive. (p. 93)

In drawing out these themes, Kail is theorizing tutor-training manuals through lore. In other words, by viewing manuals as contributing to writing center lore, Kail is able to theorize from materials with pragmatic underpinnings. These manuals are intended to help writing center tutors and administrators better help the students better perform the everyday practices of writing center work, but they can also be examined as a whole to realize a more theoretical understanding of the nature and value of writing center work. Kail concludes his article with a practical, concrete takeaway for writing center directors: "What might these manuals-as-myths tell us about ourselves? For one thing, they suggest a more satisfying explanation of why we are so very, very busy" (p. 93). Kail argues here that viewing training manuals as lore can lead to a deeper, and more theoretical, understanding of writing center work. He acknowledges the practical pressures administrators face, but he also nudges them to better understand what is happening in peer tutoring programs. If they do so, he argues, they will realize a more satisfying answer to their busyness for both themselves and the external audiences they must convince.

The Role of Research

Kail's examination of tutor training manuals also points to his methodological egalitarianism, particularly concerning the relationship between lore and empirical research. He resists dichotomies, believing that lore and empirical research "are not mutually exclusive . . . [the writing center] story can incorporate empirical research . . . You can create a story about the writing center that includes the writing center as a research part of the institution" (2012). As the writing center considers the value and role of both lore and empirical research, then, Kail recognizes the value and limitations of both: "I wouldn't put any more emphasis or value on empirical research than I would on lore . . . I don't think they are mutually exclusive and neither one is more powerful than the other" (2012). This methodological egalitarianism both overlaps and differs with Stephen North's understanding of the relationship between the two. One specific, essential overlap is a belief in the general inclusivity of lore. Like Kail, North (1987) claims that "Literally anything can become a part of lore. The only requirement for entry is that the idea, notion, practice, or whatever be nominated: some member of the community must claim that it worked, or seemed to work, or might work" (p. 24). But North differs from Kail in claiming that lore is not rigorously tested in the same way as empirical research: "Once this nomination is made—by formal publication, in a handout, or just in a hallway conversation—the item becomes a part of lore . . . The nature of pragmatic logic makes disposition simple: once somebody says that it has worked or is working or might work, it is part of lore" (p. 24). Yes, North believes that lore possesses logic and form—he states that it is driven by pragmatic, experiential logic (p. 23)—but he also acknowledges the ease in which something becomes part of lore. For North, this ease of inclusivity distinguishes lore from empirical research and is caused by a desire for practitioners to share solutions with each other.

Kail, however, views lore as a means for writing center practitioners to communicate a narrative to themselves and each other. Thus, for Kail, the limitation of lore is less a lack of methodological rigor and more an inability to convince others. In many ways, Kail's concern is less methodological and more rhetorical. This concern is evident in "The Problem with Peer Tutoring" when Kail (1983a) shares a story of a conversation with an English department colleague:

> Although I do not want to put too much weight on one example, I would suggest that the two-minute exchange I had with my colleague on the way to our respective mailboxes . . . did not represent a "breakdown in communication" at all, but a very clear communication that the service model of peer tutoring is inadequate to describe what is actually beginning to take place where tutoring programs become an official activity of English departments. (p. 597)

Kail clearly believes in the credibility and power of this story in challenging the counternarrative of writing center as remedial lab, but before doing so, he offers an initial qualifier that recognizes the limitation of this single story. Of course Kail likely knows that this story will resonate with his audience of writing center administrators who have had similar experiences. This is one story for Kail, but it is a story that countless numbers of writing center professionals have experienced throughout their careers. It is a story that contributes to lore.

For Kail, lore is not merely creating a story out of thin air and telling it over and over. There are, of course, a variety of ways to identify, examine, and describe the kinds of experiences people have in writing centers, and for Kail, this is where research comes in. And that research can take on many different forms, ranging from experiential knowledge to an examination of tutor training manuals to empirical studies. The relationship between lore and

empirical research is particularly evident in Kail's early work concerning assessment, as he calls

for systematic assessment of peer tutoring as a means to create a lore that connects peer tutoring

and the improvement of student writing:

> The purpose of any composition program is improvement in student writing, and
> there is no sense establishing an academic lore that carries the message "these
> peer tutors get in the way of successfully teaching writing." Tutoring programs
> are going to have to be encouraged or discarded in the light of their contribution
> to our common goals. The best solution at the moment to the problem that peer
> tutoring poses—is it worth the trouble?—lies in sustaining these programs long
> enough to figure out how to evaluate them in the systemic context that I have
> outlined in this article. (1983a, p. 599)

Although Kail does call for systematic assessment as a means to create lore, he also recognizes

the limitations of empirical research: "I am not suggesting that we will ever be able

quantitatively to prove that peer tutoring 'causes' an improvement in student writing. What we

can and should do is examine more fruitfully, both in theory and in practice, how students and

teachers learn when their writing environment is organized to include collaborative learning in

the form of formal peer tutoring programs" (1983a, p. 599). So, for Kail, empirical research is

not simply a matter of determining if writing centers cause writing improvement. He is instead

more interested in using empirical research to gain a better understanding of how collaborative

learning and peer tutoring programs affect writing teachers and students. Kail does not expect

empirical research to answer yes/no questions or questions of causation, nor does he necessarily

want it to. He views empirical research as one way in which writing centers can better

understand and describe their affect on the teaching and learning of writing. This approach

challenges assessment calls for research that shows causation between writing centers and improved student writing, often with the goal of satisfying external demands (Henson & Stephenson, 2009; Lerner, 2003; Lerner, 1997). Kail's inclusive approach, however, shifts the immediate emphasis of research from meeting external demands to satisfying intrinsic desires:

> Certainly, I can provide my Dean with some impressive statistics about the numbers of students who make use of our Writing Lab and of the peer tutors, (and I probably will) along with some earnest generalizations about the good we are doing at a comparatively low cost, and this might satisfy him. Or it might not. More important, it won't really satisfy me or, I suspect, satisfy you. We want to know what actually is going on in our own tutoring programs, whether we value that or not, and, if we do, what and to what degree? The question is, then how do we begin to evaluate our own programs? (1983b, p. 2).

Kail acknowledges the external demands for evaluation, but this passage points to a deeper, intrinsic desire to better understand what happens in writing center work. For Kail, research driven by a personal goal to better understand—as opposed to research primarily driven by a desire to "prove our own effectiveness"—will help writing centers tell more informed stories that will in turn create a productive lore that communicates an accurate, effective narrative of writing center work.

Of course, this approach to research is also evident in areas outside of assessment. For instance, Kail identifies a need to research faculty attitudes towards the writing center with the goal of identifying variations among faculty from different fields:

> I probably should find a different sense of how the attitudes vary about amongst faculty towards the writing center. We've done some polling of faculty to find out

what they know about the writing center. But I've never really done a very

careful distinction to find out: how do the humanities faculty see the writing

center? English department faculty in particular. How do those in the natural

sciences, social sciences, see it? The hard sciences? (2012)

There is a pragmatic bent to Kail's research approach, but Kail's pragmatism does not

necessarily follow the traditional pragmatic desire to seek clear answers or solutions. Kail's

pragmatism appears to assume that an honest exploration of writing center work will lead to

narratives that will provide answers or solutions. In this case, Kail is interested in better

understanding how his writing center story is affecting, or not affecting, faculty, and he believes

that this understanding will lead to pragmatic solutions in terms of usage and funding.

In the end, Kail wants to know more about the lore of his writing center. He believes that

if writing centers better understand who they are and what they do, then they will be able to

dictate the narratives that are told. Like most writing center professionals, Kail acknowledges

the need to satisfy external pressures, but at the same time, he understands that those external

pressures are often framed in unfeasible ways. Thus, if writing center professionals have a

strong understanding of writing center work, then they will be able to tell stories that meet the

external demands placed on them. Or, instead of meeting the external demands, they will be able

to create a narrative that changes those external demands in ways writing centers can satisfy.

Lore, Research, and PWTARP

One example of how a better understanding of writing center work can change external

demands in feasible ways is the Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project (PWTARP). Kail

is known for his work with Paula Gillespie and Brad Hughes in designing and promoting the

PWTARP, a systematic, ongoing study that seeks to document and better understand how peer

tutoring impacts tutors in their post-graduate lives (Kail, Gillespie, & Hughes, 2010a). External demands placed on writing centers traditionally concern proving effectiveness in terms of helping student writers, but by showing the benefits of writing centers for the tutors themselves, PWTARP was able to create a narrative that changed external demands in more feasible ways for writing centers. After the initial PWTARP findings were reported, writing centers were able to promote a narrative that included the benefits of writing centers for peer tutors.

PWTARP is also an interesting example of Kail's integrative approach to lore and empirical research. In fact, when the PWTARP results were first published in the *Writing Center Journal*, Kail, Gillespie, and Hughes began their article with a narrative:

> Within both the noisy and the quiet conversations in our writing centers, something extraordinary is happening. Undergraduate peer tutors are creating one of the most important experiences in their educational careers, a complex, multi-faceted experience whose influence persists not just years but decades after graduation. When undergraduate writing tutors and fellows participate in challenging and sustained staff education, and when they interact closely with other student writers and with other peer tutors through our writing centers and writing fellows programs, they develop in profound ways both intellectually and academically. This developmental experience, played out in their tutor education and in their work as peer tutors and fellows, helps to shape and sometimes transform them personally, educationally, and professionally. (p. 13)

What is especially interesting about this narrative is the manner in which it is was constructed. As Kail points out, the project was born from lore, not any particular theory or empirical study: "We have been hearing all this stuff from our tutors . . . so it was really like, 'Why don't we take

a harder look at this in a more systematic way.' There was never any attempt at the beginning to

establish theory as true" (2012). Kail, Gillespie, and Hughes started with the narratives their

tutors were telling, but they did not stop there—they used research and theory to both confirm

and inform those narratives: "I don't think we had really made that jump when we started. In

fact, I think it was Brad who brought in [William] Cronon into the discussion. He was very

excited about the way Cronon lays out the active things that people do to be liberally educated

rather than just reading books on the great book list" (2012). This statement reveals a process

that emerged through PWTARP. First, the researchers listened to the narratives their tutors were

telling. Second, once they started gathering research, they began making connections to the

learning theories of William Cronon and Kenneth Bruffee. Finally, the combination of theory

and empirical research results in the ability to articulate a more informed narrative in a

convincing way. Indeed, this inclusive approach to research is evident when the authors

introduce and set up the study:

> Through the Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project (PWTARP), we have
> set out to explore and document what peer tutors take with them from their
> training and experience. We believe that by listening to what they have to tell us,
> we will better understand the powerful educational experiences of becoming a
> peer writing tutor in a college or university . . . We also know not only that tutors
> become better writers, but they develop in a number of other highly consequential
> ways . . . As Kenneth Bruffee has argued since the 1970s, peer tutoring benefits
> the liberal education of peer tutors. (2010a, p. 13)

What we see in this excerpt is a recognition of the value of practice and theory—the authors not

only use both in their research, they also value both equally. This passage details the value of

listening to the experiences of peer tutors; in addition, it also recognizes the insight offered through Bruffee's theoretical arguments. Indeed, the collaborative learning theories of Cronon and Bruffee are interwoven with the experiences of peer tutors throughout the article. This integration is exemplified in a discussion of the role of peer tutoring experience in skills, values, and abilities in families and relationships: "Over and over and with consistency, tutor alumni responses to this question reveal wisdom about connecting with others (a part of Cronon's exhortation to develop 'the generosity and the freedom to connect')" (2010a, p. 33). The same integration occurs later during a discussion of confidence: "We found it striking that the word 'confidence' itself or the concept came up in response to almost every question we asked. It is a concept that neither Bruffee nor Cronon mentions specifically, but it reveals the kinds of attitude that allow tutors to develop judgment within communities" (p. 34). In both examples, the authors discuss their research results with theory. That is, they use theory to help understand and describe the practice of peer tutors.

