

# The Cultures of Writing Centers

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In this age of globalization, perhaps the second most controversial entity involved in the ever-increasing movement across borders, coming after only the migration of people, is culture. While international trade in physical goods has often been a flashpoint in globalization disputes, the most emotionally laden issues in globalization have involved not commodities such as coal, corn, or copper—bulk materials barely differentiable by whether they originate in Argentina, Australia, or Aspen—but rather goods with distinctive cultural origins, whether films, fashion, or fast food. Furthermore, except in cases where protectionist economic interests come into play, it is not the acetate, fibers, or flour contained in those goods that engenders the most enmity. Rather, it is their cultural content—the assertions and assumptions about sexual mores in the case of movies and clothing, for example, or the threat to traditional culinary customs thought to be posed by fast-food restaurants—that prompts resistance.

The university writing center would thus seem to be a potential target for similar resistance. Like Spiderman, blue jeans, and the hamburger, writing centers are a cultural entity that originated in the United States, and, as described below, they betray that origin in many of their characteristics. But perhaps because their spread beyond North America has barely begun, they do not yet seem to have excited much, if any, controversy outside of the country of their birth. Nevertheless, the writing center movement cannot be understood without considering its cultural origins, and such an understanding is essential for those considering the establishment of writing centers outside the United States.

This paper will therefore examine writing centers from the

perspective of culture, with the word “culture” considered in several of its many senses. The purpose is neither to promote nor to protest the establishment of writing centers at non-U.S. universities, nor is it to insist that non-American writing centers take any particular form. Rather, I merely hope that a deeper appreciation of how cultures have shaped writing centers and how writing centers in turn create their own cultures will ensure that writing centers are not established inappropriately and will, furthermore, enable the centers that are established to fulfill their missions more effectively.

### Attempts at Definitions

Both “writing center” and “culture” are difficult to define, the former because there is no standards-setting or accrediting body to prescribe what a writing center is or is not and because, even at similar institutions in the United States, every writing center is different, and the latter because the word has been used for centuries in a variety of senses, some quite nebulous. But as the more recent term, and the one with more distinctly identifiable physical manifestations, “writing center” is perhaps easier to pin down.

A typical writing center in the United States is an organizational unit within an educational institution that provides tutoring and other education-related services related to writing. The tutoring is typically done peer-to-peer, meaning that students who have been trained as tutors meet one-on-one with other students—sometimes called “clients”—to discuss the clients’ writing projects, although tutoring may be conducted by faculty or by nonstudent tutors as well. While most writing projects brought to writing centers are class assignments or theses, writing centers also welcome clients who want help with letters, application essays, résumés, and other types of writing. Writing centers might offer workshops to groups of students on topics such as research skills and citation/referencing systems, but they usually do not offer regular courses for credit. A writing center might be affiliated with an English, composition, communication, or other academic department, or it might be part of an administrative unit such as student services. Writing centers are generally managed by professional administrators with

advanced degrees in fields such as English language or literature, composition studies, and communication, with assistance from clerical staff.

As related by Peter Carino (1995), today's writing centers have forebears dating back at least a century. In the early days called "clinics" or "laboratories," those efforts included many aspects of current writing center pedagogy, including peer consultation and individual tutoring. During World War II, similar techniques were adopted within the U.S. military to improve the written communication skills of officer candidates, and communication remained an emphasis of writing labs in the early 1950s. Carino reports an apparent dormancy of interest within the composition field in such activities in the late 1950s and early 1960s, perhaps because of overoptimism about the applicability of recently developed linguistic theories to writing education. The turning point came in the late 1960s, when the open admissions movement led to an influx of minority and underprivileged students into American universities (Boquet, 1999/2001). Many of those nontraditional students were seen as not having writing skills adequate for college-level coursework, and writing centers were established to provide remedial help to them.

