

SHARING OUR STORIES: USING NARRATIVE INQUIRY
TO EXAMINE OUR WRITING CENTERS

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of
Texas State University-San Marcos
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of ARTS

by

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San Marcos, Texas
May 2013

SHARING OUR STORIES: USING NARRATIVE INQUIRY
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Rebecca Jackson, for always challenging me to take my ideas one step further, for responding to my many e-mails with patience and reassurance, and for sitting inside with me on a gorgeous, sunny day in San Diego during IWCA to brainstorm what would become this thesis. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Deborah Balzhiser and Dr. Nancy Wilson, for their time, guidance, and support. Each comment and suggestion has forced me to view my writing and my subject in a new way that helped to enrich the thesis as a whole, and for that I am grateful.

I would also like to thank Susan Guiher-Huff for inspiring me to apply to programs in rhetoric and composition as well as sparking my passion for writing centers. I am thankful to have someone as steeped in writing center theory and practice who I can call both my friend and mentor. Her advice and encouragement have been invaluable, and I hope that, as a hopeful writing center director, I can one day foster the same sense of camaraderie and community that she has nurtured in her writing center.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank Logan Fry for assuming all domestic duties this past semester, for helping me conjure up old writing center memories, for always agreeing to read over my latest sections and offer suggestions, and for supplying the buffalo wing-flavored pretzel nuggets, Monster energy drinks, and (vegan) jerky to fuel me through my all-nighters—just like old times.

This manuscript was submitted on March 6, 2013.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Writing center tutors occupy an interesting role in the academy in that they exist on the border between instructor and student. Such a position affords them a unique perspective—while they, usually students themselves, can readily empathize with the students who visit their centers, they are members of an often exclusive community that gives them the power to advise their peers, makes them privy to English department drama and faculty quirks, and offers them, in many cases, a second home. Tutors' existence within these realms can be so uniquely multidimensional that only they can truly understand the inner workings of their local writing center community. While writing center researchers draw upon both qualitative and quantitative empirical traditions, few have used narrative inquiry as a qualitative research method. This is not to say that anecdotal contributions are nonexistent in writing center research. In *The Everyday Writing Center*, Geller et al. weave their own lived experiences as directors with those of tutors and students to offer a deeper understanding of what goes on behind writing center doors. In *Facing the Center*, Harry Denny acknowledges the value of narrative in writing studies in that it “open[s] up this conversation about the policies of difference and identity for self-awareness, learning, and literacies” (19) and describes interactions that have taken place in his own writing center. While these examples use narrative as anecdotal evidence or rhetorical strategy, narrative inquiry as a formally defined approach to qualitative writing center research is still fairly uncommon. There are exceptions: Rebecca Jackson's “Resisting Institutional Narratives: One Student's

Counterstories of Writing and Learning in the Academy,” which spotlights the idea of counternarratives, and Colleen Connolly, Amy DeJarlais, Alice Gillam, and Laura Micciche’s “Erika and the Fish Lamps: Writing and Reading the Local Scene,” which demonstrates the value of “critical, self-reflective narrative inquiry” through the telling of their writing center’s evolving physical space (25), to name a couple. Still, the overall lack of attention given to narrative inquiry as a specific method of research has motivated me to use it in my own research.

My interest in this topic was sparked by an assignment for which I wrote my own critical narrative pertaining to my experience as a tutor at my undergraduate institution. I found that through the writing of my narrative I was able to unveil some probing questions about my own tutoring practices as well as the actions of others that I observed during my time in the writing center: How does the notion of community manifest in the writing center among tutors, students, and faculty? Who is excluded from this community? How does language become a vehicle for both community and exclusion? As I tried to focus on a single thread to pull from that narrative and examine, I realized how intricately woven these threads were. What gave my narrative its spark was not hiding in just one of those threads but existed within the *story* I was telling. This realization led me to consider not only how valuable but also how viable narrative inquiry could be as a method of writing center research. We can observe writing centers and theorize based on those observations, but the firsthand accounts of actual writing center tutors can capture the thoughts and emotions behind decisions made during appointments, the biases that lead to exclusive practices, and the profound connection that tutors have to their respective writing centers.

My specific research questions are as follows:

- What does autoethnography tell us about the notions of “community” and “exclusion” in the writing center?

- What is it about my own narratives that convey the sort of information and provoke the sort of questions that I want to examine in writing center studies—for example, how do our practices, however well-intentioned, promote an atmosphere of exclusivity in the writing center? How does the writing center serve as a place for tutors as writers? How might our writing center spaces reconfigure relations and identities?
- What do these narratives suggest about the writing center culture and my place as both a tutor and a scholar within it?

I also examine a series of “subquestions” in order to provide some background and context to my research questions: Why have I chosen to focus on writing centers? Why have I chosen narrative inquiry as my method of research? What is narrative inquiry? What has been said thus far about narrative inquiry as a form of research, specifically pertaining to writing centers? What makes writing centers a particularly effective lens for demonstrating the importance of narrative inquiry? Why is it as or perhaps even more valuable to read about writing center practices from the perspective of narrative inquiry than it is to perform a different kind of study? These “subquestions” serve to provide a definition of narrative inquiry and allow me to articulate my reasons for selecting both narrative inquiry and writing center studies as the two pillars of my research project.

That said, this is not your typical thesis in that it is part narrative prose and part more traditional academic analysis. First, I introduce and address the two questions that serve as the foundation of my research: why writing centers and why narrative inquiry? My first chapter also includes a literature review of what has been said about narrative inquiry and how narrative inquiry has been used in writing center research thus far. My second chapter takes a closer look at narrative inquiry as a method of research and discusses why it is particularly useful for the specific questions I want to explore. Chapters three and four feature my own critical narratives in the form of vignettes, each interrogating aspects of writing centers that I am interested in researching, specifically

the ideas of community and exclusion in the writing center. Chapters three and four also contain subchapters in which I provide a reflective analysis addressing both its narrative form and contribution to writing center studies. I conclude my thesis by asking what we draw from the use of narrative inquiry in writing center research.

It is possible that some of my own biases and limitations color the analysis of my findings. I have a bachelor's degree in creative nonfiction, so it is possible that I favor narrative as a form of writing more than others might in the academy. It is also possible that, with my experience as a writing center tutor, some may view narrative as I am arguing for it as too narrow-minded; some may argue that my experience colors my reflections in such a way that does not accurately report what other tutors, tutees, faculty, and administrators experienced. It could also be argued that I have not yet gained enough distance from my recent experience as a writing center tutor, as many writers like to put a considerable amount of time between an event or experience and writing about it.

The nature of the research method itself can also pose limitations in that it is based primarily on storytelling. Storytelling relies on memory, which as we all know can vary from one individual to the next. The way that I remember an event occurring may not be the same away another person remembers the same event occurring. However, narrative inquiry operates under what is often referred to as truth criteria; the examples given in Robert Nash's *Liberating Scholarly Writing: The Power of Personal Narrative* include "trustworthiness, honesty, plausibility, situatedness, interpretive self-consciousness, introspectiveness/self-reflection, and universalizability" (5). Jerome Bruner in *Acts of Meaning* adds "coherence, livability, and adequacy" to this list (12). In *Personally Speaking: Experience As Evidence In Academic Discourse*, Candace Spigelman references Aristotle in her reminder to "consider the 'timeliness' and 'appropriateness' of emotion-laden disclosures" (20). These scholars, as well as others, reinforce the notion that the criteria we use to evaluate qualitative research, namely

narrative inquiry, is necessarily different from what we would use to evaluate quantitative research.

A Brief Overview of the Literature

To help frame my argument that narrative inquiry is an effective “vehicle” for writing center research, I imagine my sources as existing within a car dealership—only the dealership sells methods of research in lieu of cars. In walks the only customer of the day: The Writing Center (who will adopt the pronoun “she,” since her field of work is “historically feminized” [Boquet 13]). The Writing Center is looking for a method of research—a vehicle, if you will—that will encapsulate her everyday goings-on—from the appointments to the administrative work to the inside jokes shared by tutors—and tell her story in such a way that provokes questions, inspires reflection, and creates meaning. “What sort of features are you looking for?” asks the salesman.

“Well...” she begins. She gives *The Everyday Writing Center* as an example of the sort of subject she would like highlighted in this research. She likes how Anne Geller, Michele Eodice, Frankie Condon, Meg Carroll, and Elizabeth Boquet collaborate to provide a collective perspective on the seemingly mundane details of everyday writing center life and transform those details into opportunities for learning. Their mission is best summarized by Kurt Spellmeyer in his proposition that instead of turning to theory, “we might start to explore an alternative so mundane that we have passed it over time after time in our scramble for sophistication and prestige. That alternative is ordinary sensuous life, which is not an ‘effect’ of how we think but the ground of thought itself” (894). Geller et al.’s focus on “trickster” figures in the writing center, those “who teach us a habit of mind that helps us notice and revel in the accidental, the unforeseen, the surprise” and who facilitate “a community of practice that allows for change, mutability, learning” (12), is just the sort of thing she wants highlighted in a method of research. Instead of discounting the parts of everyday writing center life as irrelevant to the “actual” work that is being done—the mugs of hot tea shared by a director and one of her

tutors during an impromptu afternoon conversation, the mystery of who keeps arranging the pushpins on the bulletin board to form a friendly “HI”—she’d like those to become a focus. While they’re at it, she’d like to see Etienne Wenger’s *Communities of Practice* examined as well, since The Writing Center herself is a unique learning community where knowledge is formed during interactions between tutors and tutees, tutors and tutors, tutors and director, etc.

Luckily the salesman has just the thing for The Writing Center: narrative inquiry has been on the road since 1990 when F. Michael Connelly and D. Jean Clandinin coined the term in their article “Stories of Experience and Narrative Inquiry,” but is still considered an innovative approach to research today. He takes The Writing Center out onto the lot for a closer look. Opening the passenger’s side door and reaching into the glove compartment, he pulls out the owner’s manual: David Schaafsma and Ruth Vinz’s *On Narrative Inquiry*. Schaafsma and Vinz start by asking, “Why does narrative matter?” and move on toward explaining why narrative is a uniquely effective method of research in the field of education. They state that “[r]esearchers in education who gravitate toward narrative inquiry are inherently interested in details, complexities, context, and stories of human experiences of learning and teaching” and that “[n]arratives often reveal what has remained unsaid, what has been unspeakable” (1).

“That sounds a lot like what I’m looking for,” says The Writing Center. “Go on.”

Schaafsma and Vinz emphasize that narrative is more than just storytelling, however—rather, it “give[s] shape to the telling” of the story (3). They offer different examples of how one might go about performing narrative inquiry as research—having both researcher and participant give their accounts of a particular situation in what they call “tandem tellings” (3), how to move toward purpose in a narrative account (12). Their book includes actual narratives to demonstrate the richness and variety that narrative can encompass as a craft.

Another helpful source the salesman suggests is *Narration as Knowledge: Tales of the Teaching Life*. At the start of the project, the editor, Joseph Trimmer, calls upon English teachers to “write a personal narrative—a story about some event that had transformed lives” (x). He also asks them to “avoid presenting themselves as heroes”—to avoid glorifying the moments when *they* were the ones to finally break through and make the students understand something, but to more humbly acknowledge “the partiality of their knowledge and the vulnerability of their power” (xii). What follows are stories about reading, stories about writing, and all of the other things that go into what it means to be a part of an English classroom. They reveal the thought processes of an overzealous first-year TA as he is grading papers in his office (61), love affairs with professors and almost with students (191), and the trials and triumphs of an advanced composition class (84). While the collection is purposefully all story and no theory, it is deeply insightful, forming profound conclusions about what it is to teach and to be taught by one’s students in the most unexpected ways.

Candace Spigelman’s *Personally Speaking: Experience as Evidence in Academic Discourse* also uses actual narratives as examples, but her argument is that narrative can be blended with more scholarly discourse to provide a greater understanding of the learning that goes on in a school setting. She uses the term “personal academic discourse,” which she describes as a “blended approach [that] creates useful contradictions, contributes more complicated meanings, and so may provoke greater insights than reading or writing either experiential or academic modes separately” (3). She gives as a recurring example a student named Michelle who weaves stories about her family into school assignments, sparking the conversation on whether or not that combination is “appropriate” for academic writing (2). “Is that something you had in mind?” asks the salesman.

The Writing Center looks pensive. “Yes, those are all good things,” she explains, “but I’m also looking for something a little more... *critical*. My work is not always hot mugs of tea and friendly messages on bulletin boards. Sometimes my work is a little more complicated—issues of power dynamics, class, language, race, and sexual orientation come up and can be divisive among directors, staff, students, and faculty. Sometimes what we need to examine most are the everyday things that *aren’t* easy to talk about.” She offers Jackie Grutsch McKinney’s article “Leaving Home Sweet Home: Towards Critical Readings of Writing Center Spaces” in that it complicates what are perceived to be “necessities” in our writing centers in an attempt to make the space feel like home: the cozy couch, the coffee maker, the potted plants, the artwork on the walls (6). “At first glance, this organizing metaphor of home appears unproblematic,” McKinney states. “However, when we consider that ‘home’ is read differently by different people, the fissures in this metaphor appear” (7). When we promote this metaphor, we promote our interpretation of what “home” is like or should be like, which could conflict with others’ realities of “home” depending on, for example, their economic class. On a different note, many students seek an environment that is different from “home” to be productive and get their work done, so if we strive to make our writing centers feel like a living room, we are doing these students a disservice. More seriously, many students do not have comfortable or safe home lives and thus have a negative interpretation of “home”; by making our writing centers more home-like, we could be alienating these students who might otherwise turn to our space as a safe haven. “So it’s not just the everyday interactions in the writing center that I want to have researched, it’s the seemingly mundane details of the space in which those interactions occur that interest me as well,” explains The Writing Center.