Still, despite the methodological inclusiveness and thoroughness of PWTARP, it is important to note that Kail does recognize the study's limitations. He does not believe PWTARP fundamentally changes writing center work or writing center effectiveness, but he does believe it functions as a kind of glue that shows "us what we are doing has more value than even we thought it had. Not that we were the first to look at the benefits of peer tutors, but we brought a lot of that stuff together for the first time" (2012). For Kail, a research project like PWTARP does not need to be mutually exclusive from lore. Instead, research and lore can inform each other in meaningful, productive ways. Indeed, the ability to articulate and talk about the contributions of writing centers to liberal arts learning is what excites Kail most about the project. He believes PWTARP enables the writing center community to articulate a narrative

that testifies to power of peer tutoring for all involved. He also believes PWTARP contributes to a narrative that can be told to people both inside and outside the writing center community. In fact, one of the hardest decisions Kail, Gillespie, and Hughes had to make regarding the project was where to publish the findings. Ultimately, they decided to initially publish in *Writing Center Journal*, but Kail believes PWTARP research will find its way into non-writing center journals and venues: "I think that article will be cited in other venues besides just writing centers. I do think that the more we are able to publish outside of our own journals, the better for everybody" (2012). This last comment testifies to Kail's belief in the necessity for writing center lore to extend beyond the internal community. Writing centers need to tell stories over and over so they become part of lore, but they need to research those stories so they are better informed, and they need those stories to reach audiences beyond the writing center community.

Repetition, Reflection, and an Inclusive Praxis

Kail's understanding of lore as something that is created through the continual telling of narratives testifies to the value he places on repetition. In fact, Kail (2012) believes that one of the unique benefits of writing center work is the opportunity it provides for repetition—tutors have the opportunity to conduct sessions again and again and again: "[Tutors] become experts themselves because they've had 8, 9, 10, 14, 25, 72 tutorials. They really know their way around. They know all the complications; they're very sensitive to all the difficulties. At least most tutors are." Kail emphasizes the importance of pairing repetition with reflection. The importance of this pairing is evident in Kail's approach to tutor training, which emphasizes reflective practice: "What tutors experience, many of them have gone through training . . . and then they have tutorial after tutorial after tutorial. I also put stuff out for them to read and we have staff meetings to talk about it" (2012). Without reflection that comes through reading,

writing, discussing, and analysis, Kail believes repetition runs the risk of becoming the status quo. "Without reflection, repetition can become a rut," he says. "This is why it is essential that writing center professionals attend conferences. You have to put your work out in front of other people. You have to send your articles to peer review and journals. To make sure that you don't just fall into *mere* repetition" (2012). Stated differently, Kail claims that quality repetitions are the ultimate goal, and he believes that reflection is key to realizing quality repetitions. "If you are doing yoga, you gotta sit there and do za zen over and over and over," he says. "And the 40th time that you sit to meditate is different than the 3rd or 4th time. So I've really become a big believer in quality repetitions" (2012).

If you do these things—if you practice consistently and reflect on that practice to make sure your practice is effective—then Kail believes you achieve a form of praxis in which the everyday and abstract interconnect. And for Kail, this form of praxis is tied up in quality repetitions. As he says, "Without repetition, you really cannot have praxis" (2012). The importance of reflective practice, or of quality repetitions, is evident in Kail's description of his work consulting to European writing centers in the early 2000s. Kail describes having to build six workshops that were "each a self-contained, sequenced series of activities that would structure actual experiences in peer tutoring and collaborative learning with plenty of time for reflection built in" (2003b, p. 6). For Kail, everything starts with experience and practice—lots of it, in fact—but if there is not reflection on that practice, then a writing tutor, director, center, and even the writing center community as a whole cannot reach its full potential.

Kail's understanding of praxis as the interconnection between the everyday and abstract through action-and-reflection is indicative of his approach to theory. Kail does not distinguish between theory and practice, or perhaps more accurately, he does not necessarily place one

above or before the other. He recognizes the value of theory—in fact, he credits his experience

training peer writing tutors at the Brooklyn College Summer Institute with helping him transition

from literary studies to composition studies and writing center work. But at the same time, he is

quick to point out that the value of theory does not occupy a place above or separate from

practice—collaborative learning and social construction theory is merely one way for writing

centers to contribute to and understand their collective lore: "We've kind of embedded

collaborative learning and social construction theory in writing centers because it helps us

explain things that are going on. But it's not really necessary to burden other people with that"

(2012). The mindset that theory can be used to better understand and explain what is happening

is evident when Kail (1994) comments on the role of theory in understanding something that has

been happening throughout the history of humanity: "There is certainly nothing new about

collaborative learning. People have always shared the intellectual work, learning together what

they need to know . . . What is new, or at least relatively new, is the attention now being paid to

the development of systematic pedagogies called 'collaborative learning'" (p. 1). Later, Kail

claims that a theoretical and practical understanding of collaborative learning within composition

studies has resulted in "a revised understanding of what it means to write and to learn how to

write" (p. 33). This last statement testifies to Kail's comprehensive, inclusive approach to the

theory-practice relationship. For Kail, attempting to create a dichotomy between theory and

practice and privileging one over the other is misguided. In contrast, he appears to prefer an

inclusive approach that focuses on creating and understanding a lore that speaks to work that

happens in writing centers. This lore can come from a variety of sources that speak to both

internal and external audiences, but in the end, instead of focusing on the source of lore, Kail is

concerned with examining the lore that exists so that writing center professionals can effectively communicate compelling narratives to internal and external audiences.

Of course, Kail is not alone in his trust of everyday lived experiences—his well-known contemporary, Mickey Harris, also trusts experience as a source of understanding. Although she does not explicitly discuss lore, she contributes to it through her championing of the experiential and anecdotal. While Harris shares Kail's desire to be inclusive in communicating writing center effectiveness—and indeed references empirical and theoretical research—her work favors the experiential. The following chapter will explore how this favoring, along with Harris' reception among writing center practitioners, is important in better understanding the theory-practice interplay in writing center work.

CHAPTER FIVE

MICKEY HARRIS AND THE DESIRE FOR SOLUTIONS

Mickey Harris is Professor Emerita of English at Purdue University, where in 1976 she founded the University Writing Lab that she would direct for the next 28 years. Her influence on the writing center field is indeed profound as she was one of the key players in the formation of the National Writing Centers Association in 1982, now the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA)—she hosted the first Writing Centers Association meeting at Purdue in 1984—and she spearheaded efforts to develop at Purdue one of the most admired and used Online Writing Labs (OWLs) in existence. In 1977 she founded the *Writing Lab Newsletter (WLN)* and has served as its editor ever since. Furthermore, Harris is a frequent featured speaker at writing center conferences and maintains a consistent presence on the *WCenter* listserv.

Along with this significant service, Harris has been able to publish extensively: she has authored six books and edited three, written 32 book chapters, and published 40 articles in refereed journals. Most of Harris' work has focused on writing center pedagogy and administration. In fact, the only scholarship awards she received from IWCA were for works in these areas: *Teaching One-to-One* and "Solutions and Trade-Offs in Writing Center Administration," respectively. Her contributions to writing center pedagogy and administration was formally recognized in 1984 when she was the first recipient of the Muriel Harris Outstanding Service Award. The award, which is given every four years at alternate IWCA conferences, recognizes outstanding service that has benefited the international writing center community in significant ways.

Harris' work is important when examining the interplay between theory and practice in writing center work because of her prominent and unique standing in the field. She is known for

connecting with the "everyday" writing center professional through her emphasis on real world examples, experiences, and contexts to find solutions in writing center work. But at the same time, she also recognizes that these local realities prevent any universal solutions, and that because each center and situation is unique, we sometimes need to use theory to help reach some consensus. There is a productive tension in her work, then, that points to the ways in which theory and practice can complement each other.

Although she shares commonalities with Kail—both, for instance, resist dichotomies and focus on local contexts—Harris offers a different perspective on the interplay of theory and practice because of her strong emphasis on the experiential. If Kail argues for a methodological egalitarianism in which all research contributes to writing center lore, Harris endorses research that comes from everyday writing center work, believing like Dewey that all inquiry should come from and refer back to experience. In other words, while Harris's work incorporates theory and empirical research, it ultimately defers to the experiential more consistently than Kail. This emphasis on the experiential reflects her overarching desire to find solutions for writing center professionals, as compared to Kail, who mostly wants to better understand what is happening. Clearly, Harris's desire to find solutions through the experiential, along with her overall positive reception among writing center practitioners, has significant implications for better understanding how theory and practice interact in writing center work.

The Limitations of Theory

Most writing center professionals familiar with Harris point out that anecdotal evidence and experiential knowledge permeate her work. Harris (2013) also acknowledges this, although she states that this approach is not necessarily intentional. In the end, Harris is concerned with the pragmatic desire to find solutions or "what works" in writing centers. She believes these

solutions are almost always found in the everyday experiences of writing centers: that because something meaningful is created through action, the actions of writing center work are purposeful and consequential.

Harris credits much of this mindset to her appreciation of Donald Schön (1983), who identifies the limitations of theorizing in a detached, controlled setting. For Schön, the messiness or complications of reality prevent the application of pure theory. Harris (2002) agrees with Schön's contention that "research hasn't helped a lot when practitioners move into the real world . . . The real world presents us with conditions unlike those in the tidy world of pure research" (p. 77). Applying Schön's claim to writing centers, Harris contends that centers are not detached research labs but instead are places of complexity that require trial and error within a localized context: "Reality is much messier than theory, and the locality of each writing center has its defining features and constraints that impinge on the structure of the center and the solutions to the various problems and questions that arise" (p. 77). Harris goes on to state that writing center professionals work in "real, particularized settings where universal principles, theories, and findings from pure research may conflict or collide—or be of very little help" (p. 78). As such, Harris strongly believes that instead of abstract theories, writing center work should be examined through an experiential lens: "In the real world, especially in writing centers, you have to work in context, and in context means all the messy examples of life and that's when it comes to life when you think about things, and you can't talk in theory without connecting it to reality" (Harris 2013). For Harris, insights and solutions to writing center work come from the everyday experiences of its practitioners.

Harris' valuing of the experiential is particularly evident in her early work. For instance, in *Teaching One-to-One*, she champions the writing conference as a place where writers can hear

tutors and teachers talk about their writing in context as opposed to the detached, abstract, and generic discussions that often happen in the classroom (1986, p. 3). This argument is evident in "What's Up and What's In: Trends and Traditions in Writing Centers" when Harris (1990) champions the one-to-one writing center conference as a solution to abstract, detached conversations about writing: "When textbooks and classroom explanations evaporate into airy abstractions, when generalities fail to make connections to the specific writing task the writer is engaged in, then the tutor and student engage in dialogue that leads to making those connections (p. 19). In these two works, Harris alludes to the limitations of disconnected, abstract discussions, arguing instead that learning and understanding best occur through lived experiences and contextual discussions like the ones that occur in writing center conferences.

By the turn of the century, Harris became even more explicit in championing experiential knowledge over theory. For instance, in "Centering in on Professional Choices," she argues that "no matter how much tutoring of writing is studied, theorized, analyzed, and taught, the underlying principles that account for its effectiveness continue to evolve from experience, principles that are tried, tested, and altered when the next challenge to explore comes along" (2001, p. 435). This is a significant claim, as it champions experience, and not theory, as the main producer of knowledge and understanding in writing center work. In fact, Harris believes that a theoretical understanding of writing processes is a step removed from the reality of writers at work: "Reading about writing processes provides a background for understanding how we write, but that knowledge is one step removed from observing writers at work and seeing the messiness and reality of actual composing" (2002, p. 197). She goes on to state that the messiness of writing center work—specifically the watching, listening, and question-asking— demonstrates the "convoluted paths writers take to find out what they want that illusive main

point to be, of the ways in which outlines can assist or inhibit that exploration, and of the directions early drafts slowly take, often in zigzag fashion, as the paper moves toward coherence" (p. 197). For Harris, the theoretical explorations of writing process (i.e., composition theory) are detached from the reality of actual composing processes, a reality that is all too evident in everyday writing center work. Simply stated, tutoring is effective because experience leads to understandings, insights, and solutions that are not attainable through theoretical examinations.

Harris believes that the power of experiential knowledge in realizing understanding and solutions is a main reason she connects with her audience. Like composition, the writing center field is mostly comprised of everyday practitioners who are looking for ways to better meet the everyday demands they face in their centers and at their institutions. As such, Harris believes she is better able to connect with these practitioners because they can relate to her stories and examples—they can connect them to their lived experiences. She claims that "people picture things better when you talk about things in real terms and things that have happened . . . That's when it comes alive for many people" (2013). Fittingly, Harris(2013) bases this claim on her personal experiences as a writing tutor:

> In all of the years that I used to tutor, when you come across something that you want to talk about and you use an experience or an example and it connects with the other person, you've made that connection from one brain to the other about the two of you understanding what you're talking about as opposed to just saying generalities. And I'm thinking how often that must have worked because, you know the other person says, "Oh yeah, yeah I understand."