An influential essay by Stephen M. North, titled "The Idea of a Writing Center" (1984/2001), describes the dialectics of writing centers a decade and a half after open admissions. The fundamental conflict, as he relates it, is between faculty and students who perceive the role of the writing center as being to correct mistakes in student papers—in other words, to be a "fix-it shop," a phrase often seen in the writing center literature—and the broader mission as perceived by writing center professionals:

[I]n a writing center the object is to make sure that writers, and not necessarily their texts, are what get changed by instruction. In axiom form it goes like this: our job is to produce better writers, not better writing. Any given project—a class assignment, a law school application letter, an encyclopedia entry, a dissertation proposal—is for the writer the prime, often the exclusive concern. That particular text, its success or failure, is what brings them to talk to us in the first place. In the center, though, we look beyond or through

that particular project, that particular text, and see it as an occasion for addressing *our* primary concern, that process by which it is produced. (p. 69)

In the quarter century since North's essay, this statement continues to reflect the overall focus of most U.S. writing centers: emphasizing the writer and the writing process rather than the product of that process.<sup>1</sup> Writing centers thus usually do not provide editing or proofreading services. Other shared features of American writing centers include the promotion of broader writing-based initiatives such as "writing across the curriculum," an effort to incorporate significant amounts of writing in all or nearly all classes (and thus, not incidentally, increase the demand for writing center services) (see, for example, Blumner, Eliason, & Fritz, 2001); a strong interest in responding appropriately to the diverse needs of their clientele in terms of race, ethnicity, age, class, national origin, disability status, etc.; and, perhaps most important for the purposes of this paper, an almost exclusive focus on writing in English within an institutional context in which practically all academic and administrative communication takes place in English. These features of writing centers make up part of the writing center culture to be considered below. But, first, let us consider some definitions of "culture."

### Intellectual, Social, and Organizational Culture

Among the many senses in which the word "culture" is used in English, some, for the purposes of this study, can be safely ignored, including "The cultivation of soil; tillage" and "The growing of microorganisms, tissue cells, or other living matter in a specially prepared nutrient medium." (These and the following definitions are taken from the entry "culture" in the fourth edition of *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, with the numbering changed.) Rather, the meanings of "culture" that might shed light on writing centers and the writing center movement are the following three:

- (1) Development of the intellect through training or education.
- (2) a. The totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of

- human work and thought.
- b. These patterns, traits, and products considered as the expression of a particular period, class, community, or population.
- (3) The predominating attitudes and behavior that characterize the functioning of a group or organization.

For the sake of convenience, let us refer to sense (1) of “culture” as *intellectual culture*, to sense (2) as *social culture*, and to sense (3) as *organizational culture*. Examples of the use of “culture” would thus be “He acquired culture from reading the classics” in the intellectual sense, “Anthropologists studied the culture of the indigenous peoples of New Guinea” in the social sense, and “The recently hired employees had difficulty adapting to the culture of their new company” in the organizational sense. Intellectual culture thus refers to the process of developing one’s intellect through study and practice. Besides literature, music, religion, and much else, social culture includes spoken and written language, nonverbal communication, and the patterns of personal interactions. Finally, organizational culture refers to how a particular organization differs in its operations from other organizations with similar missions, particularly in ways that are uncodified but nevertheless understood, consciously or unconsciously, by the organization’s members; in addition to business corporations, a frequent subject for studies of organizational culture, such organizations might be government agencies, religious groups, volunteer organizations, universities as a whole, or university units such as writing centers.