She points to Harry Denny who explores the issue of identity that arises within our everyday writing center interactions. *Facing the Center: Toward an Identity Politics of One-to-One Mentoring* is divided into chapters on facing race and ethnicity, class, sex

and gender, and nationality. He directs our focus to the struggles that those of us in writing centers—directors, tutors, and students alike—face on a daily basis in regards to identity:

Identity is ubiquitous to the everyday life of writing centers. For them, struggles with face involve a complicated juggling of identities in relation to perceived audiences. A consultant calls me aside and shares an experience with racism that peers would dismiss as hypersensitivity. Other tutors tell me of students' sexual advances, and another group speaks about gendered differences in students' and consultants' approaches to tutoring. Colleagues and students alike confide embarrassment at people's reactions to their accented English. (8)

It is easy to pretend that our writing centers are neutral territories for tutors and students, but a closer examination of our everyday interactions can reveal otherwise. A tutor casually lamenting to another tutor how frustrating her last appointment with an ELL (English Language Learner) student was can be overheard by another ELL student and give him reason to believe he is not welcome in the writing center. A student refusing an appointment with a gay tutor poses questions about how our identities create conflict in the writing center and what can be done about it.

The salesman scratches his head. "Those are a lot of specifications, I'd have to check our computers to see if there's a model that—"

"I'm not done yet," the Writing Center interjects. In *Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times*, Nancy Grimm problematizes the function of writing centers in that they train students to think, talk, read, write, and adopt the values of the dominant culture (29). Despite our attempts to be open-minded, welcoming, safe places for students (we "help" students, after all), "we are merely helping them conform to institutional expectations" (29) when we guide them toward writing the "right" way in the "right" language: usually that which is revered by white, middle-to-upper class

Americans. Likewise, in *Writing Centers and the New Racism: A Call for Sustainable Dialogue and Change*, Laura Greenfield and Karen Rowan address the fact that, “[d]espite producing a solid and growing body of scholarship and research, the writing center field has to its credit only a handful of published writings that explicitly address race” (6). They point out how those of us who are involved in writing centers skirt around the question of whether or not our practices privilege white students over students of other ethnicities. The contributors featured in this collection explore the intrinsic racism imbedded within our writing center discourse and practices and within the academy at large.

“I think we can find something that will suit you,” answers the salesman. In “Critical Race Methodology: Counter-Storytelling as an Analytical Framework for Education Research,” Daniel Solórzano and Tara Yosso discuss how the mainstream academic, or what they call “majoritarian” narrative, marginalizes the stories and experiences of people of color. Critical race theorists “draw explicitly on the lived experiences of people of color by including such methods as storytelling, family histories, biographies, scenarios, parables, *cuentos*, *testimonios*, chronicles, and narratives” (26). Their methodology “exposes deficit-informed research and methods that silence and distort the experiences of people of color and instead focuses on their racialized, gendered, and classed experiences as sources of strength” (26). Their focus on the experiences of people of color through narrative serves to counter majoritarian narratives that assume white privilege is natural and that people of color are culturally deprived; for example, many educational majoritarian narratives tell the story of the unmotivated black student (31) or the overachieving Asian student without giving those students a chance to show who they really are underneath the stereotypes.

Similarly, in “Resisting Institutional Narratives: One Student's Counterstories of Writing and Learning in the Academy,” Rebecca Jackson focuses on “counternarratives,” or the stories offered by students to counter the majoritarian narratives imposed on them.

She shares the story of “Yolanda,” a Hispanic, nontraditional student who, because she failed the written component of an admission exam by a narrow margin, is required to attend tutoring sessions (with Jackson as her tutor) in the writing center. Surprisingly enough, all of the other students who are required to attend these sessions are also female, Hispanic, and nontraditional (24). Yolanda “has been ‘narrated’ by the university as a particular kind of student, a ‘deficient’ writer,” explains Jackson (26). However, as Jackson spends more time with Yolanda, she “come[s] to know Yolanda as a much more nuanced, sophisticated, and complex woman than the featureless character she plays in the institutional narrative told about her” (26). Both Jackson’s and Solórzano and Yosso’s articles demonstrate the importance of narrative in the quest for social justice in that narrative allows oppressed persons to problematize generalized narratives that make assumptions about who they are according to their age, gender, economic status, sexual preference, and/or ethnicity.

“I think *I’m* convinced,” says The Writing Center. “But not everyone looks favorably on narrative inquiry as a method on par with more empirical research.” In “The Politics of the Personal: Storying Our Lives Against the Grain,” several well-known scholars share their thoughts on the increasing presence of personal narrative in academic writing. Gena Kirsch and Min-Zhan Lu begin by stating, “We are concerned about some of the uncritical celebration of personal narrative in recent years and the concomitant critical scrutiny given to those of us who do not wish to represent/live the personal in our work” (42). Likewise, Deborah Brandt claims that “[r]esearch . . . is a public interest enterprise” (42) and that theory and empirical research should be given precedence over personal narrative. Ellen Cushman echoes their concerns and suggests that the personal narrative of self-reflexivity should be less about the individual and more about the relations between the researchers and participant” (46); in other words, the camera lens should zoom out from the personal and strive for a panoramic view of the research.

“True,” responds the salesman, “but there are also pro-narrative voices in this same conversation.” Anne Ruggles Gere claims that personal narrative, especially about her religious beliefs, is so much a part of her that she cannot disentangle it from her academic writing, though she tried when she first became an assistant professor (46). She laments “the insistence upon secular to the exclusion of sacred” (47) within the academy and believes that those who express their spirituality within the academic “risk being exoticized” (46). Anne Herrington broaches the subject of personal narrative with caution, acknowledging that “in some instances, there is a methodological imperative to write of what we might view as private,” but that one should only turn to narrative when it is relevant to the subject matter (47). While she does not believe that personal narrative has a “special purchase on insight or knowledge,” she suggests that we “try to bring ‘the personal’ into our thinking in conscious and critical ways and then decide for ourselves whether and how to include it in our public writing” (49). Richard E. Miller celebrates writing that uses “emotional states of discomfort and yearning visions of relief as ways to a better understanding of the institutions that have most affected all our lives, regardless of our race, class, or gender” (50). Lastly, Victor Villanueva offers his support of narrative in the form of critical autobiographies, those that mix the autobiographical with the theoretical as a way of examining and critiquing our institutions (52). Although these scholars offer very different perspectives on the merits of incorporating narrative into academic writing, they agree that it is certainly a valuable method of relaying insight that cannot be achieved through empirical research.

“Yes,” nods The Writing Center. “When you take into consideration that writing centers are often crossroads for people of all backgrounds, I think that narrative would be an especially useful way to gain a better understanding of our practices and the decisions that inform them.”

“So,” says the salesman with a smile, “What can I do to get you into this car today?”

CHAPTER II

METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

The purpose of this study is to build an argument for the value and viability of narrative inquiry as a means of researching themes of community and exclusion in the writing center. Because this project relies on narrative inquiry, as well as autoethnography, as its methodologies, I am both the population and sample for this study. F. Michael Connelly and D. Jean Clandinin coined the term “narrative inquiry” in 1990 and defined the study of narrative as “the study of the ways humans experience the world” (2). They explain further that “narrative is both phenomenon and method. [It] names the structured quality of experience to be studied, and it names the patterns of inquiry for its study” (2). The most fitting definition of autoethnography for my purposes is from Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner: “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (739). My experiences, informed by literature on writing center communities as well as narrative inquiry and autoethnography, serve as the foundation for this project. As is probably evident, this is a qualitative study; according to Frederick Erickson’s definition, it “combine[s] close analysis of fine details of behavior and meaning in everyday social interaction with analysis of the wider societal context—the field of broader social influences” (120). The conclusions I make, if any, are drawn inductively in response to the observations detailed in my narratives, as well as the literature that supports my argument that narrative inquiry is not only an appropriate but also effective method of exploring the concepts of community and exclusion in writing centers. My use of “if any” as a qualifier serves as a reminder that as a research method, narrative inquiry

is most effective when it inspires both reader and writer to extend the dialogue and explore more deeply the topics presented within the narrative. While I strive to cultivate a richer understanding of the interplay of community and exclusion within the context of writing centers, to arrive at any definitive conclusions concerning, for example, the policies a writing center director should adopt in his or her writing center is not the purpose of my study. The purpose of my study is to build an argument for narrative inquiry within the realm of writing center studies, and if it should inspire writing center directors, tutors, students who use writing centers, or the faculty whose students use writing centers to look within themselves and engage in conversations about their roles within these communities, I will consider this study to have been successful.

Research Method and Appropriate Methods

To reiterate, my specific research questions are as follows: How do autoethnographic narratives function in illuminating learning, community practice, and, in particular, issues of community and inclusion in the writing center? What makes writing centers a particularly effective topic for narrative inquiry? Why is it more valuable to read about writing center practices from the perspective of narrative inquiry than it is to perform an empirical study? In addition, I will examine the following “subquestions”: How am I qualified to share my stories? Why have I chosen to focus on writing centers? Why have I chosen narrative inquiry as my method of research? What do these narratives suggest about the writing center culture and my place within it?

As Robert Nash reminds us in *Liberating Scholarly Writing: The Power of Personal Narrative*, “the best SPN [scholarly personal narrative] interview is the scholar’s self-interrogation” (18); to demonstrate that my methods thoroughly answer my research questions, I will address each question individually, in interview-format if you will. To begin, what autoethnographic narratives do I want to share with the writing center community? The narratives I intend to share in this project are my own. In order to demonstrate my own understanding of what constitutes an effective narrative, I offer my

own experiences and reflections (the latter of which I will discuss in more detail concerning my next question) as the primary focus of this project. The narratives I share specifically pertain to the ideas of community and exclusion in the writing center. The first narrative juxtaposes the sense of community within my undergraduate writing center with the sense of exclusion that simultaneously exists within tutor-student, tutor-faculty, and faculty-student interactions. It focuses on an incident when an adjunct faculty member complained to me about his ELL students, and while I was quick to point fingers at him for creating an exclusive environment, I came to realize that the community our writing center had created was not exactly inclusive either. My purpose in revealing how these two contradictory themes, community and exclusion, were both present in my undergraduate writing center is to urge those who are involved with writing centers to consider both the comfortable and uncomfortable aspects of their work: the positive aspects of our writing centers that fuel our devotion to this field and create long-lasting memories of our time spent there as well as the negative—the implicit hegemony and even racism in what we consider to be academically-acceptable writing, our reluctance to help ELL students. It is a story that encourages the reader to hold the mirror up to her own biases and tutoring/directing practices and ask herself, “Is there anything that I’m doing that might make someone feel unwelcome in this space?” Nash also claims that “the ultimate intellectual responsibility of the SPN scholar is to find a way to use the personal insights gained in order to draw larger conclusions for readers” (18). I hope that the issues that I raise in my first narrative spark larger conversations about community, exclusion, and language in the writing center; the subchapters that I include after each narrative draw some of these larger conclusions through reflection and analysis.

I think the question that naturally follows pertains to the issue of my authority in telling these stories: how am I qualified to share my stories? Nash opens Chapter One of *Liberating Scholarly Writing* by referencing Tonya Stremmler in her assertion that critical narrative “enables a writer to both establish and question the authority of her experience”

(qtd. in Nash 1). I like this description; I can establish the authority of my experience due to the fact that I have been an insider in the writing center community by working as a tutor at both my undergraduate and graduate institutions. I know firsthand the allegiance that both tutors and directors—even students who become “regulars” through an extended series of appointments—can have toward their writing centers. To add to my credibility, I have taken a graduate course on writing center theory and practice and have presented at IWCA; while I am only getting my feet wet, I feel that my academic experience pertaining to writing centers has enhanced my lived experience as a tutor. The foundation I have built in terms of my familiarity with writing centers makes me confident in establishing my authority—questioning it, in keeping with Stremlau’s description of critical narrative, is equally as important. Introspection is essential to critical narrative. If I cannot hold a mirror to my own practices and behavior as a tutor, then what am I learning? How can I grow and improve as a teacher? Just as importantly, what will my readers carry away from my narrative? Nash states that “one of the reasons for going *inside* of yourself in an SPN is so that, at least some of the time, you can get your readers to go *outside* of themselves in order to see their external worlds in a different way” (60). By questioning my authority and admitting that I do not have all the answers, I hope to inspire my readers to initiate conversations about their roles within their writing centers.