For Harris, the use of examples enables a concrete understanding between two individuals that is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve through abstract generalities.

Harris' desire to connect with her audience through the use of concrete terms and relatable experiences is evident in her introduction to *Teaching One-to-One* when she identifies her three audiences: classroom teachers who have not used writing conferences, teachers who already conference with students, and tutors who are working or preparing to conference with students in a writing center (1986, p. 1). She states that "for a variety of readers of this book, then, there should be some matters of use and interest" (p. 2). These matters of use and interest include a rationale for conference teaching, discussion of the goals and tasks of a conference, the teacher's role in a conference, suggestions for the kind of diagnostic work appropriate for individualized instruction, and, finally, strategies for teaching one-to-one (p. 2). Harris discusses these items in practical terms, often doing so through the use of examples and experiences. Similarly, when discussing the relationship between a Writing Center and WAC program, she connects with her audience by referencing her experiences at Purdue:

> Some days in the Writing Lab as I watch students come and go, I worry that we are trying to empty the ocean with a teaspoon. I had a similar sense when reading the comments on an end-of-the-semester evaluation from a faculty member across campus, several of whose students had come to the Writing Lab: 'Thanks for your assistance, but Tim's paper still had a few grammatical errors that slipped through your net.' . . . She and I talked and later agreed to a follow-up meeting with a graduate student Writing Lab staff member interested in working with faculty across the curriculum. After he met with her, she called to ask if I would talk with her staff since they would be the ones interacting with the student writing. I had difficulty

determining what the agenda for my visit to the staff meeting would be, but when I

arrived, the faculty member enthusiastically informed me that she had allotted ten

minutes for my part of her staff meeting and asked if I could introduce the Writing

Lab and its services, talk about writing and its importance in a biology course, and

suggest to these quiz section instructors how to work with writing in their quiz

sections. She assumed that I could adequately cover all that in ten minutes. In a de

facto WAC Writing Center, you win some and you lose some, and it is never quite

clear which is which. (1999, p. 102)

This excerpt exemplifies Harris' preference to use examples to connect with her audience. She

begins with the statement that as a director, she sometimes feels as if she is trying to empty the

ocean with a teaspoon, a statement that surely connects with much of her audience. But instead

of transitioning into theory, she proceeds to describe her experience working with a faculty

member who did not quite understand what the lab did. By the time she reaches her concluding

statement that you win some and you lose some, she has clearly connected with her practitioner

audience through a personal example.

By connecting with her audience through experience, Harris is able to invite skeptical

practitioners to consider using writing conferences, whether in the classroom or writing center, in

a way that theory would not allow her to do. For instance, instead of offering a collaborative

learning theory or a body of composition research, she states, "For those of us who tutor and are

personally and professionally enriched by the experience, tutoring is the most effective form of

teaching we have encountered" (2002, p. 194). In essence, she is saying, "Trust me. Those of us

who have done this find the experience enriching and effective." Later she offers to share

conferencing methods and approaches "with those who teach in classrooms because we know

that tutoring also has much to offer classroom teachers" (p. 194). Again, she connects with and attempts to convince her audience through personal testimony and real world examples instead of abstract theories.

Beyond demonstrating Harris' preference to connect to with her audience through examples, this passage also demonstrates how examples function differently than theories in establishing connections. This speaks to Dewey's criteria that reflective practice happen in community or interaction with others, as well as a valuing of the intellectual growth of oneself and others (Rodgers, 2002, p. 845). Harris ultimately wants to connect with her audience so they not only learn from her experiences, but also they are encouraged to reflect on their own experiences and in turn share those reflections with others. Encouraging communal reflection aligns with Deweyan pragmatism. As Rodgers (2002) points out, reflection in this way follows Dewey's desire to realize a form of pragmatism in which "reflection is a meaning-making process that moves a learner from one experience in to the next with deeper understanding of its relationships with and connections to other experiences and ideas" (p. 845). Harris' desire to connect with her audience through the experiential is pragmatic not only because it uses experience to realize deeper understanding, but also because it is a means to moral ends that "makes continuity of learning possible, and ensures the progress of the individual and, ultimately, society" (p. 845). Again, this can only occur through connections and interactions, and Harris partly uses the experiential to make this happen with her practitioner audience.

The Experience Problem

Of course, while Harris' emphasis on experiential knowledge helps her connect with her audience and encourage communal reflection, it also has an unintentional complication concerning pragmatism's desire to clarify obscurities and provide solutions. Namely, a reliance

on local experiences resists universal solutions. This is largely because local experiences and examples do not transfer well to other contexts. Thus, a solution that Harris discovered at Purdue may not translate to a different center, or even a different situation at Purdue. Harris' desire to realize solutions through experiential knowledge then can create more obscurities and problems because of the uniqueness of each context. To be fair, Harris recognizes that there are no absolutes in writing center work—that every situation is different and every solution entails a trade-off. She writes that the lack of simple answers in writing center work occurs because "every solution has a flip side, a possible disadvantage or limitation that, when recognized, keeps us from leaping to that solution as the only right answer" (1991, p. 65). Harris believes that the foundational reason for a lack of universal, absolute solutions in writing center work is due to their unique contexts and everyday experiences. She writes that writing centers differ from one another "because they have evolved within different kinds of institutions and different writing programs and therefore serve different needs" (1990, p. 15). In other words, an example of how a particular director collaborated with a faculty member may not work for another director because of the uniqueness of the institution. Thus Harris encourages writing center administrators to focus on their local contexts as opposed to implementing practices from other centers. She warns that a center must fit its "particular student population, writing program, and institution, not a nearby writing center the director may have visited and not the previous center the director may have worked in" (1999, p. 1). Again, the problem with relying upon examples and experiences is that they do not necessarily translate to other contexts.

Of course, transfer challenges do not prevent Harris or other writing center professionals from drawing on experiences in an attempt to follow pragmatism's call to clarify obscurities and realize solutions. In fact, Harris (1991) recognizes the tendency of writing center professionals

to contradict the very same mantra they use when training tutors and educating faculty: "In our tutor training, we are clearly succeeding in conveying the message that there are no simple answers to complicated questions. Yet those of us who direct writing centers have an uncomfortably similar tendency to turn around and sound as if we too are seeking absolute answers for our administrative concerns" (p. 64). This inconsistency is evident in an earlier work, "Theory and Reality: The Ideal Writing Center(s)," when Harris (1985) attempts to articulate the features of an ideal writing center. Ultimately, she reaches the conclusion that realizing "the ideal writing lab is a paradox because no two centers function in the same way" (p. 9). And not only do centers function differently externally, they function differently internally as well: "[Writing centers] are in a constant state of motion—growing, expanding, and redefining their roles" (p. 5). So, experiential knowledge is limited in its capacity for transfer not only between centers, but also within centers that are continuously changing.

Confronted with these complications, Harris accepts some uncertainty and complexity. In fact, she at times appears to embrace it. For instance, after stating that writing center conferences entail "a rich density of layers of interaction and a complex diversity of learning outcomes," she asks, "Why would we settle for any simple explanation anyway?" (2007, p. 83). The problem with this acceptance, however, is its contradiction with the pragmatic goal of clarifying obscurities and realizing solutions. The acceptance instead lends itself to abstract theories and explanations, which Harris cannot accept:

> We cannot encapsulate in any easy way what a tutorial accomplishes without rising to such a level of generality that it becomes almost meaningless—or worse yet, useless. Instead, we fall back on our favorite mantras . . . But these generalities don't explore the specifics of what we do or why we do it . . . The very diversity of the interactions

that constitute tutorials work against us when we try to build linguistic constructions

of what a writing center tutorial can accomplish. (2007, p. 77-78)

The tension in this passage is clear: It is difficult to explain what a writing tutorial accomplishes

without using abstract theories that are so far removed from the specific realities that it becomes

counterproductive, if not impossible, to utilize in better understanding and communicating what

writing centers do. Indeed, this passage exemplifies Harris' struggle to reconcile practice and

theory in a productive, pragmatic way. She wants to explain what happens in writing center

conferences, but she cannot do so without employing theory, which runs counter to her

pragmatic desire to remove obscurities and realize solutions through the experiential.

Reconciling the Tension

The issue, then, is what Harris does with this tension, and her approach offers some

insight into the interplay of theory and practice in writing center work. Ultimately, Harris

attempts to reconcile the theory-practice tension through a "blended" approach in which both

complement each other. Still, it is important to note that the relationship is not egalitarian—

experiential knowledge takes priority in the sense that she either works from it or always comes

back to it. In other words, while some of Harris' work is void of theory, none of her work is void

of practice. Thus, when Harris references theory and research, she does so in two main ways: 1)

she brings in theory and research that support or complement her experiences, or 2) she uses

theory and research when everyday examples do not provide clear solutions. As she states,

"Pragmatically, [writing centers] have a huge diversity of needs. It starts out pragmatically and

as you go into that area, you could begin to reach to larger generalizations" (2013). In fact,

Harris often functions as a translator in her work, reporting what scholars and researchers have

found and speculating how writing center workers can use these findings and theories in their everyday work.

Harris believes that the prioritization of experiential knowledge is the result of her career working in writing centers. She states that in her experience, individuals are more likely to connect with and understand through concrete examples: "You can kind of connect with him by an example; by saying, 'Oh yeah, what about if you or I used to' and then the two of you understand what you're talking about; if you've connected. And then you can go on to a larger principle" (2013). When pressed further about whether her emphasis on the concrete is intentional, Harris states, "I don't know that I'm drawing on experience as much as trying to find a way to help the other person realize what I'm talking about." For Harris, concrete examples provide a means to connect. Once she makes a connection, she can move on to abstract generalities; if she loses that connection, she can return back to the concrete. In doing so, she follows a pragmatic desire to clarify obscurities and find solutions and lends credence to Dewey's argument that pragmatic reflection seeks connections and interaction.

This interplay between practice and theory is exemplified in "Collaboration Is Not Collaboration Is Not Collaboration: Writing Center Tutorials vs. Peer-Response Groups," a *CCC* article addressed to both composition instructors and writing center professionals. Harris (1992) introduces and articulates the article's problem through personal experience: "'I don't use the Writing Lab,' a composition teacher told me recently, 'because I have peer-response groups in my classroom.' To a degree she is correct . . . Yet tutorials and response groups, though collaborative in their approaches, also have different underlying perspectives, assumptions, and goals" (p. 369). Instead of using a particular theory or theorist to convey the overlap between peer response and writing center conferences, Harris uses a colleague's statement to connect with

her audience and make the problem concrete. She goes on to state that her purpose "is to examine the differences and, because I work in a writing center, also to help those outside the center appreciate what tutoring can offer" (p. 369). Again, instead of using a theoretical concept, Harris uses a colleague's statement and her work in writing centers to differentiate between writing center tutorials and peer response groups and ultimately show the unique benefits of peer tutoring. In doing so, she prioritizes the experiential over the theoretical.

Still, this is not to say that she dismisses theory. Instead, she uses it in a way that is indicative of her approach to theory and practice. For instance, she begins her section on the history of response groups and writing tutorials by citing Anne Ruggles Gere's historical and theoretical study of writing groups. In summarizing the study, Harris writes that it differentiates "the forms of writing groups by the locus and degree of authority from within or outside the group" (371). But she follows this abstract theoretical statement by providing concrete examples of informal writing groups found "in residence halls, study rooms, coffee shops, libraries, and faculty offices—where peers help each other by reading each other's drafts when asked" (371). The examples make the abstract concrete for the reader by connecting the idea of authority with something the audience can relate to. Harris builds on this connection by offering her experiences of interviewing prospective writing tutors about their peer-group experiences:

> I hear them describe their efforts either as editorial work ("When someone learns that I got A's in comp classes, they drop by my room before a paper is due and ask me to check for grammar and stuff") or as reader response ("My roommate gives me his papers and I tell him what I think is clear and what isn't"). In either case, this collaboration is closer to tutoring, in that there is likely to be an implicit recognition

> that the reader is either as skilled or more skilled than the writer and that the focus of
>
> the collaboration is on the writer. (371)

Obviously this passage contains examples from Harris' experience that further explain the abstractions of the aforementioned study. However, it also contains references to composition theory (i.e., editorial work and reader response) that are explained by quotes from tutors, showing that Harris is indeed willing to use theory but only if it is applied to, or explained through, the experiential. This interplay between experience and theory is evident later in the article when Harris discusses methods for writing center conferences:

> The tutor has an advantage over the teacher who most often works alone at her desk
>
> using clues on the page—a product-oriented method—to identify the writer's
>
> strengths and weaknesses. The tutor, with the student sitting next to her, can ask
>
> questions, engage in conversation, listen, ask more questions, offer support, and ask a
>
> few more questions. Tutors can rely on questions as much or more than evidence in
>
> the paper. Thus, successful question-asking and listening are skills that are heavily
>
> stressed in manuals for writing tutors (Arkin and Shollar; B. Clark; I. Clark; Harris,
>
> *Teaching*; Meyer and Smith). (p. 375)

Harris references theory and scholarship in two ways here. First, she brings in composition theory by describing teacher grading practices as product-oriented. Second, she references five works of scholarship when discussing question-asking and listening skills. Then, she comes back to the experiential: "I've found one of the tutor's best questions to be 'Why did you do that?' because, when students answer, they so often help tutors see what is needed or lacking" (p. 375). Harris is basically saying, "Look, you can read all of this literature on question-asking and listening, but in my experience, here is the main question tutors should ask." She follows this

statement with a concrete example: "When a student says that a particular type of support for an argument is there because that's all she could think of, the tutor hears something useful about the need for work on invention" (p. 375). Again, there is a place for the theoretical, but the experiential takes priority.