### **Intellectual Culture and Writing Centers**

Intellectual culture, as defined above, is based on “training or education,” in other words, on learning. The process of learning has, throughout history, been implemented using two complementary and sometimes competing approaches, which might be called atomistic learning and connective learning. In atomistic learning, the learner is exposed to particular facts or skills that have been distilled from a larger body of knowledge or practice. A child learning how to write the letters of the alphabet, a novice tennis player learning how to hit a serve, and a medical student learning the names and functions of each organ in the human

body are all engaged in atomistic learning. The ultimate purpose of such learning, of course, is more than acquiring only those individual “atoms”: the goal for the child is to be able to write words and sentences, not merely isolated letters; the tennis player’s goal is to play and win games, not just serve well; and the medical student’s goal is to treat and cure illnesses throughout the body, not merely in individual organs. To make the learning process more efficient, though, the subject matter is divided into discrete units that are studied and practiced separately. In connective learning, the focus is on becoming able to understand and apply knowledge in more holistic, integrated ways: the child is asked to write a letter to a friend, the tennis player to play a complete game against another novice, the medical student to accompany physicians on their hospital rounds and help diagnose and treat actual patients.

The atomistic and connective approaches are complementary because, in many cases, knowledge and skills can be acquired most effectively through a combination of the two approaches. Overly atomistic learning is likely to leave the learner without abilities that can be applied in a meaningful way—all trees and no forest—while an excessive focus on connective learning can leave the learner with debilitating gaps—poor spelling and grammatical skills, perhaps, in the case of a child asked only to write extended texts, or a weak backhand, in the case of a tennis player who has never been drilled on that specific swing. Atomistic and connective learning can compete with each other because some educators tend to emphasize one of the approaches over the other, even to the point of asserting the exclusive value of one approach and denigrating the importance of the other. This conflict often has a political component, with more conservative educators favoring an emphasis on “basics” or “fundamentals” and progressive educators deriding such approaches as “rote learning” and advocating integrative pedagogies in their place.

In *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (1916), the American educational philosopher John Dewey made a similar distinction:

Philosophically, the difference [between “empirical and higher rational knowing”] turns about the distinction of the

particular and universal. Experience is an aggregate of more or less isolated particulars, acquaintance with each of which must be separately made. Reason deals with universals, with general principles, with laws, which lie above the welter of concrete details. In the educational precipitate, the pupil is supposed to have to learn, on one hand, a lot of items of specific information, each standing by itself, and upon the other hand, to become familiar with a certain number of laws and general relationships. Geography, as often taught, illustrates the former; mathematics, beyond the rudiments of figuring, the latter. For all practical purposes, they represent two independent worlds. (p. 389)

Dewey's own bent, of course, was towards the connective approach, and his progressive views of education had a strong, if indirect, effect on the writing centers that emerged decades later in the United States.

In the teaching and learning of writing skills, the conflicts between the atomistic and connective approaches can be seen in both public discourse and specialized research. In 2009, writing on his blog on the *New York Times* Web site, the scholar Stanley Fish attacked progressive approaches to writing education at American universities, specifically composition courses in which "students spent much of their time discussing novels, movies, TV shows and essays on a variety of hot-button issues—racism, sexism, immigration, globalization," and declared that "all courses listed as courses in composition [should] teach grammar and rhetoric and nothing else." He was spurred toward this view, he wrote, when he found that graduate students in a literature course he was teaching could not write "a clean English sentence." In the comments section of the blog, many people wrote to support Fish's atomistic emphasis, but connectivist approaches were also advocated:

many composition courses include mechanical lessons—how to use parallel construction, for instance, or how to avoid the passive voice—but these more pedestrian topics are not as helpful in teaching students how to think. or, more precisely, these dry topics are not as engaging for the ultimate purpose of "writing" courses in college: how to



think critically. (Gonzalez 2009; *sic*)

In the field of second-language (L2) writing pedagogy, the atomistic/connectivist conflict has been mirrored in an ongoing debate on the role of error correction in writing classes. The usual practice of L2 writing teachers has been to correct grammatical mistakes on student-written papers—items such as incorrect article usage or faulty number agreement, in the case of English, or incorrect particles or faulty verb conjugations, in the case of Japanese—and return the corrected papers to the students. This methodology was rarely questioned, and the correction of grammatical errors was assumed, by both teachers and students, to be an essential part of the teaching and learning of writing. In a review article published in the journal *Language Learning* in 1996, however, John Truscott of National Tsing Hua University in Taiwan challenged that assumption head-on, asserting that “extensive research” on grammar correction “provides a great deal of evidence against correction’s effectiveness and no evidence for it” and that, therefore, “[g]rammar correction should be abandoned” (p. 360). In a later paper (2007), Truscott went even further, suggesting that grammar correction might actually be “harmful” (p. 271). A number of rebuttals to Truscott have appeared, including Ferris (1999), Chandler (2003), Ferris (2004), and Bitchener (2008), prompting further replies by Truscott (1999; 2004; 2007). The dispute has yet to be resolved.