The next two questions require us to take a step back and view my subject matter from a larger perspective: what is it about these narratives that convey the sort of information and provoke the sort of questions that I want to examine in writing center studies, and, while we’re at it, why have I chosen to focus on writing centers? As I have mentioned, my narratives examine the ideas of community and exclusion in the writing center. Perhaps the most obvious aspect of narratives that could convey these themes is their reliance on the insider perspective; my experience in the writing center enables me to build my perspective for the community theme. I’ve always thought that writing center

tutors occupy an interesting role in the academy in that they exist on the border between instructor and student; while they, often students themselves, can readily empathize with the students who visit their centers, they are members of an often exclusive community that affords them special privileges and a sense of power. I know what it's like to have my name and photograph posted on the writing center bulletin board. I know what it's like to be privy to English department drama and faculty quirks. I knew I could use the refrigerator and the microwave in the kitchen at any time. I even had special access to the writing center on the weekends (when the English building was usually locked) so that I could work on my own papers. However, my understanding of what it is to be *excluded* in the context of the writing center is not as clear. I got a sense of it before working at the writing center at both my undergraduate and graduate institutions; it was nothing I could put my finger on, but I could sense that the tutors were an exclusive group from the photographs and memos hanging on the wall or the "EMPLOYEES ONLY" sign hanging on the door of the break room. I would feel awkward about stopping in to use a stapler; on one occasion I felt brave enough to ask to use the microwave, but after getting weird looks from some of the tutors while I stood waiting for my soup to heat up, I decided to stick to sandwiches for dinner. Even now that I am not currently employed as a tutor and especially since the writing center at my graduate institution has moved to a new location (Jackie Grutsch McKinney offers a revealing analysis of how space can affect the community dynamics of a writing center in "Leaving Home Sweet Home: Towards Critical Readings of Writing Center Spaces"), I no longer feel part of the writing center community. I have come full circle: outsider to insider back to outsider. I realize that I am still much more "insider" than I am "outsider"; there are those who may always feel excluded from the writing center, whether they are ELL students who feel anxious at the thought of making an appointment, or even faculty who do not have a good reputation among the tutors (the focus of my first narrative). I know that my experience as well as my more academic knowledge have somewhat secured me a spot within the writing

center community—it is the theme of exclusion in particular that I would like to examine in my narratives, since I cannot relate to that with as much authority and accuracy.

My reason for focusing on writing centers for this project is because, like the tutor's role in the academy, writing centers also exist on a border. In a way, they serve as customs between the students and the university; students typically take their papers to the writing center to make sure they're passable before turning them in to their professors. In a less intimidating metaphor, they can also serve as a safe haven for students who would feel more nervous consulting their professors than meeting with a peer tutor. Many writing center directors strive to cultivate this latter image by furnishing their spaces with couches, coffee pots, and artwork, "operating under the tacitly accepted notion that writing centers should be welcoming, cozy, comfortable, friendly spots where talk about writing can happen . . . [W]riting centers should be like home" (McKinney 7). While writing center directors and tutors are well-intentioned in creating these home-like communities, McKinney draws our attention to the problems in doing so: "If a writing center is a home, whose home is it? Mine? Yours? For whom is it comfortable?" (16). These questions resonate with me in that they are similar to how I see the writing center community; if a writing center is a community, there must be insiders, and if there are insiders, then there are outsiders. This realization has spurred my interest in analyzing the interactions that go on within our writing centers, both spoken and unspoken, like the "EMPLOYEES ONLY" sign on the break room door. I wholeheartedly believe that writing centers strive to be inclusive, but they are often inadvertently exclusive. In what forms does this exclusion manifest? What practices cause this exclusion? I feel that, as someone who has straddled the line between insider and outsider in the writing center, my narratives are a valuable resource in investigating these questions.

What do these narratives suggest about the writing center culture and my place within it? As a disclaimer, it is not my intention to malign the work that is done in writing centers, specifically within the centers that I will be spotlighting in my narratives. I hope

to represent writing centers as places where positive things happen—where ideas finally “click,” where students stop first with news of a good grade on a difficult assignment, where tutors form long-lasting friendships with one another, and where directors form close mentor-mentee relationships with their tutors. These are the things that fuel our passion for writing centers and reassure us that the work we are doing is good. However, we would be remiss to fix our focus on the positive and not examine our own implications in the problems that exist within the academy. There are students who cannot pass freshman composition; are we reaching out to these students? Should we be? Will reaching out to these students cultivate a reputation that marks our service as remedial and drive away more experienced writers? Should we be worried about that? There are instructors who view their ELL students as deficient; do we find ourselves “cleaning up” or “fixing” ELL work? What message does this practice convey about our attitudes toward ELL writing? Are we actually helping ELL students by doing this? Nancy Grimm mentions in *Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times* that “often, writing centers inadvertently distance themselves from the academic work of the university by representing writing centers as places where students can find refuge, comfort, and support. These representations gloss over the identity struggles that students experience in literacy learning and ignore the gatekeeping function of literacy” (10). I want my narratives to discourage that glossing over—to acknowledge the positive, but to examine our problems so that we can extend our reach to more students, or in other words, become more inclusive.

I also strive to keep the following idea in mind throughout my narratives, especially in the second: tutors are usually students themselves. Likewise, directors have lives outside of the writing center. We come to this practice with our own experiences, biases, outside commitments and responsibilities, etc. From my experience as a tutor, I know that long shifts spent helping other students with their papers can be frustrating when my own workload is piling up. We can wholeheartedly want to help the students

who visit our writing centers, but we are only human; there is only so much of ourselves that we can give. I think that this is important to consider when examining where we fall short in terms of helping students. I would like my readers to ask themselves, “Where do I draw the line between ‘them’ and ‘me?’ When do I have to put my needs first? When is a job just a job?” I think that, as instructors and directors, we can all remember a time when we *had* to exclude someone—had to cancel an appointment with a student, had to turn down a request for help—and that is why I think that narrative is such an effective medium for prompting this sort of introspection. I will share my stories in the hopes that they will bring to mind some of your own.

Since the last of my research questions involves narrative inquiry in terms of its legitimacy and effectiveness in the context of writing centers, I will highlight the elements of narrative inquiry that most complement the field of writing center studies; in other words, what can narrative inquiry accomplish for writing centers that other methods of research cannot? To begin, narrative inquiry is a remarkable tool for extricating meaning and larger themes from data (i.e. stories) that may not necessarily have been the researcher’s original intention. This is not to say that, when I sit down to compose a narrative, I do not have certain themes in mind to shape my story; as David Schaafsma and Ruth Vinz remind us, “to *narrate* . . . is to do more than ‘give’ an account or ‘tell’ a story. The verb *narrate* suggests shaping . . .” (3). What makes narration different than merely recounting the details of an event is that “[scholarly personal narrative] writers intentionally organize their essays around themes, issues, constructs, and concepts that carry larger, more universalizable meanings for readings” (Nash 30). My intention could be to write a piece on tutors’ interactions with ELL writers, and it could evolve into a piece on how language biases affect ELL students’ academic success. Sometimes just the process of writing is what is necessary to unearth other elements or issues, which is especially useful for writing centers in that they often serve a diverse community. Writing center directors are interested in how to reach more students, build networks with faculty,

aid student retention, etc., usually because they must prove their worth to the university in order to receive funding. Since directors are continually looking for ways to improve their centers, critical narratives that unearth potential issues or concerns (such as, in my case, the ways in which certain students or groups of students are excluded in the writing center) could provide a new and useful perspective. After all, “research grows out of the telling, questioning, and rendering of narratives. What further questions are the stories provoking?” (Schaafsma and Vinz 3).

Other methods of research can be used to collect data with the intention of improving the services that we offer in our writing centers. We can survey students post-appointment to inquire about their experience: were they made to feel welcome? Did they feel that their questions were answered? On a scale of 1-10, how likely are they to return to the writing center for future assignments? This information can certainly be helpful, and its ability to be neatly packaged into statistics allows it to be more easily conveyed to those who are not as familiar with writing center operations (i.e. university administration). However, the firsthand accounts of tutors and directors or even students who choose to share their experiences in narrative form communicate information that cannot be conveyed in numbers. Nash describes it like this: “Your own life tells a story (or a series of stories) that, when narrated well, can deliver to your readers those delicious aha! moments of self and social insight that are all too rare in more conventional forms of research” (24). Narrative also benefits those who are not familiar with the field of writing centers (or any field, for that matter) in that it uses more casual language; for this reason, it is more accessible than other forms of scholarly research. Nash states that “it’s a willingness to be vulnerable in language that the other understands” (44); narrative is less guarded in that it does not hide behind esoteric language and field-specific terms. It tells a story through “casual musings [that] . . . carry the promise of creating an intimate tie that binds author and reader, sender and receiver, if only for the moment” (55-6). Nash asks, “Why can’t academic writing do the same thing without compromising its fundamental,

intellectual values?” (55-6). To answer him, it can—but only if we accept narrative as a form of academic writing that is just as valid as more scholarly writing.

The value of narrative also exists within its reflexivity; “[it] can take many different forms. While it is personal, it is also social. While it is practical, it is also theoretical. While it is reflective, it is also public. While it is local, it is also political. While it narrates, it also proposes. While it is self-revealing, it also evokes self-examination from readers” (29). The way in which the story I relate in Chapter 3 about an adjunct faculty member’s inability to understand the writing of his ELL students provides a window into a larger conversation: how does our society treat people who do not speak English as their first language? When narratives form a bridge between what Nash describes as the personal and the social, the reflective and the public, and the local and the political, we can see how our accounts of what happens in our writing centers can contribute to a greater cause from a social justice standpoint.

Data Collection

I will not be collecting any external data, since my project is largely autoethnographic and derived from my own experiences. As I mentioned previously, I have written two critical narratives that I use in my project.

My first narrative was written without the foreknowledge that it would become part of my thesis. The instructions were to “write a narrative in which you explore and critically reflect upon a writing, teaching, or tutoring experience that continues to bother, perplex, fascinate, or challenge you.” While I had jotted down a handful of different experiences, the one that stood out the most was the incident I had had with a disgruntled adjunct instructor; it prompted me to examine questions that had been left behind unanswered questions and resurrected so many other memories from my undergraduate writing center days that it became fodder for what I consider to be a successful critical narrative (more on that in the next section). I follow these same instructions for Chapter 4, “The Annex.”

My rationale for using these techniques is that they are fueled by my real experiences in the writing center. They are autoethnographic in that they “[display] multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis and Bochner 739). The “data” I will be using is what Nash calls “the raw material of [my] day-to-day experiences” (27). Basically, my process is also my product. While the focus of my project is my own narratives, the process of how I arrived at those narratives is equally important and will be analyzed as well.

Data Analysis

The subchapters that I include after each narrative provide further reflection and analysis on both the content of my story, as well as my writing process. I have an extensive bibliography of works written by scholars who are interested in narrative that I use to inform both the more “meta” conversation of my writing process as well as books and articles written by writing center scholars. I use both forms of literature to gauge, as I mentioned previously, how “successful” my narrative is in terms of how much further conversation it is able to generate. I think that the true success of narrative lies in the conclusions its readers are able to draw from it, but for the purposes of this project, I will be the one reflecting on my narratives and perhaps considering other angles that might lead to different conclusions in my work; for example, what would my first narrative look like had I considered the perspective of the “angry adjunct”? Further analysis and reflection are the bulk of the conclusion to my project; I take a step back and look at how narrative inquiry has enabled me to initiate conversations and draw conclusions from my narratives that could not have been otherwise drawn using other methods of research.

CHAPTER III

THE ANGRY ADJUNCT

Language . . . makes possible our shared understanding of communities . . . but it's also the means through which our practices cleave out who's included, left out, and the symbolic import of all that discursive haggling.

--Harry Denny, *Facing the Center*

My shift was ending. It had been a slow afternoon in the writing center at a tiny, conservative private school in a sleepy, rural Midwestern town. I was in the middle of completing the report from my last appointment, scrawling in tired handwriting that I had discussed organization and grammar with my client as requested. I folded the piece of orange computer paper in half, haphazardly addressed it to my client's instructor, and stuck it in the hanging file folder on the wall. I was the only tutor on duty besides Connor, a gangly, good-natured kid with whom I often joked around and referred to as my "son," a friendly quirk resulting from the close quarters and long hours that we tutors shared; we had become a family in our own way. Connor was in the computer lab, the back room of the writing center, conversing quietly with his client.

As I headed for the door, a short man with a mop of greying brown hair pushed past me. "Where's a pen and paper?" he asked. Before I could answer, he helped himself to our supply of scrap paper and pencils sitting on the desk and scribbled furiously. "*This* is what an Asian student's paper looks like, *this* is what a Hispanic student's paper looks like, and *this* is what an American student's paper looks like!" he exclaimed, drawing all

sorts of circles and lines. When he was finished, he thrust the piece of paper at me with a smug air of accomplishment.