More recently, Harris' approach to reconciliation took a turn when she wrote that the *compleat tutor* has the strategic knowledge to turn theory into practice. She specifically argued that "the link between theory that constructs guidelines and practices that promote it . . . is the strategic knowledge that tutors need to enact those practices built on theory (2006, p. 303). This is a significant admission for Harris because it implies a top-down approach in which practice comes from theory—that you use theory to determine practice. But Harris appears to be uncomfortable with this, because she quickly highlights the problem of working in the abstract: "But strategic knowledge can't be easily 'taught' merely by explaining or describing it . . . We have to confront this reality—that much of the strategic knowledge of tutoring cannot easily be 'taught'" (pp. 303-304). Indeed, she states that writing center administrators must "demonstrate for [tutors] the flexibility they'll need when tutorials don't seem to head in standard directions, in standardized ways; how to be truly collaborative, and how to help students actively seek their own solutions and answers that result in real learning" (p. 305). Thus, even when she attempts to prioritize theory by stating practice builds on it, she returns to championing the experiential because the abstract and general cannot account for the uniqueness or messiness of reality.

Prioritizing the Local

The prioritization of experience is a main reason for Harris' championing of the local. And really, this makes sense, as all experiences and examples come from a local context. Harris (2002) strongly believes that "Writing centers are—and must be—shaped to fit their

particularized surroundings" (p. 76). As such, the interests of writing center professionals are "the result of imperatives of local context and situation: for example, we take positions that are available or that we have the experience to handle; we fill needs that are pressing" (2001, p. 430). She cites her experience developing grammar handouts at the Purdue Writing Lab as an example of this. At the time, doctoral students had to pass a series of writing exams to obtain their degree, and many were coming into the lab with grammar questions. Harris admits that she did not know how to explain a fragment, so she decided to look at 100 or 200 exams and determine what the university was classifying as fragments. She eventually realized that most of the fragments identified in the exams "weren't what grammar handbooks were talking about" (2013). The lab went on to produce other handouts through a similar process of trying figure out what people were doing, working from what they were seeing and what the real problems were:

> And so the handout really started as a cheat-sheet for us; you would just suddenly have to explain parallel structure – how in the world do you do it? So we began talking to each other and writing out handouts . . . So that was a question that needed to be answered immediately, and it needed to be answered in large part because if you start looking at textbooks, they're not really talking in real terms about what people are doing. (2013)

In this situation, Harris identified a local, immediate problem and found a solution—a solution not found in generic, often abstract, textbooks—through local research and collaboration.

Still, it is important to note that Harris' discovery through this experience did not stay local. In fact, she credits the experience with motivating her to write about sentence fragments in a *CCC* article, "Mending the Fragmented Free Modifier" (1981). What is noteworthy about the article, however, is its emphasis on linguistic theory and research. Harris cites her work in

examining student writing samples, but most of the article focuses on linguistic theory and composition research (i.e., Christensen, Klein, Memering, Hunt, Wolk, Gebhard, etc.). Harris makes this transition from the local and concrete to the global and abstract in other works as well. For instance, after stating that sending session notes or records to teachers is a matter of local choice, Harris (1998) moves to theory by encouraging writing center professionals to consider the ethical consequences of doing so: "This issue is sometimes defined as being a question of whether the center works for the student or for the teacher. It is also an ethical debate, one that has been considered often on WCenter (see the WCenter archives at http://www.ttu.edu/lists/wcenter/) and in the Ethics Columns by Michael Pemberton in the *Writing Lab Newsletter*" (p. III.2.2). Still, Harris moves back to the local by stating that Purdue has chosen to send notes unless the student requests otherwise.

Ultimately, Harris believes that answers or solutions to local problems can be applied to broader contexts, but with limitations. She cites her and Tony Silva's oft-cited article, "Tutoring ESL Students: Issues and Options," as an example of this. The article originated from her experience of inviting Tony to campus to talk with faculty and staff about how to work with the increasing number of ESL students at the university. "We just talked back and forth, and I tried to explain our concerns so he could understand what our questions were about," she says. "And afterward, I traveled to his office and I tried to write this out because I really thought it was valuable and so we co-authored an article. It became an article that I guess really was reprinted, but that was a local question" (2013). Again, as was the case with the grammar handouts, Harris sought a solution to a local problem through local research and collaboration. And again, she shared her solution and discoveries with a global audience with the goal that they might find something applicable to their own unique contexts. Harris believes that writing centers, in a

quest to answer their own local questions, can look to the experiences of other centers for ideas and potential direction, but at the same time, they must recognize the unique constraints and nuances of their own contexts.

Writing Center Work as Research

An emphasis on the local influences Harris' advocacy of writing center work as research. Part of this position is grounded in her advocacy role for the writing center field—particularly in terms of securing faculty or full-time status for writing center administrators—but part of it is also based on her belief in the value of experiential knowledge. Harris strongly contends that the knowledge writing center professionals gain through their everyday work and practices is a valuable form of research. This research is both anecdotal (i.e., "Here's what worked well for our center, here's what these tutors did in this situation, etc.") and systematic (i.e., surveys, case studies, usage numbers, etc.), but the one constant is that it is practical and conducted in a local context. While Harris admits that writing center professionals share much common theoretical and pedagogical ground, she argues that there is ultimately "a localness, a particularity, an institutional identity to writing centers" (1999, p. 1). This is not to say that general theories, practices, and research on writing centers should not be worked into the processes of "structuring and directing a center, but reality is much messier than theory, and the locality of each writing center has its defining features and constraints that impinge on the structure of the center and the solutions to the various problems and questions that arise" (2002, p. 77). So, for Harris, the locality of writing center work points to the necessity for writing center research. In other words, writing center professionals should conduct research in their own centers and institutions in order to do their job well. "There's so many things that you have to look at in order to understand in context what your writing center is in your place," she says. "How do you know that unless you

go out and look around and research it?" (2013). Taken further, Harris' call for local research speaks to the pragmatic desire to remove obscurities and realize solutions:

> A well-functioning, effective writing center folds itself into and around the localized features, building on them. But how does the director know what those feature are? That's where localized institutional research arises. By studying the particular place, with its particular staff, student body, institutional mission, administrative structures, and faculty needs, a writing center director makes knowledge—localized knowledge that is critically important as a basis for the administrative decisions that have to be made and problems that have to be solved. (2002, pp. 76-77)

And Harris believes that this local, pragmatic research is commonly employed by most writing center professionals: "The form of inquiry under discussion here is that type of research being done year after year, semester after semester, as part of a writing center administrator's work" (p. 76). Referring to everyday writing center work as a form of research speaks to the value Harris places on experiential learning and, by extension, pragmatism. In fact, she believes that writing center administrators must do a better job of convincing others that running a writing center well requires an intense program of institutional research: "Too many writing center directors fail to credit themselves when review time comes around for all the institutional research they do in order to run their centers well. And writing centers haven't exactly spotlighted themselves publicly as places with intense programs of institutional research" (p. 76). Harris contends that for writing center administrators to receive the credit and respect they deserve, they must first recognize that examining the messy reality of their centers is a valuable form of institutional research.

Harris states that writing center administrators engage in wide-ranging types of research

and draw on a variety of research methodologies appropriate to the institution and the knowledge

needed (1999, p. 1). But what do those methodologies specifically look like? She offers case

studies and surveys as effective tools to research faculty, students, and tutors because they

examine particular examples or experiences from a local context (2002, pp. 81-85). Not only do

these methodologies offer insight into a local context, Harris believes that such research "can and

should be disseminated publicly off-campus for use by other writing center administrators" (p.

86). By sharing localized practitioner knowledge in print, on listservs, and at conferences, Harris

believes it becomes "data for further study both locally and as a contribution to knowledge in the

field" (1999, p. 3). Still, as is the case with theory-practice tension regarding real world

examples and generalizable theories, this approach to writing center research becomes

complicated when the discussion moves beyond particular experiences or a particular center.

Namely, if each context is unique, what happens when directors share, or look for, research from

other centers? Again, the desire to realize solutions through experiential knowledge then can

create more obscurities because of the uniqueness of each context.

Harris responds to this problem by arguing that there is indeed some commonality among

writing centers. However, she also argues that research from other centers should always derive

from local contexts and experiences, and likewise, research examined from other contexts should

always be examined through a local framework. For Harris, everything must return to the local

and experiential. She references Patricia Terry's experience at Gonzaga University as an

example of this: "Books, articles, conference talks, even conversations with colleagues at other

institutions were helpful, but finally, as Terry's story shows us, the knowledge she needed was

scattered throughout her institution." (p. 80). Indeed, Harris believes Writing Centers "both

permit and encourage constant experimentation and exploration" (2001, p. 435). Not only do writing centers provide opportunities for research, they require it because of the everyday experiences and challenges writing center professionals face. Writing center professionals conduct local, experience-based research every day because they have to.

It is the pragmatic demands that result in Harris' championing of the experiential. For her, writing center research starts out with the pragmatic, with the local and concrete, before moving into the general and theoretical: "Pragmatically, [writing centers] have a huge diversity of needs. It starts out pragmatically and as you go into that area, you could begin to reach to larger generalizations" (2013). But those professionals who do reach to larger generalizations, often become frustrated with the limitations of theory, both writing center and beyond: "There's so many needs that we have to go into all kinds of fields and once we do, we're floundering because we're looking for answers that aren't often there" (2013). It is because of this limitation that Harris comes back to the experiential: "No matter how much tutoring of writing is studied, theorized, analyzed, and taught, the underlying principles that account for its effectiveness continue to evolve from experience, principles that are tried, tested, and altered when the next challenge to explore comes along (2001, p. 435). Harris champions local experience as the beginning, or the foundation, for understanding and explaining writing center work.

In many ways, the *Writing Lab Newsletter* (*WLN*) embodies this perspective of the theory-practice relationship. In a keynote address given at the 2000 CCCC, Harris stated that the mix of the practical and theoretical in *WLN* reflects everyday writing center work: "The newsletter's [WLN] mix of practical, immediately useful information and more generalized papers on theory, administration, and pedagogy characterizes much of writing center daily work" (2001, p. 434). Still, Harris stated that the current content of *WLN* is a result of the increased

experience of its readers: "As people got more experienced, there are things they can talk about . . . So it's been evolving along with changing times and peoples' education and now they're much more sophisticated articles because there are people who are much more sophisticated about the field" (2013). Again, experience is foundational as increased experience leads to a deeper, more sophisticated understanding of the field.

Harris' strong commitment to finding solutions through experience is largely responsible for her prominence in the writing center field. Even after her retirement, Harris has remained active in settings that allow her to help out and answer the questions of writing center practitioners. She draws on the experiential to provide as many solutions as possible for writing center practitioners. Indeed, this active, vocal approach in many ways echoes the approach of Jeanne Simpson, who draws upon her experiences in both writing center and central administration to provide solutions for the institutional challenges faced by many centers. Like Harris, Simpson has remained active in the field even after retirement. The following chapter will explore how Simpson's approach to realizing and communicate solutions can provide a better understanding to the theory-practice interplay in writing center work.