Although Truscott has not advocated “connective” or holistic approaches to writing education—in his 1996 paper, he raised the issue of “what teachers should do in writing classes” only to recommend “anything except grammar correction” (p. 360)—this debate is nevertheless another example of the atomistic/connectivist divide, as the correction of individual grammatical errors, like the teaching of grammar itself, falls squarely on the atomistic side of the language-learning scale, and any other class activity would almost have to be at least somewhat more connective. The debate is germane to the concerns of this paper as well, as grammatical correction is precisely the sort of thing that North and others have stated that writing centers should avoid lest they become the dreaded “fix-it shops.”

While the grammar-correction debate has not been overtly political, at least in the literature, in the writing center field the



political divide has been apparent. In her 1991/1995 paper “Writing Centers in Context: Responding to Current Educational Theory,” for example, Christina Murphy examines how writing center activities relate to conservative, liberal, and radical educational philosophies, stating that “[f]rom the conservative perspective, writing centers are effective when they advance a student’s mastery of skills—specifically, grammar, mechanics, vocabulary, and sentence complexity and variety,” while in the liberal model, “[s]tudents [who use writing centers] learn how to develop their analytical and critical thinking skills through dialogic exchanges with the tutor” (p. 118). Even a casual perusal of the writing center literature from the United States makes clear that the liberal model is dominant there, with strong strains of radical (i.e., politically activist) views as well (see, for example, Lutes, 2002; Denny, 2005; Condon, 2007). The writing center in its original form, therefore, has as its primary mission the promotion of intellectual culture (“Development of the intellect”) in a connective way, not the atomistic learning of specific facts or skills.

When writing centers are established in other countries, however, this mission can be problematic. Besides differences in culture in the social and organizational senses, discussed below, the issue of language becomes central. Many American universities, of course, have large numbers of international students, and writing centers have long dealt with the special issues that arise when their clients are writing in English as a second language (see, for example, Powers 1993; Bruce & Rafoth 2004). However, American writing centers, almost without exception, exist in educational institutions where instruction and other communication is conducted in English, the student writing brought to the writing center is in English, and tutorials are conducted in English. While there are writing centers in non-English-speaking countries where the situation is parallel—at Seoul National University in Korea, for example, there is an Academic Writing Lab where Korean students writing in Korean can obtain one-on-one consultations about their writing in Korean (Center for Teaching and Learning, 2005)—most of the writing centers established so far in Japan, at least, such as those in the ALESS Program at the University of Tokyo (described below) and at Osaka Jogakuin College (Johnston & Ochitani, 2008), provide tutoring to students

writing in English as a foreign language within an institution where the primary language of communication is Japanese.<sup>2</sup>

