From Creepers to Collaborators: The Importance of Sharing Our Work

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As a way of incorporating my love for writing center work and my experience as a peer tutor into my course work as a Masters student in Rhetoric and Composition, I have been working on a project that examines the *Writing Lab Newsletter* as an important artifact for understanding writing center development in the 1970s and 80s. What has interested—and excited—me most about reading these early issues of the *WLN* is the way the collaborative, egalitarian spirit of peer tutoring influenced the contributions to the newsletter.

Muriel Harris, the former director of the Purdue Writing Lab, began the *WLN* to help writing center directors find each other and share ideas and materials. The first articles were typed on a typewriter, and the columns were cut and pasted on the page before Harris hand-copied each issue. The first newsletter went to forty subscribers—in five years, that number would grow to over 1,000. In a time before word processing, Tweets, status updates, Google docs, and blogs, writing center people exchanged hand-made materials, gave advice, wrote book reviews, and shared experiences. This ethic of sharing and collaboration was so successful, in part, because of the equality demonstrated by contributors. Participants, for example, provided the same items they asked others to contribute. In response to several letters asking about writing lab evaluation, Harris suggested readers contribute their labs' evaluation materials and included examples of the evaluation sheets used at Purdue. Other contributors made similar gestures of equality: for example, in the same issue Susan Glassman called for readers to submit book reviews, she included a review she had written. The newsletter thus became predicated on an even exchange: people asked for information, but they also provided information to others. Ultimately, this emphasis on egalitarian collaboration helped develop a sense of community that shaped the growing field of writing center studies and continues to shape it today.

I think the collaboration that defines the newsletter grew out of the kind of work we do in writing centers on a daily basis, and the *WLN* shows that extending our collaboration beyond the walls of our individual centers can have far-reaching effects on the field, from issues of professional development to research projects that shape our understanding of the tutoring process. As a generation of tutors who have netbooks and iPhones that allow us to Tweet, update, share, and link, this kind of collaboration is easier than ever before. Yet, it's also easier to become what my first-year composition students call "a creeper." I commend those of you who are already active on these media because I, myself, am quite guilty of creeping—I have a Twitter account, for example, but I have yet to Tweet. Similarly, we might stalk blogs but never comment, collect links from others without posting our own, and even perhaps read online publications without submitting our own work.

If the *WLN* was able to foster collaboration and create an impressive repository of writing center knowledge using a typewriter and a cut-and-paste process that didn't involve a shift key, imagine what peer tutors could learn from each other with the media we use everyday. We already know—in part thanks to the Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project—how much we learn from the experience of tutoring and from the students we tutor. Even the PWTARP, however,

remains unsure what tutors learn from other tutors. Imagine what insights we might gain from one another when we move our writing center collaboration outward.   So, whether it's commenting on the blog *PeerCentered*, joining a facebook group, or submitting to *The Dangling Modifier,* let's stop stalking and start sharing.