CHAPTER SIX

THE EXPERENTIAL COMMITMENT OF JEANNE SIMPSON

Although it champions the experiential, the pragmatism of Peirce, James, and Dewey requires connections between theory and practice, and by extension, between theorists and practitioners. Understanding pragmatism in this way leads to questions concerning the necessity of a different form of pragmatism in the writing center field, a form that is closer to pragmatism's original call for theory and practice to work together. Kail appears to advocate for this type of pragmatism by championing an inclusive writing center lore that communicates the effectiveness of writing centers to both internal and external audiences. But this type of lore may be insufficient because its flexibility does not necessitate a theory-practice connection. Still, at the same time, Kail's desire to better understand what happens in writing centers does encourage a form of reflection that entails both theory and practice. Harris shares this desire for inclusivity, although her primary concern is to connect with her audience by following pragmatism's call to clarify obscurities and provide solutions. For Harris, this starts with the experiential, but it also connects with theory in some way. In the same way, her desire to connect local experience with the global writing center community speaks to her commitment to follow pragmatism's call for interaction between individuals, including theorists and practitioners. This commitment manifests in a continual, active presence at conferences and on listervs.

In some ways, Harris' active presence is echoed by Jeanne Simpson, although Simpson's approach is less concerned with establishing connections than it is with telling practitioners what to do. In this sense, Simpson follows pragmatism's call to clarify obscurities and realize solutions. Unlike Kail, Simpson does not trust lore's ability to communicate the story of writing centers and is more skeptical that everything will work out for the greater good. She views

experiential knowledge as a key driver in challenging writing center professionals to dismiss their oppositional tendencies and take a proactive role in working with central administration to secure status and funding within institutions. In fact, by drawing on her experiences as a writing center director and academic dean, Simpson's work addresses writing center administration issues almost exclusively. While Harris is concerned with administrative issues, she is also concerned with what happens in writing center sessions and the act of tutoring itself. Simpson, on the other hand, is mainly concerned with determining what is best for the survival of writing centers and writing center administrators. She repeatedly argues that writing center administrators need to stop playing the marginalized victim card and start working with administration. Much of her work, then, offers practical strategies for writing center administrators so they can play the "administration game." She is adamant that writing center administrators do a better job of understanding their local institutional context and remember that centers are part of the institution, not necessarily a department. Simpson is also a strong proponent of writing center assessment—needs, opportunities, and outcomes—and accreditation. In the end, she encourages writing center administrators to embrace the mindset and language of administration, adopting a win-win approach where writing center pedagogy informs and supports an institution's mission.

Simpson's work rarely references theory or scholarship of any kind—her work is dominated by experiential knowledge. Whereas Harris connects theory and practice by summarizing scholarship and offering possible pragmatic applications of research findings and theoretical arguments, Simpson functions as a solver and a dispenser of advice, providing solutions without referencing theory, and many of those solutions come from her experiences. Simply stated, she believes in identifying problems and finding solutions, and those solutions—

at least in her published work—are almost always found in experience. Again, while this approach follows pragmatism's valuing of the experiential and call to clarify obscurities and realize solutions, it fails to encourage connections between theory and practice. As such, examining Simpson's approach to pragmatism and writing center work highlights the interplay between theory and practice in the field.

Valuing the Experiential

Like Harris, Simpson consistently values the experiential. She strongly believes that experience is the best, if not only, means of learning, and that planning and theorizing cannot account for the surprises and nuances of everyday experience. "People's lives are a great deal improvisational," she says. "One of the dumbest interview questions I ever heard was, 'Where do you see yourself in 5 years?' Who the hell knows? Life has a way of throwing things at you" (2013). One of the experiences thrown at Simpson early in her career was writing center work. As a writing instructor looking to improve her effectiveness, Simpson found her answer in an unexpected place:

> What I wanted to do was get a degree in rhetoric and composition so that I could understand a little better why things that I did in the classroom worked or didn't work. I needed some sort of theoretical framework. But then I met Jan and she was doing the writing center and I did an assistantship in there and my immediate reaction was, "Well this is the way writing really ought to be taught. This makes a whole lot of sense to me." (2013)

What is interesting here is that Simpson was seeking out the theoretical as a means to understand her work, but she claims that the experience of working in a writing center showed her how writing should be taught. She did not need a theoretical framework to understand effective

writing instruction; she simply needed to experience the everyday, one-to-one work of writing centers to learn how to teach writing. Along these lines, years later when she found herself in central administration, Simpson drew on her experiences in writing center work when negotiating faculty contracts: "I found that my writing center experience was exactly what I needed for that because, as you know working in writing centers, one of the gifts you have is listening. You have to listen. And you have to take into account the pressures that are on the person that is talking to you" (2013). As a new dean, Simpson was confronted with an experience that she was not fully prepared for. But instead of seeking solutions through business or negotiation theories, she relied on her writing center experiences, namely the importance of listening to and empathizing with others.

Later, upon returning to writing center administration, Simpson used her experiences as a dean to secure funding and influence for her center. She claims that as a dean, she "learned so much about what actually matters to upper administration, what pressures they have on them, and who they answer to, particularly in state-supported institutions" (2013). Instead of keeping these lessons to herself, however, Simpson began sharing her solutions with other writing center professionals: "I realized, 'Okay, now I see both sides.' Now I can offer my experiences to my writing center colleagues" (2013). Simpson began imploring her writing center colleagues to stop playing the victim card and start looking at their centers from the perspective of central administration. She says that her experience taught her that writing center directors "needed to be aware of what [central administrators] want to know and that, if they're not interested in the writing center, the writing center won't survive" (2013). This advice is evident in Simpson's plea for writing center administrators to better understand retention. For instance, in "The Role of Writing Centers in Student Retention Programs," Simpson (1991) discusses how Writing

Centers can support institutional student retention efforts. She argues that while writing center administrators want students to graduate, they cannot have tunnel vision or just focus on teaching writing; they need to consider larger institutional contexts and pressures, beginning with retention efforts: "Writing center people have always known that writing is central to successful education; what we have needed is a means to convince others. If we face indifference, misunderstanding, wretched budgets, and unmotivated students, we need more than just to believe in what we do" (p. 108). Before making this charge, however, Simpson makes sure to offer a pragmatic rationale for understanding retention:

> Retention is the magic word from the department level right on up to governing boards and legislatures. Funding, support, everything is based on how many students an institution gets, keeps, and graduates. Writing centers can play a significant role in retention efforts, but before they do, their directors need to understand what retention means and how centers affect it. After spending six years helping to develop a coordinated university retention program, I have learned some valuable lessons in this respect." (p. 102)

A couple of interesting moves are made in this passage. First, instead of making a theoretical argument, Simpson presents a pragmatic case for focusing on retention: funding. But perhaps more importantly, she ends this passage by offering solutions, solutions that she discovered through her six years of experience developing a coordinated university retention program.

Simpson's work draws upon the experiential even more than Harris, or perhaps it draws upon her own experiences more than Harris draws upon hers. Simpson often writes that moving from a writing center into central administration gave her a global perspective that helped her "understand how important it is for the writing center director to learn as much as possible about

the workings of the institution and the administration" (2006, p. 214). Indeed, much of her work begins by referencing her experiences in both writing centers and central administration. For instance, Simpson and Kinkead (2000) establish ethos in "Learning Admin-Speak" by referencing their experiences as administrators: "As administrators ourselves—one at the college level and one in central administration—we would like to share what we have learned about the administrative audience, what we wish we had known when we were directors of writing centers and writing programs" (p. 72). Likewise, Simpson (2006) starts "Managing Encounters with Central Administration" by referencing her collective 19 years in writing center and central administration: "After establishing and then directing a writing center for nine years, I entered central administration. I spent the next decade in the provost's office thinking, 'I wish I had known this or that when I was directing the center!' The principles, suggestions, and examples I offer here are intended to fulfill that wish vicariously" (2006, p. 199). In addition to stating her experience, Simpson also connects with her audience by offering solutions, or more specifically, by offering solutions she wished she would have known about as a writing center administrator: "Had we been more savvy about administrative rhetoric, we believe we could have negotiated more dollars, more space, more options for expanding and improving services" (Simpson & Kinkead, 2000, p. 72). Again, these are not theoretical solutions to theoretical problems; they are pragmatic solutions to the everyday problems facing most writing center administrators, and they come from Simpson's experiences in administration. In essence, Simpson is saying, "I've been there, and I've learned these things firsthand; listen to me and you won't have to learn the hard way."

The Purpose of Research

Simpson's desire to share what she has learned through her experiences reflects her approach to writing center research. That is to say, she acknowledges the value and necessity of writing center research, but only if it comes from the local and is conducted through a framework that removes obscurities and provides solutions. Research, she writes, should "define the specific problem and find a solution" (1994, p. 156). Predictably, Simpson has countless examples of research she conducted to solve problems she faced as a writing center administrator. Perhaps the most notable problem is one that shaped her career: powerlessness. "I learned from my own powerlessness. I had no control over my own budget. I was a temporary faculty member so I had no access to tenure or promotion" (2013). Faced with a lack of power and status in her institution, Simpson conducted research to solve the problem facing her and her center. But instead of drawing on theory, she drew on her experiences—mostly centered on effective communication strategies—and continued to do so throughout her career. As she said, writing center scholarship did not exist when she entered the field, so she and others needed to create it: "When I first began doing writing center work, there wasn't any scholarship. People like me and Mickey and Harvey and Joyce and so many others—I mean, we had to create it; it really didn't exist" (2013). And Simpson and others basically created it through a process of trial-and-error—they were faced with problems, identified potential solutions, and then shared what worked and didn't work with others.

Simpson cites her work drafting the National Writing Centers Association (NWCA) position statement on working conditions for writing centers as an example of how she and others created writing center scholarship. As a member of the founding board of NWCA, she was tasked with drafting a statement that articulated what the ideal writing center job in terms of status, pay, duties, etc. Simpson (2013) says, "That was not something where we could use

scholarship either; it had to be on the basis of talking to people and experience." At the time, Simpson created the statement based on surveys and conversations with writing center professionals throughout the country. Although she now wishes that she had documented her research better, at the time, documentation was not a concern—she simply wanted to find a solution to the problem of lacking working conditions for writing center professionals. And she stands by the statement's credibility because it articulates the experiences of so many professionals in the field: "I wish now that I had done a better job of documenting who all I've talked to, but I did explain in the article how that came about. So it wasn't just me making this stuff up" (2013). For Simpson, then, effective research is not simply created—it seeks to find solutions by drawing on personal experience or, when necessary, the experience of others.

Still, it is important to note that while Simpson contends that research can be used to solve a variety of problems, she believes that writing center research and scholarship should ultimately seek to convince others about the effectiveness of writing center work: "Writing center people have always known that writing is central to successful education; what we have needed is a means to convince others. If we face indifference, misunderstanding, wretched budgets, and unmotivated students, we need more than just to believe in what we do" (1991, p. 108). She writes that the "success of writing centers is based entirely too much on perception and not enough on hard documentation" (1994, p. 154). This lack of documentation relates to Simpson's concern that writing center research too often fails to establish credibility to those outside the field. "That is actually my biggest objection to Steve North's famous article," she said. "I think his little famous sound bite 'We don't make better writing we make better writers,' I think is just hooey. We can't prove that" (2013). Of course, this is not to say that Simpson thinks "proof of our effectiveness" is impossible to attain; she believes it is difficult, but not

impossible: "Assisting students to become more adept at communicating with writing is cause for writing centers. It is our primary reason for existence. Tough to prove—no one who's ever worked with centers thinks this proof is easy to get. It is maddingly elusive. But you can try. Must try" (1994, p. 159). To overcome this difficulty, Simpson claims that the field needs to look beyond itself when conducting research:

> We need to avoid becoming too solipsistic in our research. That, to me, is the most damning thing in Steve North's article—is that we tend to think that it has to be about us and that we can find the answers to our questions within our community. I think the answer is no, we can't. We need to look at theories much further in fields that we would find in English departments.

On the surface, there appears to be two key contradictions here. First, while Simpson calls for the writing center community to look at theories in other fields and disciplines—she specifically mentions game, chaos, and cognitive theories—her research has almost exclusively drawn on personal experience and rarely references theory of any kind. Second, Simpson advocates for local research that solves immediate problems, but she also claims that writing center research often fails to convince outsiders that writing centers are effective and worthwhile, which begs the question of whether or not local research can convince an outsider. Indeed, at times, she acknowledges this latter contradiction: "The content of the scholarship, where so many good ideas now reside, is read mostly by people who already believe and know. As a rhetoric of institutional change, it is more ceremonial than deliberative" (1993, p. 3). This statement suggests that the problem does not lie as much in the research, per se, as in the inability of writing center professionals to craft their research findings in a broadly influential way. For Simpson, good ideas do indeed reside in writing center scholarship, but for some reason, those

good ideas fail to connect with and convince non-writing center audiences. And as someone

who believes that status, funding, and influence are still the overarching problems of the field,

Simpson believes addressing this failure should be a priority of the field.