The question arises, therefore, whether the holistic, noncorrective approach to tutoring emphasized at American writing centers is appropriate in contexts where essentially all students are writing in a foreign language, including many intermediate and even some beginning learners of that language. In other words, should tutors in foreign-language writing centers correct students' mistakes? Those imbued with the American writing center tradition would respond "no" and reject error correction in most cases, and Truscott's arguments about the ineffectiveness of grammar correction in L2 writing classes could be harnessed to discourage grammar correction in writing center tutorials as well. But the exclusively foreign-language context of many writing centers outside the United States cannot be ignored. Students writing in their first language, even if they are unable to write a "clean" sentence (that is, one free of errors in the standard written form of that language), possess a vast passive awareness of the conventions of that standard language, and that awareness might very well be activated most effectively not through correction but through activities such as extended writing projects, nonjudgmental peer review, and continued exposure to writing in the desired target style and register. Similarly, L2 writers immersed in their second language, such as international students at American universities, while having had less passive contact with the standard language than first-language (L1) writers have had, are exposed to large amounts of that language through study and daily life, and that exposure might obviate the need for error correction in their cases as well. But most students writing in the language of a foreign country are exposed to that language primarily in language classes, so they have little past or current passive knowledge of the language to fall back on. In their case, adopting the American writing center focus on intellectual culture—connective "development of the intellect"—and discouraging atomistic error correction during writing center tutorials risks depriving of the students of the necessary "training or education" necessary for their intellectual development.

### Social Culture and Writing Centers

It is social culture, as defined above, that attracts the most attention in the writing center field in the United States. Not only are foreign students, who in many cases have different social-cultural characteristics from American students, present in large numbers on many American campuses, but they also use writing centers in large numbers (Powers & Nelson, 1995). Part of the attention directed on international students in the writing center context focuses on linguistic issues. Most American writing-center tutors have little or no first-hand experience with the issues faced by someone writing in a second language, and they often lack the vocabulary to explain English grammar even when such explanations are acceptable and necessary; thus they struggle, at least at first, to respond adequately to their clients' needs. The clients, in turn, often "do not understand the specialized strategies and language that writing center tutors use when trying to help them succeed in their new academic environment" (Garner & Young, 2003). Other social-cultural issues that arise in tutorials with international students are "the preference for or avoidance of eye contact, . . . the amount of space that people expect to maintain between themselves and others, the acceptability of touching between strangers, and so on" (Harris & Silva, 1993) and different standards of politeness (Nash, 2006).<sup>3</sup>

But social-cultural issues in American writing centers are not limited to those involving students from other countries. The United States itself is a diverse nation, and differences among students from different cultural backgrounds are of major concern in the American writing center context. Such backgrounds include not only ethnicities, such as native American, Vietnamese-American, and Hispanic, but also regional, class, and religious characteristics (working-class Appalachian, West Coast Jewish, New England patrician), sexual orientation, disability status, and race. Gender issues are considered in ways that might seem foreign from other cultural perspectives (Rafoth, Macauley, Stoltenberg, Housenick, Brown, & Baran, 1999; Gillispie & Olden, 2006). Age is also an important component; while elite universities tend to serve mostly full-time undergraduates in their late teens or early twenties, state and especially community colleges—which often have particularly strong writing cen-

ter programs—educate large numbers of working and between-career students in their thirties, forties, and fifties.

The issues that arise when working with a diverse clientele are often discussed in the writing center literature and can lead to profound conclusions. Steve Accardi of DePaul University in Chicago, for example, described his encounter with a Yoruban student from Nigeria (2005) whose paper included the sentence “my parents went for vacation.” When Accardi discovered that the student, when the sentence was pointed out to him, did not notice that it was unnatural in American English, Accardi changed his tutoring strategy with the student to a “more direct style, informing [the student] that Americans say ‘on vacation’ or ‘for a vacation’ rather than ‘for vacation’.” Thinking about the experience later, he realized that “we as tutors, whether we know it or not, are Americanizing our tutees, linguistically and perhaps culturally,” and he became concerned that students from nonmainstream backgrounds were being “forced to give up, lose, exchange their primary discourse for the academic discourse.” In response, he recommends that tutors “address multicultural assimilation in order to raise the consciousness of their tutees so that they can both maintain their cultural identity and succeed in the university.” In other words, Accardi felt that his writing center should not only make students better writers but also help them preserve their cultural identities. A similarly forceful statement about the role of writing centers serving multicultural academic communities comes from Nancy Maloney Grimm (1996): “The writing center could be a space in the university where students . . . discuss the possibilities and impossibilities of negotiating cultural and racial conflicts” (pp. 544–545).

