

## Taking It with You: Personal Reflections on Life “After” the Writing Center

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At the October 2003 International Writing Centers Association-National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing (IWCA-NCPTW), I had the opportunity to address the question “How did your writing center work inform/affect your life subsequent to that work?” on a panel with several esteemed colleagues. I worked as a peer writing tutor for Jon Olson and with fellow IWCA-NCPTW panelist Josie Gildow at Penn State University from October 1998 to May 2000. In truth, however, I just recently left writing center work. For the previous two years at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), where I am a Ph.D. candidate, I worked as a writing consultant at the Writers’ Workshop. You might say I loved writing center work so much I didn’t want to give it up! This inability to walk away from the writing center is emblematic of the crucial role my work as a peer writing tutor has had in my life—and how I’ve carried the experience with me since. As the other panelists also attested, there is really no “after” work in a writing center.

My writing center work has had a profound effect on my life since my time as a peer tutor at Penn State. I chose to attend graduate school in writing studies precisely because of my work as a peer writing tutor; it introduced me to the field of rhetoric and composition and cultivated in me an interest in composition pedagogy. My tutorial sessions with students reinforced that I wanted to work with college students on their writing. I enjoyed how I could observe and put into practice in my tutoring sessions what I learned in the tutoring training course at Penn State (English 250). Discussing with other writers how they use language provided ideas and insights that made my own academic work seem more engaging and worthwhile.

My work as intern for the 1999 NCPTW further acquainted me with the depth of work in composition, and this position became available for me because of my work as a writing tutor. My primary responsibility for the internship was preparing the conference program and coordinating the conference presentations, which necessitated that I read the presenters’ abstracts. I was fascinated by what I read. People were doing and talking about interesting, important things. Not only that, when I met folks at the conference they were invested in and excited about what they were doing. They were making a difference, one tutorial session or one writing center at a time, and they wanted to ensure that such work continued. I was taken by the depth of enthusiasm and energy, and I wanted to be a part of it.

With respect to my specific academic pursuits, one of the papers I wrote for the peer tutoring training course at Penn State, an exploration of how using email changes students’ writing practices, has served as a foundation for my interest in the connection between composition and computer technologies. While my dissertation will not directly address email, it will likely center on the intersection of new media technologies and writing—an interest that started in English 250 at Penn State.

Perhaps most profound, though, was the influence of theories of collaborative learning that were the foundation of writing center work at Penn State. They forever changed my views

of writing and the writing process and got me to think about writing in new ways, specifically as the combination of the efforts of multiple people (e.g., writers, teachers, editors, colleagues, friends, tutors, peers), multiple technologies (e.g., written text, computers, pens), and multiple environmental and cultural influences (e.g., personal histories, social and generic conventions, physical spaces). As a result, in my role as a composition instructor at UIUC, peer workshops play an important role in my classroom to show students that their best resources are often one another, that learning, especially about writing, involves—even requires—the influence of others. Hannah Arendt has something to say about this—“For excellence, the presence of others is always required”<sup>1</sup>—which I remember being the motto of sorts for the writing center when I was at Penn State. It’s one I have carried with me. Belief in collaborative learning has structured not only what I have done in the classroom as a composition instructor, but also has shaped my outlook on problem solving in other spheres, for example, in my work as a technical writer at IBM, as associate editor of *Computers and Composition*, and as a peer advisor for new composition instructors at UIUC.

My writing center work sent me on the academic path I am currently pursuing and established how I think about writing and collaborative learning. My experience as a peer writing tutor has not really left me; rather, it has shaped everything since. I wouldn’t be where I am today had I not worked as a peer writing tutor at Penn State!

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).