Striving for the Win-Win

Simpson argues that a key way for the field to connect with external audiences is by

adopting a research focus that always keeps an eye on the global, particularly at the institutional

level. While she recognizes that maintaining an institutional focus is difficult because of the

individual, localized nature or the field, she claims that writing centers ignore the institutional at

their own peril. She writes that the main reason writing centers fight the same battles "over and

over, with only the institutional names changing, is that most writing-center professionals focus

primarily on serving students and fail to address the political realities of their institutions" (2001,

p. 128). For Simpson, because writing center professionals are committed to serving students

and teaching writing, they mistakenly remove themselves from the decision-making processes

that influence their ability to serve students:

> Directing a writing center is such an absorbing job that it is easy to keep a local
>
> focus—the writing center . . . We tend to be committed to teaching writing, not to
>
> institutional policies. But while the decisions themselves don't always affect the
>
> center, the decision process does. Writing center directors need to attend carefully to
>
> the process at their institutions. (1991, p. 107)

Simpson's claim that writing center directors attend carefully to institutional processes reflects

her belief that writing centers professionals should "think about the writing center as a part of

your institution as you plan the internal functions of the center" (1998, p. II.2.1). One specific

example of this concerns mission—Simpson believes that a writing center's mission should

match, complement, or support the institution's mission because the "relationship to institutional mission may be the determining factor in the decision of whether to support a writing center proposal" (p. II.2.2). Indeed, Simpson consistently challenges directors who view writing centers as places of subversion, questioning how this mindset enables them to serve writers more effectively: "Will you do a better job of making the writing center operate if you perceive your work as subversion, even if others don't perceive it that way at all? Maybe so. This begins to become a hall of mirrors, and my pragmatic soul cringes" (p. 155-156). Even today, Simpson remains passionate about this need for writing centers to stop viewing their work as subversion. When asked about the criticism that this argument is a form of selling out, Simpson (2013) responds, "These people are paying your salary, they give you a parking place, who is selling out here?"

Instead of viewing themselves as subversive or adversarial, Simpson challenges writing center professionals to seek out win-win scenarios with administration: "Having a service mentality and being a shaker/doer are not antithetical. They are, to my mind, closely linked. I think the issue is instead one of being pro-active rather than re-active" (1993, p. 1). Again, drawing on her experience in central administration, Simpson argues that institutions want strong writing centers that strengthen recruitment, retention, and graduation rates and improve "the institution's ratings with external entities and accrediting agencies" (1998, p. II.2.11). If writing centers can convince administration that they do these things, they attain stability and credibility within the institution that affords them the "latitude to innovate and take risks" (1998, p. II.2.11). In other words, Simpson does not accept the argument that writing centers must be oppositional or subversive to influence—she believes they have the most power and influence by working in synch with institutions: "Rather than work against the institution, we need to acknowledge that

we are part of the institution and can be effective change agents . . . By communicating well with the administrative culture in the terminology of administration, we stand to gain resources and respect" (2000, p. 72).

One specific way Simpson believes writing centers can secure resources and respect is through accreditation. For Simpson, accreditation is the currency of the academic realm that "implies the existence of standards, or regular external and internal review—in short, quality control . . . it answers local political attacks by providing a context that is more than local" (2001, p. 128). But more than a means to attain credibility and respect with others, she believes accreditation also makes "writing center[s] intrinsically better and is in all ways preferable to waiting for standards to be imposed upon us arbitrarily by outside entities" (1996, p. 4). In the end, accreditation is the ultimate win-win for writing centers because it addresses both external and internal, or global and local, demands:

> If the existence of writing centers is already fraught with risk and unpredictability, why not try accreditation as a means to strengthen them? If external powers, such as legislatures and governing boards, exert directly and specifically their power over academic institutions, then writing centers should recognize that these chosen currencies must be writing center currencies also. If the currency is accountability, assessment and accreditation, then writing centers already know that they have few options. Quantitative, measurable quality indicators for writing centers are difficult to achieve. The one means already endorsed by the external powers and subject to writing center control is accreditation. (2001, pp. 131-132)

Simpson's approach to writing center work manifests itself in this passage through the claim that accreditation is a solution to the problem of security and stability

. Instead of using accreditation as a means to better understand writing center work, Simpson believes writing centers should pursue accreditation because it is the currency of higher education and can be used to secure status and funding in an institution. While it may provide a potential solution, this narrow focus fails to follow pragmatism's call to connect theory and practice in meaningful ways.

A Place for Theory

The desire to find solutions and seek win-win scenarios influences Simpson's approach to theory. She follows pragmatism's call for connections, as well as its emphasis on measurable consequences: "There needs to be coherence between theory and practice. My thought is that we have to look not at what we wish was there, but [at] what is actually there" (2013). In other words, Simpson finds value in theory, but only if it is considered practically in the sense that it has tangible benefits. For instance, Simpson claims that "we need to look at a lot of theories"— particularly composition theory, chaos theory, and cognitive load theory—to better understand what we are doing in writing centers (2013). She says that we know that the act of writing is extremely complicated and many of these theories have the potential to provide answers about how to teaching writing more effectively (2013). Again, theory is valuable, but only if it is used to remove obscurities and provide solutions. In this case, the theories she references can be used by writing center professionals to better understand and teach writing.

Still it is important to note that although she claims to value theory, Simpson's work is notably void of any as it almost exclusively draws upon the experiential. On the rare occasion that she does reference theory, it is in the context of helping writing center professionals address administrative and political challenges. For instance, one of the few times Simpson (1994) references theory in her published work is in "War, Peace, and Writing Administration," which

documents an email discussion she had with Steve Braye and Beth Boquet. The article addresses a variety of writing center issues, but a consistent focus is the status and role of writing centers in higher education. Simpson references political theory and feudalism several times in the essay as a means to better understand the status of writing centers within the academy and speculate about potential paths or courses of action:

> Let's explore the analogy to feudalism a bit . . . Now as long as a writing center operates within the feudal hierarchy, it is going to be subject to both the advantages and the constraints imposed by the hierarchy . . . You have to work really hard and carry a big burden for not much reward. Always the lot of a serf. If you leave the feudal hierarchy, you become more exposed in a way, but also you have more opportunity for enterprise. (p. 161)

Simpson's political approach to theory is also evident in her use of Nancy Grimm. She uses Grimm's work as a means to consider the role of writing centers in higher education as a whole and individual institutions: "We can make things better, not just for writing centers but for higher education. But we must accept some hard truths first. We must be willing to move out of our old contexts, to be amenable to change. If we want to be doers and shakers, to use Nancy Grimm's terms, we must understand what nature we will assume" (1993, p. 2). Simpson uses Grimm to not only envision what centers can and should look like but also to consider the ways in which writing centers should change.

Perhaps Simpson's approach to theory and practice is best conveyed through her opinion of professional preparation for writing center administrators. She believes that writing center directors "need to be sophisticated enough in their own administrative activities to balance the two levels of knowledge and expertise—theoretical and managerial, pedagogical and

budgetary—effectively" (1995, p. 52). Unfortunately, while writing center professionals are well-prepared in terms of the theoretical and pedagogical, Simpson argues that preparation is lacking on the managerial and budgetary (1995, p. 52). To solve this problem, she challenges doctoral programs to offer more coursework emphasizing administrative issues:

> While I certainly would insist that any writing center preparation has to begin with a sound knowledge of composition theory and practice, I believe we must begin to do more to prepare ourselves appropriately . . . I propose that we go in this same direction and prepare future writing center directors for some of the administrative work that comes with this assignment. So, one step I would propose is for writing center personnel at doctoral institutions to push to get broader-based preparation worked into these graduate programs. (1996, p. 3)

The idea that doctoral institutions place equal emphasis on theory and practice hints at Simpson's attempt to reconcile the two. Indeed, she does believe that "there needs to be coherence between theory and practice" (2013). But at the same time, when pressed, she defaults to practice, arguing that if theory and practice do not agree, then theory is incorrect: "Don't think about what could happen. Watch what does happen . . . if something isn't working, but a theory insisted it must, then the theory must be wrong" (2013). Another way to frame this approach is to say that theory is only valuable if it is grounded in practice, or similarly, that theory should come from practice.

This approach suggests that there are indeed opportunities for research in writing centers. Simpson herself says that "the premise that each writer is unique and has a unique set of problems means that a writing center is uniquely placed to explore that" (2013). Viewing writing centers as potential sites of research for writing theory and pedagogy is the ultimate win-

win for Simpson because it helps writing centers gain status and security while also enabling them to become agents of change within an institution. And even more importantly, it enables centers to move beyond the victim mentality and better serve the students they work with: "For writing centers to fret about marginalization and/or victimization is to waste time. Define the specific problem and find a solution is my response. And the problem should be defined in terms of service to students or the whole thing is a sham" (1994, p. 156). Indeed, Simpson's pragmatic call to define problems and find solutions is an underlying theme of her approach to writing center work. She writes, "The details may differ from institution to institution, but writing centers exist in every case because some function needed to be fulfilled. What a center needs is to develop integrity and professionalism. The enemy is complacency and inattention" (1996, p. 3). Simpson believes that if writing centers identify and effectively fulfill those functions and communicate their effectiveness to an outside audience, they will achieve more security and status in the academy, which will in turn lead to more influence.

Simpson's approach to understanding writing center work both echoes and differs from Kail and Harris. But taken as a whole, all three point to the possibility of an interplay that recognizes the pragmatic underpinnings of the writing center field while also allowing for epistemological and methodological diversity in the field. Kail, Harris, and Simpson testify that the writing center field can employ action-and-reflection in a way that adheres to the systematic pragmatism championed by Dewey.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ACTION-AND-REFLECTION IN WRITING CENTER WORK

Approaching writing center work through a theory-practice framework creates a dichotomy that results in an unproductive tension for the field. While most writing center professionals acknowledge both the theoretical and the practical, they tend to first separate the two and then favor one over the other. This separation and favoring results in parallel conversations in which many theorists and practitioners either ignore or talk past each other. The dilemma, then, is what the writing center community should do with this tension. Answering this question is important because writing center professionals need to better understand the work they do. Doing so not only helps writing centers be more effective, it also helps them explain their work and value to skeptical audiences, many of which impact the status, funding, and structure of writing centers.

One way the theory-practice tension has been addressed is through praxis. However, as Doherty (2005) points out, praxis has been traditionally understood as the application of theory in practice, a system that not only maintains a theory-practice dichotomy, but does so in a hierarchical manner. Perhaps a more effective way to approach the theory-practice quandary is to examine the relationship between action-and-reflection. Using an action-and-reflection perspective resists a dichotomization and suggests a more reciprocal relationship between theory and practice as opposed to the more hierarchical relationship praxis traditionally encourages.

Pragmatism, Action, and Reflection

Better understanding pragmatism is important in understanding the interplay of action-and-reflection because it is a philosophical school that appeals to many writing center professionals who are overwhelmed with the day-to-day challenges of writing center work. The

catch is that many of these professionals embrace a form of pragmatism that pushes back against more abstract theoretical paradigms and methodologies present in the field. However, pragmatism, particularly the pragmatism of John Dewey, requires both action-and-reflection. Yes, pragmatism values the experiential and seeks solutions, but at the same time, it also encourages connections between the experiential and theoretical. Ultimately, it encourages an interplay between theory and practice that informs instead of divides. In doing so, it speaks to the possibility of viewing the theory and practice interplay as a reciprocal relationship of action-and-reflection.

Both James and Peirce viewed pragmatism as a means to filter out unnecessary, abstract philosophical arguments. For them, pragmatism was an orientation that focused on identifying what happened and worked—pragmatism was a call to seek solutions through observation of known experience, or an orientation to concrete results. Still, it is important to note that this commitment to finding solutions through the experiential does not call for the dismissal of theory. Indeed, the idea of connections is strongly embraced by Dewey, who ardently believed in a form of pragmatism in which what was true was what worked. Dewey was interested in observable results; epistemologies that were not interested in results were harmful. He also believed that connections were required to realize observable results and workable solutions. Dewey viewed inquiry and education as a communal endeavor that required interaction and a commitment to the common good (Fishman, 2003, p. 316). Still, Dewey (1910a) subscribed to the belief that all inquiry began and ended with experience (p. 156). Thus, while reflection should be included as part of the inquiry process, any reflection that does not begin with or refer back to action is inadequate.