This emphasis on diversity and multicultural acceptance in the American writing center context raises important issues when considering applying the American writing center model in other countries. Those American concerns, after all, arise out of historical factors that are particularly significant in the United States, including the legacy of slavery and racial discrimination, the repeated waves of immigration and nativist backlash, and the centrality of human rights to the country’s political discourse. Those factors have made American society what it is today, and they have shaped many of the shared assumptions of American writing centers—the nonjudgmentality of tutorial ses-

sions, the focus on the writer as an individual, and the emphasis on collaboration over hierarchical control (as in Lunsford, 1991). While the mere fact that those assumptions arose out of a peculiarly American context does not mean that they should be rejected out of hand when establishing writing centers in other countries, it also suggests that they should not be adopted blindly. The social-cultural characteristics of the country of establishment should be given equal or greater consideration.

One example of how the social culture of a country might affect a writing center in ways not considered in the American model arose in 2007 when graduate students at the University of Tokyo were tutoring undergraduate students enrolled in English academic writing classes. (The university's first writing center would be established the following year.) Although the classes were conducted primarily in English, the tutors and undergraduates were encouraged to speak whatever language was most comfortable for them during their tutorial sessions. Most of the tutors and students were native speakers of Japanese, so most of the tutorials were conducted in Japanese. One of the graduate student tutors, Toru Oda, a scholar of comparative literature, described a difficulty he encountered during tutorial sessions with regard to how he and his tutee should address each other.

People speaking Japanese choose from a variety of strategies for addressing each other depending on their relative age, gender, social status, and familiarity. The use of given names and second-person pronouns is restricted to relationships of high familiarity, such as between family members or close friends; in work and university contexts, surnames are the norm. When calling another person by his or her surname, one must choose an appropriate suffix. The surname followed by *-san* is suitable in many cases, but if the person addressed is a younger male within the same group, *-kun* might be used instead. A teacher or doctor is usually addressed with *-sensei*. Words designating social status can sometimes be used in place of name-plus-suffix. Students, for example, can address their teacher just as *sensei*, without the surname, and a younger student can address an older student within the same school as *senpai* ("senior"). However, an older student would not normally address a younger student with the counterpart to *senpai*, which is *kōhai* ("junior").

In his tutorial sessions, Oda reported, some students

assumed that he was a teacher of some sort and therefore addressed him as *sensei*. Because he was not employed as a teacher, however, he felt that this form of address was inappropriate. He was also unsure whether to use *-san* or *-kun* when addressing his tutees, because *-san* might seem a bit too formal but it wasn't clear if the tutor-tutee relationship justified the use of *-kun*. In an e-mail to me (personal communication, July 12, 2007; quoted by permission), he wrote:

Thus we were forced, in a sense, to remain nameless. Of course we were able to communicate without any problem and make productive discussions; the purpose of the tutoring session is to let them understand that writing is a creative and conscious process. But it is true that I felt this situation was a bit troublesome when I wanted to persuade them to change the general structure of their papers or to reject their plans without imposing my opinion authoritatively. In order to solve this (trivial but fundamental) problem, we should make it clear before starting the very first tutorial, by what name we call each other.

His recommendation was that tutors call students by either *-san* or *-kun* and that students be told to address tutors using *-san*.

This small example shows how a social-cultural issue not relevant in the United States and therefore not considered in the American writing center literature—forms of address in spoken Japanese—can play a significant role in tutorials in another cultural context. Similar issues that might arise, in Japan or elsewhere, include greater sensitivity to age differences between tutor and tutee; the need to maintain status and hierarchy distinctions between tutor/teacher and student, thus rendering difficult the dialogic, nonjudgmental style of American tutorials; and a variety of factors related to gender, religion, social class, language, and nonverbal communication. When such factors are especially important within the country in question, the social-cultural adaptations made by writing centers might end up rendering those centers unrecognizable to someone familiar only with American writing center practices.