We'll call this man Robert Smith, an adjunct English instructor who had once called me and the director of the writing center into his broom closet of an office to complain about the shortcomings of his ELL students—namely John, a Korean exchange student who was growing increasingly dependent on me, most likely due to his many banishments to the center by Mr. Smith. “This is the hardest part of my job,” Smith continued, as I stood there bewildered. “Getting students from *here*, where they’re arguing in circles,” he pointed to the circle, “to *here*—a linear progression from intro to conclusion.” He motioned toward a straight arrow pointing downward. I slowly nodded, unsure of what to say and hoping he would please just leave. “It’s hard to have to grade papers when they’re all different,” he concluded. Shoulders slumped in defeat, he set the paper on the desk and walked out the door.

Connor entered the reception area and looked around the room. “What was *that* all about?” he asked. I picked up the piece of paper and studied it, still a bit shaken and confused. “I have no idea.” I crumpled the paper in my hand and tossed it into the trashcan. Although I was quick to dispose of the evidence, Smith’s frustrated lines and circles remain imprinted in my memory even now as a graduate student studying the same issues that tormented Smith in his broom closet: what *do* we do with ELL students? While I was struck by Smith’s outright and out loud dismissal of ELL students and their writing, some small part of me, the part that only wanted my job as a tutor to be easier, sympathized with his frustration. It *would* be easier on us come grading time if all of our students approached their arguments the same way—so how *do* we get students from circles to lines? The older, wiser, graduate student version of me who has read Nancy Grimm’s *Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times* and Harry Denny’s *Facing the Center: Toward an Identity Politics of One-To-One Mentoring* now

sees the hegemonic structures and implicit racism in such a mindset. Still, I find myself pondering those lines and circles. As instructors, we walk a fine line between pleasing the department and pleasing our moral centers. It *is* difficult to impose and enforce a standard of writing for all students, regardless of language and background. It *is* hard to have to grade papers when they're all different.

I performed a quick Google search of Robert Smith to see what he has been up to lately and was led to his class website for English 100, College Writing Improvement. The site is subtitled "Making the transition from spoken English to written English." As an undergraduate, I would have found nothing wrong with that—that's what you do in a basic English course, right? However, when someone makes the assumption that all of his students know how to speak English, he sets himself up for frustration. He makes his job difficult. While it is safe to assume that most students will speak English at this university, where, according to the school website, only approximately eight percent of the undergraduate population are minorities, there are still ELL students who are placed in English 100 at this university. Most of these students, like John, are not yet confident in their use of English. So when they are told that not only is their written English insufficient but their speech and way of thinking, an atmosphere of exclusion is formed.

In *Good Intentions*, Nancy Grimm explains that "in college classrooms and writing centers, the writing of American minority students who are bidialectal or bilingual is described as incoherent and nonstandard because it doesn't conform to mainstream worldviews and language patterns" (39). I am reminded of our meetings with Smith in which he lamented the fact that he "just couldn't make sense of anything" in John's papers. "They just don't make sense." He appeared sympathetic to our concerns that John was abusing the services of the writing center, but I knew that Smith was grateful for the work I was doing with him. I knew because the more I met with John, the more I simply began to fix his work. In *Facing the Center*, Denny mentions that, "for

national and immigrant students, there is an intense desire to pass as “real” Americans—not to appear as an outsider in the midst of conventional students” (25). In the same way, John would urge me to “make [him] sound like an American,” nodding eagerly as I added pronouns and reworded clunky-sounding sentences. So I did. I appropriated his work. I whitewashed it.

And I didn’t hear another word from Smith. What had stuck out as “other” had been blended smoothly, inconspicuously, into the blur of names and faces from his multiple rosters. Echoing Denny once more, I “reacted to the presence of the ELL writer as a ‘problem’ to ‘fix’” (122). However, this fix would only be temporary, since the atmosphere Smith was cultivating in his classroom was still exclusive; I had merely served as some sort of nightclub bouncer, providing John with a way in despite his not being on the “list.” And in this analogy, with the nightclub as academia, Robert Smith is a lowly janitor, upholding the standards of the establishment for meager wages and little respect.

Smith had gained quite a reputation in the English Department. Students saw him as eccentric, aloof. “He is no help with anything,” reads one review from RateMyProfessors.com. “Didn’t seem to understand my questions,” reads another. “He is an idiot of a professor.” “He’ll never know your name.” “He threw a coat at me.” Tenured professors saw him as they saw the rest of the adjuncts: “road kill on the road of academia,” as one faculty member so tactfully put it. A search of his name on the school website comes up with nothing; the English department page does not list adjunct instructors as faculty.

In the blissfully naive world of my imagination, Robert Smith has never and will never scour the comments on RateMyProfessors.com, nor will his ears be burned by the banter in the faculty lounge. As much as I was put off by the man, he really saddened me. His picture on the English 100 blog shows his face hidden behind a mug of coffee, framed by that unmistakable mop of graying hair. His eyes are hidden, but I remember

them vividly. I remember them because of the way they looked when I stood with a group of tutors in a circle outside the door to the writing center, gossiping about him and laughing, hushing just one moment too late when he walked past us: liquid brown. Pained. Dejected.

I was quick to judge Smith for the atmosphere of exclusion he cultivated in his classroom, a place where learning should be nurtured, where instruction should know no bounds. Just downstairs in the writing center, however, we were cultivating our own atmosphere of exclusion. Our laughter let Smith know he was “other”—how many others had our camaraderie made to feel excluded, I wonder now? I worried that Smith made his international students feel insufficient due to their struggles with English; could it be possible that our giggling and whispering made them feel uncomfortable as well, made them wonder whether they were the butt of our jokes? We all do our share of othering, despite our best intentions and despite our finger-pointing at those who do so less subtly.

When I reflect on what bound our writing center staff as an exclusive community, what made us appoint one another as kin, I believe it resulted out of good humor, perhaps even out of the boredom of a slow afternoon shift. Our intentions were pure—to befriend our fellow coworkers, to take one another under our wings. Our community produced fond memories (like the time we replaced our photographs on the bulletin board with the headshots of old movie stars), endless inside jokes (how we collectively decided which celebrity would play each English department faculty member in a movie—we must have had a thing for movies!), and friendships that have lasted us well past graduation (heck, some of us tutors are even marrying one another!).

But then I dig deeper into the primal need to belong to a community, to pledge allegiance to a group with which we can identify ourselves. Our instinct is to surround ourselves with those who share in our beliefs, interests, desires, worries, and fears. We find comfort in claiming and being claimed, but at what cost? A community that is exclusive to any degree has, by nature, members who can be described as insiders, and if

there are insiders there must be outsiders. The university community, while including Robert Smith to the extent of his employment with them, enabled his otherness—his students' expectations did not mesh with his teaching style, his status as an adjunct was not enough to list him among the faculty on the English department website. Our writing center community, while welcoming other English faculty members who would stop in for a visit, also reinforced Smith's outsider status—his eccentricity and miserliness were easy targets for our gossip sessions. When forming and maintaining our communities, we recoil from those who are different, from that which is other. We do so out of a primal need to protect our sameness, those traits that we value as being the glue that binds us.

Language can also create insiders and outsiders, can include and exclude on the basis of something as benign as the way one has learned to communicate and make meaning of his or her world. Language's ability to be divisive is exemplified in the views espoused by the "Official English" movement, formerly the "English Only" movement. In an opinion piece in *National Journal*, "In Defense of an English-Only Policy in the U.S.," David Arredondo writes that "English is not just another language on par with every other language spoken in the United States; English must be the language that unifies us all: 'Of Many, One.'" In his opinion, English can and should unify the masses; it should serve as "the language of worldwide communication," which, "lamentably, our liberal political elites don't see [it] as." The problem with exalting one language over others is that it diminishes the value of the others; it promotes the idea that the speakers of that one language are insiders and the rest outsiders.

Arredondo and the "Official English" movement's argument is echoed in academia, where, as Lynn Bloom says in "Freshman Composition as a Middle-Class Enterprise," "Like it or not, despite the critiques of academic Marxists, we are a nation of Standard English" (670). However, this sentiment fuels our predilection for sameness; it caters to that small part of us that only wants our jobs as tutors to be easier, that wants to get our other-thinking students from circles to lines so that we can get on with our

grading. This mindset promotes an exclusive environment in which English equals access. Those on the outside, however, are the ones who come to us for help because they've already been excluded: a big red "F" on an assignment, a hastily scrawled "Go to the writing center!" at the bottom. How do we help those students other than by playing the role of bouncer and ushering them into the community only by appropriating their work?

Nancy Grimm writes that "within an articulating practice, a writing center would be a place where students . . . find opportunities to discuss the ways that standard English is frequently linked to practices of literacy that exclude and devalue other literacies" (96). We need to examine our role as insiders, not only in the writing center but in the university as a whole. Maybe if we had invited Robert Smith into the writing center for a conversation on language and ELL students, we might have inspired him to reflect on and change his own exclusive practices. Maybe that's wishful thinking—the man may very well be too jaded from his own exclusion to want to make amends. Still, when we can view and use language as a means of inclusion rather than exclusion, we will extend our learning community to everyone, not just those who currently have access to it.

Reflecting on "The Angry Adjunct"

In my mind, the theme of language in "The Angry Adjunct" serves as the means through which people are included or excluded in the writing center, if you are willing to loosely define "language": language as in English, the hurtful words spoken behind Robert Smith's back, or even the inside jokes shared among the writing center staff. We use language to relate to one another, to demonstrate that we share common ground—or, we see it as a barrier: a buzzing neon sign proclaiming, "I can't understand you. You are different from me."

This theme does not have to be examined through narrative. There is an abundance of non-narrative literature on the experience of ELL students in the writing center: Shanti Bruce and Ben Rafoth's *ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors*

contains eighteen essays that offer pragmatic advice for assisting ELL writers according to their linguistic backgrounds. In “ESL Student Participation in Writing Center Sessions,” Jane Cogie examines the involvement of ELL students in writing center consultations. These texts are of course valuable; tutors and directors can read them and walk away with a deeper understanding of how to better accommodate their ELL clients. So what does narrative add to the equation?

I understand that my narrative imparts just one perspective: my own. But what might this narrative look like from, say, John’s perspective, and what would that add to our understanding of the needs of ELL students in the writing center? I knew John as a people-pleaser. He wanted his papers to look just right, to conceal his still-shaky (yet quickly improving) grasp of the English language. He would smile and repeat, “You are a professional,” as I added missing articles and circled misspelled words. John scheduled so many appointments that he had us worried that he was losing the ability to write papers on his own. I grew exasperated each time I saw his name on my appointment sign-up sheet. From John’s perspective, however, there could very well have been feelings of panic and desperation behind each scrawled name. Here he was, an exchange student from Korea just getting comfortable with his spoken English, enrolled in a freshman composition class with an instructor who clearly wasn’t going to cut him any slack. He saw the writing center as a safe haven and me as an ally. If we imagine John as an invisible observer during my encounter with Robert Smith (because I certainly hope that Smith would not have made the same ruckus with John present), we can probably assume that John would be embarrassed. He’d be confused like I was, trying to make sense of Smith’s circle and line metaphors—but he might be able to sense that he was likely the source of Smith’s frustration and the tension in the usually laid-back writing center atmosphere.

But here I am once again casting Smith and only Smith in a negative light. There were plenty of other circumstances that would have made John—or any ELL student,

really—feel uncomfortable: the audible sigh from a tutor upon the realization that a student with an unfamiliar Asian-sounding name has signed up for an appointment; the inevitable ranting after a long and difficult appointment with an ELL student; the director's gentle admonishment for making one too many appointments. It is easy to shake our heads at Smith's antics, but tutors and directors might find that they have more in common with him than they may be comfortable admitting. We must be at least somewhat skilled at concealing these attitudes or else the atmosphere that we cultivate in the writing center would not be as inviting and comfortable as it seems to be to ELL students—or are we? What if ELL students just feel that they have nowhere else to turn, that it's this or nothing?

I can only assume so much about what John's perspective would have looked like; I can, however, offer that his comfort with me made me uncomfortable. Everyone in our writing center community came to know John as my “stalker”; it became a running joke. Some even speculated that he would find his way down to Texas with me when I moved for graduate school. The notion of comfort in the writing center is a long-running thread of its own that was not necessarily spotlighted in this narrative, but will play a role in the next. In “Leaving Home Sweet Home: Towards Critical Readings of Writing Center Spaces,” for example, Jackie Grutsch McKinney analyzes the presence of common writing center motifs such as the coffee pot, the couch, and the artwork hanging on the walls and questions the atmosphere of comfort that these items are intended to cultivate: they are supposed to make the writing center feel like home, but what if “home” does not equal comfort for some students? We want our writing centers to be places of comfort, but for whom? It can certainly be argued, as I have above, that writing centers are not necessarily places of comfort for ELL students; alternatively, John's comfort with our writing center made me uncomfortable to some degree. Can both tutors and students be made to feel comfortable in the writing center? Narrative would be one way to find out.