It is important to note that Deweyan pragmatism does not consider reflection to be merely thinking about action. As Rodgers (2002) points out, Dewey considered reflection to be a rigorous, intentional undertaking. Dewey viewed reflection as a "meaning-making process that moves a learner from one experience into the next with deeper understanding of its relationships with and connections to other experiences and ideas" (p. 845). Reflection is also a "systematic, rigorous, and disciplined" thought process that can only happen in communal interaction with others, an interaction that requires the valuing of the personal and intellectual growth of both oneself and others. These criteria for reflection are important because they point out the necessity of both action-and-reflection working together in systematic, rigorous ways with other individuals.

Viewing action-and-reflection in this way is helpful in understanding how writing center professionals can use action-and-reflection in their everyday work. As Roskelly (1998) notes, the pragmatic tenets of Dewey suggest that "inquiry is both a communal and a contingent process, operating in local contexts and among groups as well as individuals, and its method is therefore necessarily collaborative, with action tested by many in a variety of circumstances" (p. 84). For Dewey (1944[1916]), because educators are "partners in common undertakings, the things which others communicate to us as the consequences of their particular share in the enterprise blend at once into the experience resulting from our own special doing" (p. 186). Dewey believed that educators have a responsibility to share their experiences and findings with each other—that reflection should happen in community. Ideally, communal reflection and inquiry will result in a meaning-making process that contributes to deeper understandings for all educators.

The Pragmatism of Kail, Harris, and Simpson

Dewey's expectation for systematic, communal reflection suggests the need for a form of pragmatism in the writing center field that acknowledges both theory and practice. Or, it suggests the need for a form of methodological egalitarianism in which action-and-reflection inform each other. The question that arises then is what this approach, or system, looks like. This is where the work of writing center figures such as Harvey Kail, Muriel Harris, and Jeanne Simpson can be helpful. Taken as a whole, Kail, Harris, and Simpson point to the possibility of writing center professionals using action-and-reflection to better understand writing center work. By looking at all three together, this study can help the writing center community better understand the interplay of theory and practice in the field as an integration of theory and practice by means of reflection. This study lets us see what each contributes to the theory and practice interplay by demonstrating how these three figures collectively speak to a different form of pragmatism in which action-and-reflection inform each other in reciprocal ways, a reciprocity that follows the pragmatic call to clarify obscurities and realize solutions.

For instance, those familiar with Kail's work note his strong commitment to collaborative learning and peer tutoring. In addressing these issues, Kail acknowledges and addresses practical issues without being consumed by them. His concern about writing center goals, assessment, and evaluation is clearly influenced by political and central administration pressures, but it is driven by his intrinsic desire to better understand what happens in peer tutoring programs. Because of this mindset, Kail is able to connect with practitioners and encourage them to research, or at least explore, what happens in a writing center. This connection is partly attributable to his ability to draw upon personal experiences and anecdotal evidence, but while experiential knowledge—and the lore that follows—is evident in Kail's work, so is theory. In

fact, he often uses theory as a discussion starter and then weaves it throughout his conversation when necessary. A particularly interesting example of this is his desire for peer tutoring and collaborative learning to become part of academic lore. Yes, Kail accepts the pragmatic call to clarify and find solutions while also considering the role theory plays in helping us do so.

There is a pragmatic bent to Kail's research, but his pragmatism does not necessarily follow the practitioner desire to realize clear answers or solutions. It instead assumes that an honest exploration of writing center work will lead to narratives that provide solutions without making solutions the primary goal. His pragmatism assumes that if we explore what is happening and share our stories, the task of finding solutions will take care of itself. This approach acknowledges the real issues and pressures writing center workers face without being consumed by them. That is, instead of identifying solutions through particular methods, Kail's approach is guided by an underlying desire to better understand what happens in peer tutoring programs, a desire that is less concerned with preferred methods and more concerned with realizing informed understandings that result in a stronger, more effective lore. In the end, Kail's approach is based on his confidence in the value of writing center work: "You have an opportunity to sit down and talk one-to-one and come back the next week and establish relationships with peer tutors over time. At the end of the day, the story that we tell ourselves about writing centers is not necessarily different than that" (2012). Kail trusts writing centers as places where individuals can work together and develop relationships. This trust results in a confidence that open, honest examinations of writing center work will contribute to a reliable lore that communicates the value of writing centers both within and beyond the writing center community.

Although his primary goal may not be to realize solutions, Kail remains pragmatic in the sense that he still acknowledges the necessity of consequences. Like Peirce and James, his approach to lore acknowledges that all conclusions must be tested and verified by human experience and all ideas are defined by their consequences. What's unique about Kail, however, is that he is not driven by proving these ideas because he has confidence in the day-to-day experiences of writing center workers. It is this confidence in writing centers and writing center lore that appeals to busy, pressured writing center workers. For Kail, championing lore not only validates writing centers, it also validates the research approach preferred by most writing center practitioners because of its methodological ease. For many busy writing center professionals, it is much easier to present lore to a skeptical administrator or colleagues at a conference than it is to conduct a controlled research project on writing center work, even if that research project follows the pragmatic call that "inquiry is a process of observation, hypothesizing, and experimenting" (Roskelly, 1998, p. 84). Although Kail does not explicitly admit it, lore is feasible and accessible for writing center practitioners in ways that other types of research are not.

Still, the appeal of Kail's lore among writing center practitioners extends beyond methodological ease—it is also appealing because of its methodological inclusiveness. It is important to note that Kail's lore does not necessarily follow the Deweyan expectation that all effective inquiry begin with and refer back to experience. However, Kail's methodological inclusiveness is actually appealing to writing center practitioners because it encourages flexibility. Writing center professionals have the flexibility to both use and contribute to writing center lore in whichever way they choose. So, writing center practitioners can choose to ignore

theoretical examinations of their work because according to Kail, the anecdotal evidence of their everyday experiences is just as valid and insightful.

This methodological flexibility is appealing to a community that, for the most part, champions unity and collaboration above division and hierarchy. If a group of writing center scholars wants to conduct empirical research while another group conducts theoretical research and another anecdotal, experiential research, that is fine. All of these approaches are an equally valuable part of writing center lore. Thus, the experiences of a graduate assistant conducting citation workshops or leading ESL conversation circles carries just as much value as a longitudinal research project supported by an IWCA grant or a theoretical exploration of tutor identity published by a well-known writing center scholar. All contribute to the story of writing center work; all contribute to the goal of better understanding and communicating the value of writing centers.

Still, despite its appeal to a field that resists division, it is important to note that this methodological inclusiveness is also a key criticism of lore, particularly the type of lore Kail endorses. Namely, is lore too accepting and inclusive to be credible, both within and outside the field? It is a fair and important question to ask. Kail's confidence in writing center lore is indeed appealing to writing center practitioners, but is it enough to say that anything that effectively communicates the story of writing centers is sufficient? The underlying assumption is that writing centers are indeed effective, and because of this, any stories that come from writing center work are credible. Some of those stories may come from empirical research or theoretical explorations, but more often than not, those stories come from the everyday lived experiences of writing center practitioners. In the end, this may be enough for writing center practitioners, but it may not be enough for other, more skeptical audiences. Furthermore, the

inclusivity of Kail's lore may prevent writing center professionals from attaining a more accurate understanding of writing center work.

Like Kail, Harris relies heavily on anecdotal evidence and experiential knowledge while also referencing theory. She often functions as a translator for her practitioner audience, reporting what scholars and researchers have found and speculating how writing center workers can use these findings and theories in their everyday work. Still, she defers to the experiential. This deference is evident in her strong commitment to the argument that writing center administration should not "be viewed as different in kind from other research on writing instruction" (Harris, 1999, p. 2). Part of this position is grounded in her advocacy role for the writing center field, particularly in terms of securing faculty or full-time status for writing center administrators, but it is also based on her belief in the value of experiential knowledge. She believes that the knowledge writing center administrators gain through their everyday work and practices is a valuable form of research. While this research can be both anecdotal and systematic, Harris argues it must be practical and local. In fact, she believes that writing centers must ultimately look inward or to their local context—there is no generalizable solution or approach that works best for everyone. In fact, in her pursuit of solutions, Harris recognizes every situation is different and every solution entails trade-offs. Because of this, she advocates for flexibility, arguing that specifics are not as important as the goal of growing centers and helping writers.

The unstated tension that comes from placing trust in everyday lived experiences is evident in Harris' work. Although she does not explicitly discuss lore, she contributes to it through her championing of the experiential and anecdotal. While Harris shares Kail's desire to be inclusive in communicating writing center effectiveness—and indeed references empirical

and theoretical research—her work favors the experiential. This favoring, along with Harris'

reception among writing center practitioners, is important in better understanding the theory-

practice tension in writing center work.

While Kail argues for a methodological egalitarianism in which all research can

contribute to or become part of writing center lore, Harris more consistently argues for research

that comes from everyday writing center work. Although she is not as explicit as Dewey, she

endorses the argument that all inquiry should come from and refer back to experience. Her work

incorporates theory and empirical research, but it ultimately defers to the experiential more

consistently than Kail's does. That said, Harris and Kail agree more than disagree. Both resist

creating dichotomies and are open to incorporating whatever means necessary to better

understand and communicate writing center work. And they both rely heavily on the everyday,

local experience in doing so. Along these lines, both subscribe to the idea of staying within the

writing center field. In other words, while they are open to a variety of research approaches, they

maintain a desire to stay within a writing center context and prefer to examine explicitly what

comes from writing centers.

Where the two tend to differ, however, is in their focus. Harris more consistently

expresses a concern for finding solutions for writing center professionals, while Kail mostly

wants to better understand what is happening in writing centers. In some ways, this focus is a

reflection of two different personalities. In many ways, Harris is a restless expander, a bit more

politically savvy regarding institutional power, whereas Kail is more of an individualist who sees

himself accountable to his tutors first and foremost—neither a savior nor a redeemer, he's mostly

content to carry on. Kail is more understated than Harris, possessing a confidence in the ability

of writing centers to sufficiently tell their stories of effectiveness. He does not seem to worry

much that centers will suddenly cease to exist, mostly because of his faith in the compelling story of the one-to-one. And this confidence affords him the freedom to be curious about what happens in writing center work without the pressure of convincing others of writing center effectiveness. This is not to say that Harris does not share Kail's confidence in writing centers, but she seems to be more preoccupied with finding solutions that further the status of the field within both individual institutions and the academy as a whole.

Perhaps this difference accounts for Harris' prominence in the writing center field. During his career, Kail was active in the writing center community, but much of that activeness was less visible, as he was not nearly as active in terms of WCenter listserve participation, conference addresses, or publications. Kail appeared to be content to sit back and occasionally encourage writing center tutors and administrators to continue reflecting on what happens in their centers. On the other hand, despite her retirement, Harris is continually active in settings that enable her to assist and answer the questions of writing center practitioners. She is comfortable with groups and the back-and-forth of casual interactions; she works steadily at maintaining her profile; and members of the writing center community, veterans and newcomers, find her to be easily approachable. Her goal is to draw on the experiential to provide as many solutions as possible for writing center practitioners, a goal that requires her to maintain an active presence in the conversations of the field.

Simpson follows Kail's and Harris's reliance on the experiential, but she does not imitate their inclusion of theory. In fact, Simpson's work rarely references theory or scholarship of any kind. This does not necessarily mean that she does not acknowledge the value of theory, but her work is dominated by addressing administrative issues without a theoretical context as she almost exclusively draws upon on her experiences as a writing center director and academic

dean. Simpson is ultimately concerned with determining what's best for the survival of writing centers, repeatedly arguing that writing center administrators need to stop playing the marginalized victim card and start working with administration. Much of her work, then, offers practical strategies for writing center administrators to effectively engage administration by better understanding their local institutional context. Simpson is also a strong proponent of writing center assessment and accreditation. In the end, she encourages writing center administrators to embrace the mindset and language of administration, adopting a "win-win" type of approach where writing center pedagogy informs and supports an institution's mission.