Before I discuss the value of narrative for these particular themes and what the form adds that would have been lost through more conventional methods of discourse, I'd like to entertain the question of what this narrative might have looked like through Robert Smith's eyes. Imagine a fifty-something-year-old man who is given a space literally the size of a broom closet to call his office. In the state in which he is employed, adjuncts make on average approximately \$2,000 per course and do not receive benefits such as health insurance ("US Spreadsheet"). As is the case with many institutions, adjuncts are not recognized as faculty but rather as staff; in fact, "staff" is often listed as the instructor for an adjunct-taught course on the class schedule in lieu of the instructor's actual name. Even though he may have taught more courses than his full-time or tenured counterparts, Smith's name was nowhere to be found on the English department webpage. I am not certain, but he might have been simultaneously teaching courses at another university about 45 minutes away—a fairly common scenario for adjunct instructors, given the low pay per course that requires them to seek additional employment to make a living.

Then we have the international student community: a population that continues to grow within the university despite the lack of resources to prepare them for freshman composition. The responsibility for preparing them formerly fell into the hands of a transition program outside of the English department, but, as revealed to me in an interview with my former writing center director, that program has been falling by the wayside. Adjunct instructors would then inherit the responsibility of training these students to write in the Standard English expected of them in subsequent courses while simultaneously catering to the needs of their native-English-speaking students. Smith's frustration that day in the writing center was likely the result of all of these factors combined: a job that would be more appropriate for a specialized program had fallen into his lap, he was not being sufficiently compensated, and to top it off, he was treated like an outsider by both students (us tutors in particular) and faculty. His story would likely be one of anger, frustration, and resentment. It is possible that, because students are lower

than adjuncts on the academic food chain, he felt comfortable enough with the writing center community to vent some of those frustrations; still, given how he was not quite accepted within our community, I think it's possible that he too felt he had nowhere else to turn.

In my feeble attempts to place myself in the shoes of one Korean exchange student and one middle-aged, male adjunct instructor, I have boiled perspective down to one thing: emotion. I can imagine how the scenario described in my narrative would have made each of them *feel*, and yet a narrative account offers so much more than emotion. Robert Nash explains that “a *memoir* is what writers compose when they use subject matter to explore their personal ‘personae.’ A personal narrative *essay* reverses the focus” (28). I used my own personal persona—the female, white, young, educated, middle-class, American, monolingual, native English-speaking tutor and graduate student—to explore the themes of community, exclusion, and language as I saw them being manifested in my undergraduate writing center. I used my persona to attempt to examine the ways in which I was—and still am—complicit in the exclusion of those not a part of the writing center community. I don't think I found them all within my narrative. To have done so would mean that my story ended, and I don't believe that the stories we tell in our narratives ever really do end. They don't absolve us of our sins and move along as though they did not happen; they open a window and invite further conversation. In short, narrative should “help your readers to reexamine their own truth stories in light of the truths that you are struggling to discern in your own complicated life story” (Nash 46).

What is it about this particular narrative that allowed me to spotlight the themes of community, exclusion, and language? One reason can be that it began with a hook. According to Nash, “In an SPN [scholarly personal narrative], provocative constructs can hook. So, too, can skillfully told stories. Memorable characters and a narrative arc that keep readers thoroughly absorbed can hook. A critical incident around which to build a story can hook” (58). My narrative relied on this last item in that it revolved around one

particularly volatile moment, the tension of which was caused by all three themes; like a bomb, it exploded in our otherwise calm and quiet community and left pieces of shrapnel for me to discover through my narrative. Nash says that “the best analysis and prescription come out of the scholar’s efforts to make narrative sense of personal experience” (18), and I wanted to make sense of a moment that had remained fresh in my memory for over two and a half years. One thing that allowed me to spotlight each theme—or rather to layer and juxtapose and interrogate each theme—was time. To say I didn’t know then what I know now seems cliché, but it took time and learning to attribute Smith’s explosion to anything much more than the ranting of an eccentric man who couldn’t get along with anyone in his department. It wasn’t until I read Irene Clark and Dave Healy’s “Are Writing Centers Ethical?” that I began piecing together the fragments that would eventually lead to my narrative: “For students from nonwestern cultures . . . non-directive tutoring may be insufficient, particularly since many of them are unfamiliar with the western conceptions of academic discourse and have little understanding of the purpose or components of the essays they are expected to produce” (249). In the blog that our class shared to reflect on weekly readings, I explained that “[John]’s instructor couldn’t comprehend the formation of his papers, [John] couldn’t comprehend the western concept of how his paper SHOULD be arranged, and I was frustrated because I couldn’t help him without taking a pen and fixing his mistakes” (Schiely). I was beginning to see the barriers between student and faculty, student and tutor, and faculty and tutor that would play such a significant role in my narrative.

Time was also necessary for me to distance myself from the idyllic, cozy memories of my writing center days and begin to critically analyze the dynamics of our community; this is not to say that I no longer hold those memories dear, but that I can reflect on both the positive and negative aspects of an institution that, if it has insiders, must have outsiders. I can fondly recall the time spent hanging out in the lobby and laughing with my fellow tutors as we relaxed in the armchairs, our own coats and book

bags and papers strewn everywhere; but I am also able to blur that scene in the foreground and direct my focus toward the background, where a student awaits his first appointment, feeling nervous, shy, and, perhaps, excluded.

In retrospect, my narrative tells a sad story—a story of exclusion, of barriers, of miscommunication. Where is the happy ending? Is there one? Perhaps this question can best be answered in terms of how my narrative can help the people involved in it or people who have been involved in similar situations at their institutions. I think that the best way my narrative can help others is through the invitation it extends: to be self-reflexive so that we may identify and understand how we are engaging in exclusive practices within our classrooms and writing centers and to maintain a sense of empathy for those who are marginalized—even those who we might be quick to condemn as engaging in exclusive practices themselves. Nash reminds us that “one of the reasons for going *inside* of yourself in an SPN is so that, at least some of the time, you can get your readers to go *outside* of themselves in order to see their external worlds in a different way” (60). When someone writes a narrative, he or she uses personal experience to unearth underlying themes and ideas and analyzes them so that the reader may have a clearer understanding of the subject matter; like an archaeologist, he or she chooses a site to investigate and meticulously excavates until the area has been exhausted of its resources. Once the artifacts have been obtained, the archaeologist must analyze and interpret his or her findings. While archaeologists often dig to answer a specific research question, narrativists will often find that their questions emerge from the digging: the more I wrote this particular narrative, the more the themes of community, exclusion, and language emerged and defined themselves. The more I wrote, the more voices chimed into the conversation; I’d remember something I had read in Grimm’s *Good Intentions* or Denny’s *Facing the Center*, and forms of exclusion that I hadn’t considered before would come into focus. I believe that this is what resulted in the “layered” effect of my

narrative: a series of themes and ideas becoming increasingly clearer.

I remain strong in my conviction that writing centers exist to help people. In reference to Nancy Grimm, our intentions are good. We are only human, though, and often persist in behaviors and practices that we believe are benign but can actually be alienating to the same people we are trying to help. Narrative inquiry is an effective tool for identifying these behaviors within ourselves in that it details actual experience while providing a commentary of intentions. From there we can dichotomize the reasons, intentions, and emotions behind an event with what actually occurred and the consequences that followed. Perhaps the more we turn to narrative inquiry as a method of research, the more we will learn about our own tendencies in the classroom and in the writing center, and the less disparity there will be between our good intentions and what becomes of them.

CHAPTER IV

THE ANNEX

Annex: (v) to incorporate (territory) into the domain of a city, country, or state; to take or appropriate, especially without permission

It was around 2 AM during finals week of my senior year, spring semester. I sat at a desktop computer in the writing center annex, struggling to keep my eyes open as I slowly neared the end of a ten-page paper on one line from *As I Lay Dying*: Vardaman Bundren's cryptic "My mother is a fish" (Faulkner 84). My boyfriend, Logan, a fellow tutor, sat at the computer next to me while he worked on the same assignment. The counter space around us was littered with bags of buffalo wing-flavored pretzel nuggets and half-eaten beef jerky strips. Emptied cans of Rockstar energy drink lay on the floor around the trashcan, the result of weak free-throw shots and vision blurred from the whiteness of word processors. Outside the annex window, the first floor of the English building was dark and sleepy. All was quiet, aside from the gentle tapping of fingers on keyboards and the occasional echoed whooping of an inebriated fraternity brother racing across the quad.

The faint jangling of keys down the hall and soft thud of footsteps announced the presence of Mike, the gruff, bald-headed security guard who worked the graveyard shift. Accustomed to our all-nighters, he poked his head in the door, lifted his hand in greeting and reminded us to exit out the side door of the building, since he had locked the main entrance for the night. He gave the same spiel every time. "Have a good night," he said, and ambled out the door toward the next building. We replied with nods and tired smiles

and turned our bloodshot eyes back to our computer screens.

About an hour later, I typed the final sentence of my conclusion and, not wanting to look at my paper a second longer, triumphantly hit “print.” I stood up, stretched my arms and legs, and headed toward the main room of the writing center where the printers were located. Another tutor named Melissa sat hunched over her own computer in there, popping M&Ms into her mouth as she squinted at the screen. “How’s it going?” I yawned while the printer noisily spewed the pages of my final draft. “Oh it’s going,” she answered, feigning enthusiasm. “Did you finish your paper?”

I nodded. “Can’t promise that it’s good, but it’s done.” Despite my uncertainty, I earned an “A” on the assignment. Logan and Melissa probably earned the same. We were all “good writers” by the university’s standards. We wouldn’t have been hired to work in the writing center had we proven otherwise.

These late-night paper-writing sessions in the annex became a sort of ritual for us tutors during our time in the writing center. Our director even put some pillows and blankets in the closet in case we needed to camp out overnight in there. We would joke from time to time that we lived in the annex, but it wasn’t far from the truth—we spent more time there than in our dorm rooms or anywhere else on campus for that matter. The annex was a small room tucked in the back of the writing center lobby with two of those desktop computers, counter space that was sometimes used for appointments, three to four comfortable office chairs (more or fewer depending on the students who would drag them in and out as needed), an old record player, and an abandoned pair of speakers. The closet, of course, was stuffed with those pillows and blankets, and there were several cabinets containing writing center records, spare reams of paper, office supplies, U.S. president flashcards circa 1978, and plastic forks and party hats, the remnants of a tutor’s birthday party a few years past. In a building where so much of our attention was focused on the bettering of student writing, the annex was the one place that we could find some semblance of privacy to focus on our own.

I recall when one of my fellow tutors created a list entitled “You Know You Work in the Writing Center When....” Feeling sassy and slightly cynical, I contributed the following: “You can’t actually get any writing done in the writing center.” My comment wasn’t intended to dissuade students from bringing their work to the writing center; many students came to the writing center hours before an appointment to work on a paper or stayed afterward to write while the consultation was fresh in their minds. Sometimes our writing lab students, who received one credit for completing twelve hours in the writing center over the course of a semester, opted to spend their appointment time working on a paper if they did not have anything specific to discuss at the moment. While I liked that our clients could be productive in the writing center—after all, it was the atmosphere we strove to cultivate—the same did not hold for us tutors. We could not sit down at a computer to focus on our own work without being approached by students, fellow tutors, faculty, or our director. This makes sense in that it was our place of employment; it was our job to help others with their writing, to be available for assistance. If you work at a restaurant, you can’t stop taking orders or bussing tables to sit down and enjoy your own meal while you’re on the clock.

This notion of being “on the clock,” however, is not as defined for those of us in writing centers as it is for those who work in the restaurant industry. Our mere presence often implied that we were there to help others. In our writing center, as in many, we didn’t clock in or clock out, but rather held hours that were mostly filled with appointments. When we were not holding appointments, we visited with fellow tutors, socialized, hung out in our director’s office, answered grammar questions, and offered suggestions to walk-in students who needed a second pair of eyes on their paper at the last minute before turning it in. We chimed in on other appointments when we overheard something that caught our attention: “Is that Dr. Moore’s interview assignment? That one’s a doozy,” or, “Are you talking about *M. Butterfly*? I love that play!”

The thing is, we did all of these things even when we *weren't* on the schedule. Our identity as tutors was so ingrained in our personalities that it was difficult for outsiders to differentiate between our on- and off-the-clock selves. Tutors don't wear uniforms, hats, or nametags in the same way that a restaurant worker might to create the visual distinction between a working and non-working state. Sure, we could turn down students' requests for help when we were simply in the writing center to visit or work on our own papers, but it was not in our nature to do so, especially when such requests were not usually time-consuming and only necessitated a brief response: "Yes, that's spelled correctly," or, "I would look that up in *The Bedford Handbook* if I were you." We could ignore our fellow tutors, faculty, and director, but the former were our friends and the latter two were figures of authority, and we didn't want to be rude. Yes, we could avoid being in the writing center altogether when we weren't holding hours—but we *enjoyed* being there. Conveniently located in the center of campus, not to mention in the English building where the majority of us tutors took classes, the writing center was home base. We knew we were always welcome there; to quote the *Cheers* theme, "Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name" (Portnoy). Despite how much we enjoyed being in the writing center, it was not a conducive atmosphere for us tutors as writers—and that is where the annex came in.

The annex was where we went to hide to escape our "tutor identity" and revert back to our "student identity." It was like Clark Kent's telephone booth in reverse: we went there to turn back into civilians when, at the risk of sounding self-aggrandizing, we were done being Superman. With blinds that drew over the large window facing the lobby and a door that locked, the annex was our 100-square-foot phone booth. We hid in there when we did not want to deal with our usual interruptions—often when we were overwhelmed with our own coursework. Hiding in the annex behind the drawn blinds and locked door was often the only way to communicate the message that we were not

presently available to assist others or open to conversation.

Of course, the annex was not interruption-proof. I recall our director knocking on the door: “Who’s in there? Lauren, is that you?” Her interruptions were not meant to chastise, but simply to check in. While I’m sure she would have rather that we did not lock ourselves away and hide, I think she understood that it was sometimes necessary in order to focus on our own work. She knew about our late-night paper-writing sessions and kept herself up-to-date on our classes and assignments by asking questions about them. She offered her insight on our reading assignments if she had read the material; she knew our individual writing styles because she read our papers. She was aware of the seemingly obvious yet widely overlooked notion that once a student is hired as a tutor in the writing center, she does not cease being a student.

When writing center administrators envision their centers as places to help students improve as writers, tutors are generally imagined as facilitating that vision and not on the receiving end of it because they already have a reputation as good writers—despite the fact that writing centers distance themselves from being places of remediation. Our writing did benefit from our work in the writing center in some ways: guiding students through their writing processes made us more aware of our own personal tendencies, strengths, and weaknesses. We also benefited from the privileges afforded to us by being tutors, such as the after-hours access to the English building, which we routinely took advantage of. These benefits, however, are more incidental than purposeful as writing centers do not generally build the needs of tutors-as-writers into their mission statements.

One obvious way in which tutors-as-writers can benefit from the writing center is by making appointments with other tutors. In Richard Leahy’s “What the College Writing Center Is—and Isn’t,” he claims that “[e]ven veteran writers can have their confidence shaken while working on a difficult piece. That is why the writing center encourages all writers to come in for help. In fact, tutors frequently make appointments to

be tutored by each other” (46). This might be a more common practice in writing centers where the staff is larger, a blend of graduate and undergraduate students, and perhaps not as close-knit; in our writing center, however, there were only ten of us, all undergraduates around the same age, on a staff that served a tiny private school with just over two thousand undergraduates. We were all friends with one another, and while we would gladly look over one another’s papers whether on or off the clock, it was a rare occurrence that we would actually make appointments with one another. It’s not that we didn’t respect one another’s opinions or seek input from one another on our papers, but the formality, professionalism, and objectivity that are often present in tutor-student consultations and that perhaps contribute to their effectiveness simply did not exist in our tutor-tutor consultations. Once again, while the writing center proved to be a valuable resource for student writers, we tutor-student writers had to search for other options.

The definition of the word “annex” is particularly fitting in terms of how we used the annex in the writing center: we incorporated it into our domain, appropriated it without permission (“Annex”). There were other spaces we could have annexed—the first floor of the English building also featured a student lounge directly across from the writing center that we often used for appointments. There was also a conference room down the hall that we sometimes used when the writing center became overcrowded. The annex, however, was different. It was contained within the writing center, yet separate from it; we could isolate ourselves without feeling like we had to physically leave the writing center to get our work done. We could tend to our needs as students without abandoning our tutor identity. Bonnie S. Sunstein speaks to this notion of liminality in “Moveable Feasts, Liminal Spaces: Writing Centers and the State of In-Betweenness”: “Writing centers lurk in a state of in-betweenness . . . house teachers who are students, writers who are readers” (7). More than any other space in the English building, the annex reflected the duality we felt as both tutors and student writers.

Our need to annex a space that reflected our in-betweenness could easily be read

by others—department chairs or even perhaps less-understanding writing center directors—as an act of rebellion, especially when taking into consideration the “appropriat[ing] . . . without permission” part of the definition; however, such a reading would be reductive. There was a complex set of factors that prompted our “annexing of the annex”: necessity, frustration, and a desire for privacy, among others. We may not have had permission to claim the annex as our own—it was not intended to serve as a private office or break room for tutors. We annexed because, despite our responsibilities as tutors, we could not afford to neglect our responsibilities as students. We annexed because, quite frankly, we had writing to do as well.

It is interesting to consider how the dynamics of our writing center community would have been altered had the annex not been there—rather, had the writing center been one open room. Would we have reconciled our tutor and student identities and sat among our clients to work on assignments? Would we have inhabited the writing center at all during our off-hours, perhaps opting for the library or student union before a paper was due? It’s hard to say. Dual identity is a tricky matter to negotiate when one of the identities is a paid position—if a restaurant worker were to reconcile his server identity with his diner identity by sitting down to enjoy a meal while on the clock, he would most likely lose his job. In writing centers, however, we need to nurture our tutors’ identities both as tutors *and* as writers, for not only can the two identities co-exist but profoundly enrich the other. This nurturing might manifest itself in tutor work areas in our writing center spaces; faculty members have offices where they often can concentrate on their own writing—why not have offices for tutors? If tutor-tutor consultations are not effective, perhaps the writing center staff could hold paid writing support group meetings among themselves. The solution, if one exists, should reassure tutors that their student-writer identity is just as important as their tutor identity—it is, after all, how they were hired in the first place. Directors should at the very least demonstrate an awareness of and empathy for the two identities, just as any employer should acknowledge that her

employees are more than just their job description. Above all, an effective solution should eliminate tutors' need to "annex."

Reflecting on "The Annex"

In a late 1942 Sunday newspaper comic strip, Clark Kent excuses himself from Lois by claiming that he has to make a phone call; his real purpose, of course, for ducking into the phone booth is to transform into Superman (Younis). He complains, "This definitely isn't the most comfortable place in the world to switch garments, but I've got to change identities—and in a hurry!" (Siegel and Shuster). While his discomfort is obviously caused by the cramped quarters of the telephone booth, there are some interesting parallels here that can be drawn to the notions of liminality, space, identity, authority, and time in "The Annex."

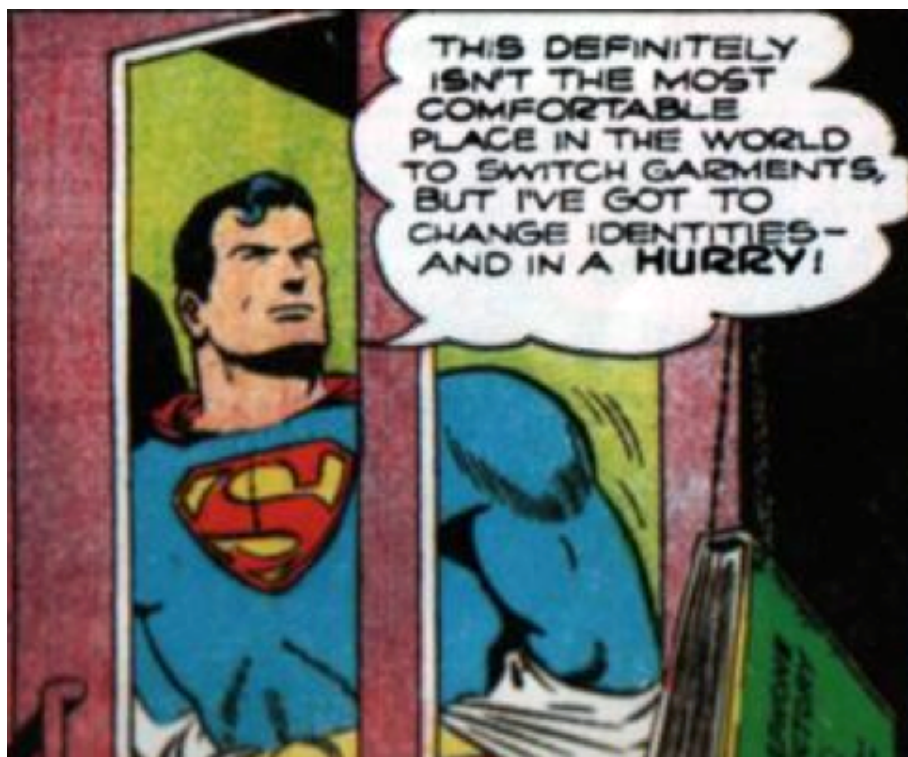


Fig. 1. Superman and the Phone Booth

We'll return to Superman in a moment; first, I'd like to preface my reflection of "The Annex" by discussing my difficulties in writing this chapter. I struggled to find a topic for this narrative because I couldn't think of a singular explosive moment—"a

critical incident around which to build a story [that] can hook” (Nash 58)—to build my story around the way I had in Chapter 3. At one point during one of my frustrated brainstorming sessions, I made a list of memories that specifically involved the physical space of my undergraduate writing center. The first five read:

- Being in the annex with Logan until 4 in the morning (sometimes later)
- Falling asleep with my head on the desk while Logan worked even later
- The security guards stopping in, knowing who we are
- Being in the annex during the day and closing the blinds and locking the door so no one would bother me
- Getting annoyed when Wendy Klein would use the annex

The fact that I kept coming back to the annex made me realize that there was something important to be said about that space in particular; it made me question what it was about this small space that we tutors held to so vehemently. I then considered the definition of the word “annex,” which, when used as a verb, means “to incorporate (territory) into the domain of a city, country, or state; to take or appropriate, especially without permission” (“Annex”). I could see my story coming together: how we had “annexed the annex.”

I then wrote nearly twelve pages about how my fellow tutors and I were territorial over the annex. It was our space, our place to get work done; we didn’t like other people using it (Wendy Klein, an adjunct faculty member, was a repeat offender). We needed that space, I insisted, to remain open, in case we needed to restore our sanity after a particularly taxing appointment, in case we found ourselves burdened with our own papers to write, in case we needed a quiet place to hide away and drown out the noise of campus... in case of anything. The *how* and *what* of our felt need to annex the annex were eclipsing the *why*, however—and my list of anecdotes and speculations grew with no conclusion in sight.

Then I tried another angle: how did the annex serve us tutors as *writers*? What

kept us returning to the annex late at night to work on our papers? Once I explored the *why* behind our annexing, I found that our reasons were a lot more complicated than sheer animalistic territorialism or teenage rebellion. Instead, I saw the annex as a place that physically represented the conflict we felt as hybrid tutor-student writers. Here we were employed at a place where our peers' writing was the focus—but what about our own needs and responsibilities as student writers? The annex, in ways that I will discuss in more depth in this subchapter, allowed us to change out of our “tutor clothes” and into our “student clothes” without having to physically leave the writing center—much like Clark Kent's phone booth in reverse.

I would never have anticipated that Superman could have so much in common with a writing center tutor, but his grievance resonates with me in that his phone booth, like the annex, was a liminal space—a space of in-betweenness, a threshold. It allowed him to transition from one identity to another in a place that was private and enclosed. While the phone booth provided a space for Clark Kent to quickly duck inside and change when his services as Superman were needed, the annex provided a space for us tutors to sequester ourselves when we needed to attend to our responsibilities as students. When assessing the major themes of “The Annex”—liminality, space, identity, authority, and time—liminality acts as an umbrella under which the other themes exist, overlap, and interact. Because this narrative focuses on the annex, a liminal space, the other themes are necessarily analyzed through a lens of liminality: the *space* we inhabited as tutors was liminal in that it was a dual space—the annex, where we went to “become students” again, was located inside of the writing center, where our primary duty was as tutors. Our *identity* was liminal in that it pulled us back and forth between the demands of being a tutor (and thus a figure of *authority* in the writing center) and being a student. Lastly, the concept of *time* in “The Annex” is liminal in that it aggravated our need to change identities in terms of appointments scheduled vs. allotted time to work on our own

papers, our on- and off-the-clock selves, and the quickness with which we needed to bounce back and forth between our dual identities; like Clark Kent, we often had “to change identities—and in a hurry!” While my intention is to address these themes individually to allow for a more thorough and detailed analysis of how each one is relevant to “The Annex,” there inevitably will be times when it will be impossible to discuss one without referencing the other—for example, authority was a part of our identity, but it was also reflected in the concept of space in the annex. In other words, these themes are not exclusive, but will be addressed in such a way that their individual relevance should be clear as well as their relation to the other themes in the discussion.

Another disclaimer: my initial purpose in analyzing these themes—or in writing “The Annex” in the first place—was not to offer solutions as to what should have been done differently in our writing center. My intention still is not to portray the annex as “good” or “bad,” but to ruminate on how it impacted our identities as tutors and as students. We tutors were glad to be able to retreat to the annex; it serves as the backdrop to many of our fondest memories in the writing center, not to mention the birthplace of some of our best works of academic and creative writing. However, my research has led me to question how our act of annexing could have perhaps contributed to an anti-learning culture in the writing center, despite our director’s attempts to create a pro-learning culture (in reference to Marcia Conner’s Learning Culture Audit). While my primary concern is still the *why* of our annexing—what messages our behavior communicated—I will offer a variety of approaches that writing center directors can take to support a pro-learning culture in their centers, not just for the students or tutors but for everyone who walks through their doors.