While Kail places more trust in lore's ability to communicate the story of writing centers, Simpson is more skeptical that everything will work out for the better if writing centers use lore and tell their stories to others. She views experiential knowledge as a key driver in challenging writing center professionals to dismiss their oppositional tendencies and take a proactive role in working with central administration. In one sense, Simpson's reception among writing center practitioners is understandable. Not only does she faithfully draw upon her own experiences in writing center and central administration, she also follows a pragmatic approach to writing center work in that seeks clarify obscurities and provide solutions. She is uniquely situated to do this because of her experience in both writing centers and central administration—she knows the fears, ambitions, and decision-making processes of both writing center directors and deans. Thus, she is able to attain a "been there, done that" credibility with her audience. This experience and credibility is partly responsible for Simpson's decision to ignore theory in her work. While Simpson shares Harris' pragmatic desire to provide solutions, she differs from Harris by finding those solutions solely in the experiential, thus ignoring pragmatism's desire to connect theory and practice. In other words, whereas Harris often functions as a translator by

summarizing scholarship and offering possible pragmatic applications of research findings and theoretical arguments, Simpson provides solutions without a theoretical context. In many ways, this approach is more restrictive than Dewey's pragmatism—Simpson not only begins with and refers back to experience in her work, she never leaves experience.

Still, what is interesting about Simpson's use of experience is that she rarely provides details of those experiences, especially in comparison to Harris. Instead, she offers a type of generic "lore" or stereotypes that operate under the assumption that the reader will understand or accept her claims as truth. In fact, her rhetoric assumes an air of authority in which she consistently provides cautionary advice and makes explicit, specific recommendations. In doing so, she relies upon an ethos that is largely based on general references to her work in both writing center and central administration. In the end, Simpson trusts that her experience will be sufficient enough to not only establish credibility with writing center professionals, but also to provide the solutions they seek.

There is no doubt that Simpson's approach has been effective in terms of connecting with her audience. Indeed, many writing center professionals have heeded Simpson's advice and found ways to work with different constituents in their respective institutions. At the same time, Simpson's approach has resulted in a message that has remained largely unchanged over the past 30 years. In some ways, this consistency has been a positive, but in other ways, it has prevented her from exploring other areas of writing center work. By focusing on her administrative experience as a means to find solutions in working with central administration, Simpson has not employed other methodologies that might help her better understand writing center work. Simply stated, if Kail is too inclusive in his exploration, Simpson is too exclusive in terms of methodologies. These shortcomings or limitations point to the necessity of collectively

examining all three figures to better understand how writing center professionals can use action-and-reflection to better understand writing center work.

Kail, Harris, and Simpson both uniquely and collectively employ action-and-reflection in their respective approaches to writing center work. Consistent with Dewey's call for rigorous, systemic, and communal reflection, these figures, taken together, embody an interplay of action-and-reflection that leads to new ways of understanding that we cannot get to any other way. In other words, all three point to the necessity of an action-and-reflection approach to writing center work that recognizes the pragmatic underpinnings of the writing center field. Such an approach does not necessarily alleviate the theory-practice tension—if anything it encourages it—but it employs the tension in a productive manner. Without practitioner demand that theory begin with or return to practice, theory can be used in detached, non-applicable ways. Similarly, without being challenged by theorists, writing center practitioners avoid considering different ways to understand and conduct writing center work. Thus, employing action-and-reflection approach to writing center work follows pragmatism's call to clarify obscurities and realize solutions in ways that lead to further examination, what Dewey calls education for education's sake.

An examination of Kail, Harris, and Simpson's work reveals that all three are committed to pragmatism's call to find solutions. An excellent example of this is their desire for writing centers to seek mutually beneficial situations with the institutions they are a part of; all three advocate influencing through relationships instead of opposition and subversion. Kail, for instance, argues that writing center professionals need to focus on telling stories that enable faculty and administrators to see how writing centers support the educational mission of the institution. Harris and Simpson claim that working with central administration and other key areas of the institution gives writing centers a place at the table, which in turn provides funding

and status that can be used to influence. All three believe that everyday writing center work is ultimately the most effective way for writing centers to exert influence. Thus, it is in the best interests of everyone for writing centers to find ways to work with the different institutional constituents. This mindset clearly speaks to a pragmatic desire to find solutions.

Still, beyond the desire to find solutions, perhaps what is most striking about these three figures is how much they value practice and the experiential in writing center work. Kail, for instance, insists that tutors learn more through the continual practice of tutoring than they do from reading or discussing theory, while Harris' work is saturated with anecdotal evidence from her experiences and the experiences of others. Simpson's prioritization of the experiential is even more overt than Kail's and Harris's, as her work contains almost no references to theory. She draws from her experiences in both writing center and central administration. This prioritizing of practice is a key reason why all three figures have been embraced by so many members of the writing center community for such a long time. Much of the credibility these three have among writing center practitioners stems from their commitment to practice—by valuing practice as much as they do in their respective work, they validate the approach of the majority of writing center practitioners. For instance, when Simpson challenges writing center administrators to work with central administration, her critique is generally well-received because she draws upon her past experiences and connects with the real pressures many writing center administrators face in their own respective contexts. This practice-based approach to critique is generally preferred by some members of the writing center community to an abstract, detached theoretical critique.

But repeatedly defaulting to the experiential results in a hierarchy that fails to follow the pragmatic desire to connect theory and practice. More importantly, it results in limitations that

not only concern the ways in which writing center workers can better understand their work, but also what aspects of their work is examined. One key benefit of theory is that it calls attention to issues that do not typically arise in everyday experience. For instance, collaborative or feminist theory may call attention to aspects of tutoring that may go unnoticed in the everyday reality of one-to-one work. When theorists challenge writing center practitioners, they call attention to issues that may otherwise go unnoticed, or they offer other ways to better understand an issue. Dismissing theory, then, dismisses potentially informative examinations and possible alternate understandings.

Kail, Harris, and Simpson all acknowledge the value and necessity of theory, but they do so to different degrees and in different ways. Simpson, for instance, argues that theory is only valuable insofar as it helps writing center professionals attain pragmatic goals, which in her case should be chiefly concerned with securing status and funding within an institution. Harris is not as explicit in equating theory's value with its ability to attain pragmatic goals, but she consistently uses theory to help remove obscurities and provide solutions. The problem with these two approaches, however, is that they limit theory by insisting it be used in service of practice or the experiential. That is, instead of allowing for a reciprocal form of praxis in which practice and theory inform each other, it endorses a bottom-up form of praxis in which theory defers to practice and, in the process, limits theory's ability to critique and call attention to alternative understandings or solutions. For Simpson and Harris, theory can only be considered if it is used in a way that provides a solution; any theory that fails to do this should be dismissed or ignored.

A potential solution to this problem, however, can be found in the call for a reflective practice in which writing center workers employ action-and-reflection to better understand what

happens in everyday writing center activities. While deriving from everyday practice, this approach does not restrict theory to a "solution-providing" role, instead enabling it to be used to both challenge and better understand writing center work. This suggests the writing center field's pragmatic underpinnings need not prevent it from realizing a more reciprocal relationship between theory and practice. That is, there is room in the writing center field to recognize the overall preference for practice while also allowing for a meaningful, fairly non-restrictive role for theory.

Employing action-and-reflection in writing center work has significant implications for the field's approach to research. Namely, it allows space for theory to be used in writing center research in ways that extend beyond justification. In this sense, using an action-and-reflection approach shifts the focus of research from demonstrating the value and effectiveness of writing centers to external audiences to better understanding what happens in writing center work. This shift is significant because it alleviates the pressure and defensiveness many writing center professional struggle with. If the goal of writing center research is to realize more informed understandings as opposed to definitive validations, then practitioners may be less defensive and open to research approaches that they would previously not consider because of their distrust of theory. But recognizing the value of the experiential, action-and-reflection disarms the defensiveness of practitioners, thus allowing for a more prominent role of theory in writing center research.

An approach that entails action-and-reflection also follows Kail's advocacy for a methodologically inclusive lore in the sense that it assumes that the incorporation of practice and theory will lead to more effective stories about writing center work. This assumption contributes to lessened pressure and a decreased defensiveness among writing center practitioners. If there

is confidence in the effectiveness of writing centers and the ability of writing center lore to communicate that effectiveness, then writing center practitioners will be less concerned with conducting research that proves their effectiveness and more concerned with better understanding the work they do. This, in turn, will lead to less resistance to the potential challenges and complexities of theory.

Still, it is important to note that action-and-reflection is not all-inclusive or purely egalitarian from a methodological standpoint, which, in essence, is the central criticism of lore. Indeed, it is tempting to subscribe to lore not only because of its methodological ease but also because its methodological inclusiveness of anecdotal experience, empirical research, and theoretical questioning resists division or hierarchies. This is indeed appealing to a community that values unity and collaboration. Still, despite the appeal, inclusiveness leads to questions of credibility both within and outside the field. The underlying assumption to lore is that writing centers are effective, and because of this, any stories that come from writing center work are credible. This assumption may be insufficient for skeptical audiences and, perhaps even more importantly, may prevent writing center professionals from attaining a more accurate understanding of writing center work. Employing action-and-reflection in writing center work addresses some of these concerns by providing a structure to lore. It is still inclusive, allowing for a variety of research methods, but it acknowledges the pragmatic underpinnings of the field by requiring all inquiry and research to either come from or come back to practice, in much the same way that Dewey argues. As Harris (1999) writes, "The knowledge that is made when these questions are pursued systematically, intentionally, and reflectively is . . . the act of the reflective practitioner reflecting on his knowledge through inquiry" (p. 2). Action-and-reflection do not dictate that inquiry start from writing center practice, but it stipulates that if inquiry does not

begin with writing center practice, it must ultimately return to it. In other words, while detached, abstract theories have a place in writing center inquiry: They must be grounded or connected to writing center practice in some way.

In many ways, this approach necessitates a theory-practice tension in writing center work. Without practitioner demand that theory begin with or come back to practice, theorists run the risk of using theory in detached, non-applicable ways. Conversely, without being challenged by theorists, writing center practitioners avoid considering different ways in which to understand and conduct writing center work. Action-and-reflection, then, not only enables practitioners and theorists to talk to each other, it requires it.

Embracing the Tension

Requiring practitioners and theorists to talk to each other will no doubt result in tension. But the tension is important. In the end, it is clear that the writing center field needs both practice and theory, and while it is understandable that a tension developed between practitioners and theorists, the field needs to find a way to channel that tension in productive ways. In other words, the field cannot allow a tension in which theory and practice—and theorists and practitioners—talk past each other. In doing so, the field fails to benefit from the productive ways in which theory and practice inform each other. For instance, Simpson, and to a lesser degree Harris, fail to acknowledge the value of theory in challenging writing center practice and allowing for alternative understandings of writing center work. And while Kail is more open to allowing for the value of theory, his trust in lore results in an inclusivity or tolerance that is too vague—it fails to provide a structure that both practitioners and theorists can subscribe to and work within.

The differences and similarities between Kail, Harris, and Simpson are significant because they show that even figures known for their commitment to everyday writing center work approach the theory-practice relationship in different ways. Ultimately, all three point to the possibility of using action-and-reflection in ways that allow for epistemological and methodological diversity. It provides a structure that recognizes the field's emphasis on practice while still calling for reflection and theorizing of practice. It recognizes the field's desire to remove obscurities and realize solutions, but it also shifts the focus to a desire to explore what happens in writing center work.

Action-and-reflection create an environment where the tension can be channeled or used in productive ways. As Geller et al. (2007) point out, this tension is necessary in designing a philosophy of writing center work that facilitates learning:

> We have to consider a philosophy of writing center work which is designed for learning . . . this design must be based on something other than the familiar stratification between directors and tutors, tutors and writers, directors and professors, peer tutors and professional instructors. Though all of these participants come from their own many sites of practice within the writing center community of practice and, as such, should be viewed as learners on common ground . . . Writing center scholarship has long positioned writing centers as potentially insulated from these tensions—we often conceive of our spaces as safe houses, for example—and some fear the dissolution of community that might result from acknowledging tension; but avoiding this kind of work, according to Wenger, denies the potential of such tension—a tension that is dynamic, necessary and ever present. (p. 7)

Instead of stratification, writing center professionals need to approach the interplay of theory and practice as opportunities for connections. These connections will undoubtedly entail tension, but at the same time, they also will enable understandings that follow pragmatism's call to connect theory and practice in ways that clarify and provide tangible solutions. In the end, writing center work should entail both the theoretical and experiential. And if writing center professionals can recognize the reciprocity of this relationship, the entire field will follow Dewey's call that education produce tangible benefits for all.

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