“This definitely isn’t the most comfortable place in the world . . . ”

While Superman’s spatial discomfort was of a physical, claustrophobic nature, ours was a bit more complicated. We retreated to the annex because it offered a more comfortable (read: conducive) space to get our work done, (mostly) free from the

interruptions of the “outer” writing center space. It offered isolation in the midst of a very social, interactive community; that said, isolation is not typically equated with comfort. It is not psychologically comfortable to isolate oneself, especially when there does not seem to be an option other than isolation. Of course that sounds melodramatic—like most college campuses, ours offered a variety of places to study—but we *wanted* to be in the writing center. We just felt that, it being our place of employment, we could not use it in the same way that our non-tutor peers could. It was not the same as, say, a Macy’s clerk who does not shop at Macy’s for her own wardrobe, or a McDonald’s line cook who can no longer stomach a Big Mac; we *liked* being at our place of employment. We enjoyed the camaraderie, the constant exchange of ideas and conversation. They were both intellectually inspiring and entertaining—just not always the best thing for our productivity. This is why the annex, with its capability of being enclosed and private without being entirely separated from the writing center, was so appealing.

We were drawn to the annex because, of all things, it had a door. In *The Everyday Writing Center*, Anne Ellen Geller, Michele Eodice, Frankie Condon, Meg Carroll, and Elizabeth Boquet state that “[d]oorways represent, in fact, crossroads for Trickster figures, sites of contingency and leakage” (15). The fact that we gravitated toward a place with a door was a major indication that Trickster had infiltrated our writing center. Trickster is Geller et al.’s term for a fictional persona that presents itself in learning opportunities disguised as mischief or otherwise counterproductive behavior. “Trickster crosses both physical and social boundaries; Trickster is often a traveler, and he frequently breaks societal rules, blurring connections and distinctions between ‘right and wrong, sacred and profane, clean and dirty, male and female, young and old, living and dead’” (15). Trickster, in other words, is liminal.

Geller et al. urge writing center directors to become mindful to Trickster (16): how might a writing center director interpret her tutors’ behaviors when they

claim/retreat to/hide in a particular spot of the writing center? What might the tutors be trying to say through their actions? As I mention in the narrative, I felt that our director was fairly perceptive of our intentions in retreating to the annex. Instead of reprimanding us for hiding or shooing us out of the annex, she understood that we needed our own place to work and allowed us to use the annex for that purpose. Her intentions were good, but were we tutors stunting our own opportunities for growth by viewing our writing as something that had to be performed away from the writing center?

One notion that may have reinforced our thinking that we could not get any work done in the writing center was the belief that certain types of work can only be performed in certain types of places—for others, this belief might be that prayer and worship can only take place in a church, or that exercise can only take place at a gym. Of course these beliefs aren't logical; a person can pray on a city bus or go for a run around the block. But there is something about walking into a church that inspires reverence and reflection—the smell of incense, the stained glass windows, the eerie quiet. There is something about walking into a gym that makes one feel like jumping on a treadmill: the upbeat music, the shiny equipment, the trim, toned patrons. In the same way, our writing center felt like a place where writing *should* happen. All of the necessary features were in place: the brainstorming, the intellectual conversation, the inspiration, the scrap paper and pencils, the computers and comfortable office chairs. Although it lacked the “plants, couches and coffee pots” (6), the iconic objects that Jackie Grutsch McKinney analyzes in “Leaving Home Sweet Home: Towards Critical Readings of Writing Center Spaces,” our writing center had that vibe, that aura about it that communicated the message that it was a place of writing. We thought about writing there, talked about writing there. All of our associations with writing were “centered” there.

However, just like the church and the gym, the writing center was simply a place, a couple of a rooms in a building. The things that made it more than that were internalized within us; the writing “center” was within us. We still felt we had to get all

of our writing done there, though, because we didn't understand that. We needed the place, the physical location, even when it kept us from being productive. In "Location, Location, Location: The 'Real' (E)states of Being, Writing, and Thinking in Composition," Johnathon Mauk discusses the concept of "third space," "a concept borrowed from critical geography, which projects a 'real and imagined' realm of intellectual-social action" (370). He discusses the need to move away from the notion of academic space as being confined to a place and toward the notion of mutable, movable academic space that can be transported, or, rather, recreated, wherever the students go. His perspective stems from his experience teaching at a community college where students are always coming and going, but it made me think about the problem in my own narrative, which is that the writing center was not really useful for tutors as writers because we were so accustomed to viewing the writing center in terms of space. Perhaps if we learned to view the writing center as "third space," as existing within ourselves and within the conversations we had about writing, we would not have been as stressed out about *where* we could or could not write our papers. Mauk's solution for his own students is to assign prompts that require students to move outside the classroom: interview co-workers, write to city officials, etc. (381).

What might it look like to turn the writing "center" into a mutable, moveable space that can exist outside the confines of the writing center? Bonnie Sunstein returns us to the notion of liminality by discussing her writing center as a "culture" that could easily (and often did) move from building to building, was staffed by a mix of part-time faculty, adjuncts, and "people who emerged sometimes only in the evening," and had the reputation among students of being "more like home than school" (the plants, couches, and coffee pots are in fact mentioned) (9-10). She claims that "[a] writing center is not a single space, an ideal product, or a shared pedagogical philosophy . . . Instead, it might be the absence of a culture that makes a writing center what it is: a temporary reflecting place, a movable spot" (10). The examples she chronicles of writing centers that

exemplify *cultures* rather than *spaces* include “Nashua, NH: Freshmen in a college dorm, covered in piles of crumpled notebook paper, bent coke cans, chewed pencils, share ideas in nightclothes and sweats with an adjunct faculty professor in a “pajama tutoring” session following her night class” (12). Another takes us to “San Diego, CA: Working adults drive over speedbumps, slog out of their cars, scrape their tired feet across the dark parking lot under the buzzing night glare of high school lights, click through the empty polished hallways, and come to life as they write business letters, children’s books, proposals, fiction, and poetry into the night—at the school to which they pay their taxes” (12). Her point is that not only does the writing “center” not have to exist within the physical space of the writing center—it doesn’t even have to exist exclusively within those of us who are associated with writing centers.

As tutors, our felt need to annex was heavily influenced by the dynamics of space in the writing center. By viewing the writing “center” as something we carried within us, that didn’t leave us once our shifts were over or even when we returned to our dorms for the night, we might not have felt stressed out when the writing center did not live up to its vibe or aura as a place of writing, because it was just that—a place where writing *could* happen, but did not *exclusively* happen. In fact, turning from our dependence on space could have resulted in a pro-learning culture in the writing center, which I will discuss further in the next two sections.

“But I’ve got to change identities . . .”

Our liminal identities as tutor-student writers was perhaps the most pervasive theme in “The Annex,” with our perceived authority as tutors being a particular source of friction. In *Writing/Teaching: Essays Toward a Rhetoric of Pedagogy*, Paul Kameen argues that when teachers are over-determined in their sense of authority, opportunities for mutual learning are diminished. As tutors, we were well aware that we had already proven our proficiency in writing; we were “people who [had] learned to ‘do school’

well. [We knew] what [we] need[ed] to do to get the grade” (Geller et al. 60). With that in mind, we did not always take the advice we offered our peers during appointments; having learned all of the rules, we felt we were free to break them. For example, we preached the ubiquitous writing center mantra of process over product or that you don’t wait to write your paper the night before it’s due. When it came to our own work, however, we were very product-focused, and we often pulled all-nighters to get our own work done, as evidenced by the opening scene in “The Annex.” This behavior resulted in some high-stress situations; I can clearly recall the frustration and anxiety I felt when I had a full day’s worth of appointments ahead of me in addition to my own papers: “I can’t help all of these people—I have my own work to do!” It was during moments like this that we felt the duality of our identities weighing on us most heavily.

Perhaps if we envisioned ourselves more as co-learners rather than as experts, we might have been more apt to follow our own advice instead of thinking of it as, “It’s okay for *me* to be giving *you* this advice, but I don’t have to follow it”; or, as Geller et al. put it, “If we are able to cultivate in ourselves and in our tutors an awareness of teaching as learning, as *becoming* rather than as a display of *being* knowledgeable, we will be well on our way to creating a sustainable learning culture within our writing centers” (59). One question I had in mind while writing “The Annex” was how writing center directors might nurture their already-skilled tutor writers. I envisioned something along the lines of special workshops or writing groups that would allow tutors to discuss writing amongst their equally proficient peers. I hadn’t anticipated Geller et al.’s suggestion to “slow down their cognitive processes a bit . . . subject them to scrutiny, and disrupt the commodification of knowledge that can follow from perceived expertise (60). Their goal is not, of course, to “dumb down” tutors but to emphasize that they are still learning and will always be learning, to reawaken them to what Sheryl Fontaine calls “the beginner’s mind” (208).

Encouraging tutors to adopt a “beginner’s mind” is easier said than done when

authority is so strongly ingrained in their identities; “[w]orking with tutors means being continually reminded of the discord students experience as they try to balance nascent expert status in their chosen professions with roles as teachers and learners continually ‘in transaction with their practice worlds’” (Geller et al. 67). Tutors often find themselves “caught . . . in difficult boundary positions between student and professional, between tutor and professor stances, between full-fledged members of profession and peripheral participants in their respective communities” (Geller et al. 68). It can be especially difficult to exist within this liminal space in the university, where authority and expertise are valued, where already *being* knowledgeable is preferable to the potential of *becoming* knowledgeable: “Consider how often students are expected to *display* their accumulating knowledge—in qualifying exams, in the LSATS, in job interviews” (Geller et al. 69). When the pressure is always on to display what you know right at this moment, with little or no regard for how you got there, it is no wonder that we were so product-focused!

How can writing center directors step in to mediate the preferred state of “beginner’s mind” with the university’s preferred state of “expert status?” Geller et al. suggest the following:

Whenever we have opportunities, we reflect, with our staff, on the conflicts that arise between a pedagogy of display and a pedagogy of construction. We work to encourage and cultivate their facility, ability, and willingness to be surprised and to become unsettled in those zones of indeterminacy they may encounter in the writing center. In our own growing and learning processes, we note the irreplaceable value of opportunities to discern, meditate, converse, and make meaning under conditions of relative or great uncertainty. (69)

When reflecting on how our institutional duties can sometimes pull us in one direction while our ethics pull us in another, I am reminded of Nancy Grimm’s *Good Intentions*. The academy values product over process. We all strive for an “A” in the class, a 4.0 on

our transcript, a diploma: it doesn't really matter too much *how* you get it but *that* you get it. We can't help but be complicit in this value system because we assist students toward satisfying the requirements set forth by the university and even strive to satisfy those requirements ourselves, but we need to keep a critical, postmodern perspective by continuing to ask what will sustain a learning culture rather than what will earn an "A" and get us out the door toward our next degree. Geller et al. suggest that "[p]erhaps Trickster can instigate a deeper understanding of both our complicity with institutional practices and our efforts to step around these practices" (27-28). Training ourselves as well as our tutors to be mindful of Trickster is a concept I will explore in the next section on time in the writing center.

"And in a HURRY!"

Another major source of tension that surfaced in "The Annex" was the concept of time: not having enough time for our own work, losing time to distractions and interruptions. Time dictated that we remained flexible and agile as we bounced from our identities as tutors to our identities as students: we could have appointments from 4:00 to 7:00 pm, stay up all night working on our own papers until 3:00 am, turn them at 9:00 am, and start the process over again. It is natural to feel stressed out by time; it is a societal construct that we cannot simply ignore or escape. Having a dual identity can be even more stressful as time has different demands according to one's different roles and responsibilities: as students, we had our own assignments and deadlines. As tutors, we had commitments in the form of shifts and appointments. Practicing effective time management skills can alleviate some of this stress; for example, we can think, "I will end my last appointment at 5:00, take an hour for dinner, then use the rest of the night to write my own paper."

However, an interruption or distraction can overthrow even the most meticulously organized schedule—a truth we tutors were painfully aware of. We perceived it as a domino effect: "If so-and-so doesn't stop meddling in my appointments, then they're

going to run over, and then I won't start my paper until a lot later..." The thought was enough to make us hyperventilate. If we took the time, perhaps, to reflect on and engage with these so-called interruptions and distractions instead of blocking them out and dismissing them as counterproductive, we might have found that they were actually learning moments. How many times, for example, was our director simply trying to offer a suggestion to help us with our papers when she knocked on the annex door? How many times did an appointment run over its scheduled time because we were wrapped up in a deeply thought-provoking conversation? I think that, by annexing ourselves to avoid all interruptions and distractions, we tutors may have actually stunted our growth in terms of learning.

This theory is supported by Conner's Learning Culture Audit, a tool of assessment designed to help leaders of "organization[s] that valu[e] learning and growth" (Conner). Several of the items in the "Pro-learning Culture" category are reminiscent of the atmosphere our director strove to cultivate—"Everyone creates, keeps, and propagates stories of colleagues who have improved their own processes"; "People take time regularly to reflect on what has happened and what may happen"; "Managers encourage continuous experimentation." For instance, each new tutor was assigned to a mentor, an experienced tutor who could provide assistance with any questions or concerns his or her mentee might have. All tutors were expected to fill out appointment reports that allowed them to reflect on what was discussed during the consultation, and our director encouraged us to experiment with different tutoring methods in order to find one that best suited us.

However, some of the items in the "Anti-learning Culture" category are reminiscent of our own behavior, especially when we felt driven to hide in the annex: "Everyone believes they know what to do, and they proceed on that assumption"; "Little time or attention is given to understanding lessons learned from projects"; "Employees proceed with work only when they feel certain of the outcome" (Conner). Due to our

sense of authority as tutors (and therefore proficient student writers), we believed that we knew exactly what we needed to proceed with our own writing assignments. We didn't need the advice we offered our clients; our natural talent, paired with a nice stretch of time in the annex and perhaps some energy drinks, were all we needed to produce quality papers. When something was introduced that was not part of that recipe—our director poking her head in to make conversation or a student asking a question about MLA formatting—we became irritable. We didn't take the time to reflect on our director's suggestions or to realize that the student's question was actually relevant to our own work. Pausing to acknowledge these “distractions” made us nervous, “uncertain of the outcome”—what would happen if we *did* change our papers to incorporate the devil's advocate stance our director suggested? What would happen if we did take ten minutes to open a handbook, to check the formatting guidelines for block quotations? Perhaps if we eased our white-knuckled grip on time, if we let Trickster moments be generative (Geller et al. 17) as opposed to counterproductive, we could have opened doors to learning opportunities, thereby promoting more of what Conner calls a Pro-learning Culture.

In *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*, Etienne Wenger speaks to the ways in which time requires us to negotiate our identities: “The temporal dimension of identity is critical. Not only do we keep negotiating our identities, but they place our engagement in practice in this temporal context. We are always simultaneously dealing with specific situations, participating in the histories of certain practices, and involved in becoming certain persons” (155). As tutor-student writers, we were always engaged in a frenzied dance between our two identities depending on whether we were on- or off-the-clock. Sometimes an hour-long break between appointments offered us the chance to retreat to the annex, (hurriedly) change into our student identity, and pull out a book for one of our own classes. An hour later, we would jump back into our role as a tutor, most likely counting down the minutes until we could “become a student” again. Rather than constantly racing against the clock, however, I think we would have learned

more from our time in the writing center had we learned to simply *exist* in it—to reflect on all that happened within those walls, to engage with Trickster moments, to actively seek learning opportunities rather than let them happen to us (and only if time allowed). This openness would require a “beginner’s mind,” an abandonment of preconceived notions that would typically reaffirm thoughts such as, “Yes, that’s going to be a distraction. I had better lock myself in the annex.” It might sound corny, but once we learned to view time as being on our side rather than against us, we might not have needed to annex the annex. We might have learned that the world outside its door was rife with learning opportunities, not to hide from, but rather to embrace.

The Annex as Phone Booth

In some sense, being a tutor can feel like being Superman. Our peers depended on us (although not too heavily, we hoped). We were sometimes told that we “saved the day” or were “life savers” by students who rushed in for a read-through an hour before their papers were due, and the more silent forms of gratitude—the spark of recognition, the shy smiles at the end of appointments—were often just as or more rewarding. As much as we enjoyed being tutors, the annex provided us with a sense of relief as we transitioned back to being students; it can be exhausting to negotiate dual identities, as I’m sure Clark Kent knows. We thought that the annex, like the phone booth, represented “our involvement in becoming certain persons” (Wenger 155). Without it, how might we have negotiated our tutor selves with our student selves? Perhaps, as with Mauk’s concept of “third space,” we would have learned that the two were never separated in the first place but always existed simultaneously within us. Even after we graduated and became “certain persons”—teachers, graduate students, office administrators, design consultants, or whatever else it was that we became—we continued to carry our multiple identities as well as the writing “center” within us. I know because even as I write this, three years after graduation, I pause to take my turn playing “Words with Friends” on my iPhone with an old fellow tutor. He plays PEONS for 52 points. I scan my list of only-

consonants for a way to one-up him. How fitting, I realize, that we are still finding ways to challenge one another—surprising one other, motivating each other to work harder. Perhaps I *have*, then, learned to be mindful of Trickster moments such as this. Perhaps I have, at last, outgrown my need to annex.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

“The value of such narratives is not in their generalizability but in their demonstration of the insights available through critical, self-reflective narrative inquiry,” state Colleen Connolly, Amy DeJarlais, Alice Gillam, and Laura Micciche in “Erika and the Fish Lamps: Writing and Reading the Local Scene” (25). Narrative inquiry, as I have shown through my own narratives and reflections, is not meant to summarize the fields it explores, but to offer perspectives and insights that might not be provided through other methods of research. It is not meant to define, but to illuminate; not to draw conclusions, but to ruminate. Above all, it is meant to *inquire* about our lived experiences and their implications for research, theory, and practice, in this case both in writing center studies as well as in the wider scope of rhetoric and composition—all of which I will touch on in my conclusion of this thesis.

In “Looking for Location Where it Can’t Be Found: Possibilities for Graduate Pedagogy in Rhetoric and Composition,” Peter Vandenberg and Jennifer Clary-Lemon stress our need to return to experience in written scholarship. They maintain that the current dominant pedagogical model in composition is to read published scholarship and produce texts that mimic its rhetorical strategies, vocabulary, organization, and research methods (94). This mimicking of conventions “can neutralize critical differences [and] engender an attitude of compliance to subjugation” among graduate students and other emerging scholars (94-95). Narrative inquiry offers the opportunity for emerging scholars to take control of conventional discourses and even define their own rather than be controlled by them. It is not Vandenberg and Clary-Lemon’s intention to demonize

academic discourse; they are concerned for graduate students in particular who may feel forced to abandon their sense of location in order to navigate their way into the conversations in their field (96).

Narrative values location in that it calls for a setting, an origin. Location plays an essential role in one's writing, as demonstrated in Johnathon Mauk's article, discussed in the previous chapter. Mauk states that there is a "connection between geography and consciousness" (383); to write narrative is to acknowledge one's place, not only geographically but temporally. In my narratives, I am in my undergraduate writing center, first floor of the English building; I am in my final year of undergrad, twenty years old. My narratives transport me back to that time and make me consider what I knew and how I saw things then compared to now. I could not have achieved that level of consciousness in, say, a more scholarly essay arguing the exclusive nature of our writing centers toward ELL students. Where narrative acknowledges and perhaps even values personal biases—for example, how I was implicated as a tutor of ELL students—written scholarship often asks that we politely step aside and maintain a sense of objectivity. To strive for one academic voice, one standard that demonstrates competence in the field, is to ignore or even abandon one's location. Narrative inquiry seeks to restore that—it is interested in location, in background, in personal experience. It is the radio host who asks, "Where are you calling from?" to those who have called in to share their stories. A writing center tutor at a large, Hispanic-serving institution in Texas will have different narratives than a tutor at a small, private university in Ohio. Through its dependence on location, narrative lends a sense of perspective to its readers that may not be present in scholarship that aims to address writing centers as a collective whole.

Narrative inquiry is also often more accessible than written scholarship, which invites more voices to participate in academic conversations—"folks who don't inhabit the university space; who don't speak [our] professional discipline's highly technical language" (Nash 148). It allows us to convey our ideas to "[our] family and friends in a

jargon-free style so that they might be able to understand and appreciate [them]” (Nash 142). It sounds simplistic to say that I could take this thesis home to my grandma and let her read it because it is written in language that is understandable to someone outside of the academy; in fact, some might even scoff at the notion, since “writing for a lay public is seen as a debasement of genuine scholarship” (143).

There is value, however, in extending the outreach of our studies to both those within and outside the academy. Those who are not steeped in traditional academic discourse may even be able to approach our stories and situations with new eyes and offer a fresh perspective. The term “accessible” should be used with caution, as it is often interpreted as “dumbed down,” even though narrative inquiry is of course more than the simplification of vocabulary. Vandenberg and Clary-Lemon share that “[their] concern for [graduate students] leaves us sensitive to our role in sustaining boundaries through the use of a conceptual vocabulary and terminology for which some graduate-student readers may have to stretch” (96), as though most written scholarship is crafted to build a bridge between those within the academy and those outside of it. Narrative offers an alternative to “the conditioned reliance within rhetoric and composition on virtuoso performance in the field’s grapholect as *the* mark of excellence” (96).

In sum, narrative inquiry connects us to others in (and even outside) our learning communities; research does not have to be something that is done in isolation but in conversation with another person as we share our narrative experiences. Instead of researching articles on the ways in which writing centers exclude ELL students, why not ask a tutor who specializes in assisting ELL students? Why not ask an ELL student? Narrative inquiry is not only accessible to others through reading, but is practicable to others through writing; we all have narratives to share, it is just up to us to write them.

What does all of this imply for future studies involving narrative inquiry? When considering its emphasis on location, its value of the personal experience, and its overall accessibility, I’d speculate that narrative inquiry will be used more to empower those who

do not necessarily have a voice within the academy. In their urging of academic writers to return to experience in their written scholarship, Vandenberg and Clary-Lemon posit that “the habituation to ‘study’—an obligation to assume the examiner’s stance . . . [and] make ‘research results’ *publishable*—which effectively means to make them meaningful for an audience that does not share the immediate context examined, or how those examined perceived their experiences—guarantees the appropriate rewriting of the disempowered” (98). They speculate that insistence on more formal written scholarship in the academy, with an emphasis on what’s *publishable*, drowns out the voices of those on the lower rungs of the academic ladder and prohibits them from joining conversations among scholars in their fields. Narrative inquiry combats the more hegemonic components of written scholarship in the narrator does not need to have already negotiated her way into academic discourse to share her lived experience.

We see firsthand how narrative inquiry provides an opportunity for the disempowered to share their lived experiences in Rebecca Jackson’s “Resisting Institutional Narratives: One Student's Counterstories of Writing and Learning in the Academy.” Jackson’s article spotlights the notion of counternarratives, the stories offered by students to counter the majoritarian narratives imposed on them—thus revealing how narrative inquiry can challenge the stories we’ve been told by our institutions: the story of the absent Hispanic student, the story of the overachieving Asian student, the story of the cynical non-traditional student. Not only, then, can narrative be empowering, but it can incite important social change in the academy.

The value of critical narrative accounts such as the ones I have shared lies in their ability to generate further conversation on the themes and ideas within the narrative. For the purposes of this project, I was the one reflecting on my narratives and considered other angles that might have led to different conclusions in my work. I also looked to relevant, ongoing conversations in the form of scholarly published articles to aid me in my reflections. Through my reflections after each narrative, I was able to generate

additional questions that I either had not thought of or did not feel were right to ask *within* the narrative. I found that I occupied two different roles in the writing of these chapters: that of the narrator (when writing the narratives) and of the analyst (when writing the subchapters). As the narrator, I often felt that I was speaking as my twenty-year-old, undergraduate self as I discussed my experiences as a tutor in the writing center. There were times when my current “graduate student” state of consciousness would flicker in—times when, for instance, I realized the relevance of Trickster in “The Annex”—but I wanted to save these realizations for further analysis in the reflective subchapter. I was worried that illuminating these themes within the narrative itself would disrupt its flow. Perhaps that admission suggests unreliability on my behalf as a narrator, but I still think there is value in committing to the story one is telling, knowing that its imperfections can be returned to upon further discussion. There were times in “The Angry Adjunct” that I allowed my “graduate student” consciousness to surface, but I think that is a move that is up to the narrator based on whether or not it will further the message of the narrative. That said, forming research questions of an empirical nature on the basis of critical narrative accounts depends largely on the ability of the reader to pick up on themes, as well as the narrator’s ability to convey those themes, of course. If a narrative contains themes of exclusivity, dual identities, or racial biases, readers may be prompted to use those as lenses when surveying their own writing centers or classrooms.

What does this mean for writing center practice? I think it’s important to note the ability of narrative inquiry to provide relevant, applicable ideas to writing center directors and tutors because it offers real stories from real people. If we want to know more about the state of writing centers now, in 2013, why not ask someone who is currently employed at a writing center to share his or her story? If we want to know about the newest online conferencing software, about campuses that feature multiple satellite writing centers, or about directors who are organizing programs on environmental literacy within their centers, why not look for a firsthand account? Narratives are more

personal and relatable than statistics. Writing center directors could even introduce their tutors to narrative-as-research by asking them to tell their stories. It might allow directors to shed light on writing center issues for themselves and for the writing center community at large. A writing center director might, at her next meeting, ask tutors to write a narrative account of a problem that they have experienced in their writing center.

As for my narratives in particular, I hope that they can be used to shed light on issues of exclusivity, language, liminality, identity, space, and time in the writing center. I hope that my readers recognize themes in them that I have yet to discover; it would mean that my stories have prompted others to think in new ways, to turn my experiences over in the palms of their hands and inspect them closely. Narrative, I have realized, makes us vulnerable; we donate our lived experiences, our emotions and memories, as written scholarship in the hope that someone will find them useful. In time, we hope our stories are recycled, trigger something that inspires others to write their own until one day, narrative is a respected and widely published form of research in composition and writing center studies. As Nash reminds us, “The best that we can ever do in the academy . . . is to tell our stories, in our words, and let the rewards fall where they may” (147).

APPENDIX

1. Project was exempted from full or expedited review by the Texas State Institutional Review Board on November 5, 2012.
2. Some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

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