## Organizational Culture and Writing Centers

When considering the relationship between writing centers and organizational culture—"The predominating attitudes and behavior that characterize the functioning of a group or organization," as defined above—two levels of organization deserve the most attention. The first is, of course, that of the writing center itself: how its operations are shaped by the shared attitudes of its administrators, staff, and tutors. The second is the entire university or other educational institution to which the writing center belongs. While other levels might also be of interest, such as the culture that forms among the student tutors working at a particular writing center or the dynamics within a university department that includes a writing center, the discussion here will be limited to the two levels mentioned.

At the level of the writing center itself, the organizational culture of writing centers in American universities is characterized overall by cooperation, nurturing, avoidance of confrontation, and a lack of overt competitiveness. Grimm (1996) locates that culture within a gendered framework, stating that writing centers "are marked by social notions of what women provide—refuge, nurturance, emotional support, personal guidance." These characteristics seem to spill over into other contexts in which writing center professionals are involved. For example, in 2006 I attended a weeklong workshop for writing center directors held at Stanford University in California and sponsored by the International Writing Centers Association. Upon my return to the University of Tokyo, I wrote the following in a report on the workshop:

Even though I was born and raised in California and should have been completely at home at Stanford, I frequently felt as though I were visiting an exotic land and had been suddenly immersed in a foreign culture. Upon reflection, I realized that this culture was not American or California culture but the culture . . . of the writing center movement. Some examples:

- In the many discussions in which the participants expressed their ideas directly and clearly, there was never any disagreement or argument. Occasionally two people



would express opposing ideas, but the session leader would merely thank both of them and make no attempt to resolve the contradiction.

- Speakers rarely used the word “tell”; instead, they would express the same meaning with the verb “share”: “I would like to share my ideas with you”; “Thank you for sharing that with us”; “Could you share what you have learned?”
- During the Institute’s final lunch on the last day, some of the organizers sang comical songs about writing center activities, people hugged each other, and one participant made an emotional, teary-eyed testimonial about how much the five-day Institute had changed her life and her plans for her career.

The atmosphere, needless to say, was very different from a similar gathering in Japan; it was also probably much different from that at a gathering of, say, American philosophers or physicists.

Within their larger organizations, however, writing center administrators must often deal with a very different organizational culture, one that is not particularly nurturing or mutually supportive, one in which competition for status, jobs, and budgets can be overt and intense. While other university units are engaged in the same competition, writing centers are in a particularly tenuous position. Because they do not offer classes for credit or as prerequisites to degrees, and because they are often perceived by faculty and administrators as providing primarily remedial services (even though they usually serve students of all ability levels), writing centers can be depicted as not essential to the university’s educational mission and therefore expendable. As a result, discussions among writing center personnel, whether in person, online, or in the literature, return frequently to the issue of how to navigate the shoals of the broader university culture (see, for example, Simpson et al., 1995; Harbord, 2006).

The organizational culture of American writing centers at the level of the writing centers themselves and among writing center professionals seems to have been shaped by the writing centers’ missions. Just as writing center tutors are trained to praise and be accepting of their tutees and not to scold them for

making mistakes, writing center professionals are generally supportive, enabling, and nurturing within their own organizations. These characteristics seem to be common to American writing centers because the writing centers' missions are generally similar in all American institutions. But at the institutional level, missions can vary, and the organizational culture of an elite research university is very different from that of a small liberal arts college, a large state university, or for-profit vocational college. The roles of writing centers within those institution-wide cultures, and the organizational-culture dynamics within those institutions, must necessarily change from place to place. The institution-specificity of this organizational culture is likely to apply in other countries as well.

When considering the adoption of the writing center model outside the United States, therefore, the organizational-culture issue that deserves the most attention is at the level of the writing center itself. The American culture of nonevaluative nurturing arose out partly out of the original mission of writing centers to serve underprivileged, minority, and other nontraditional students who began attending American universities in large numbers in the 1960s and 1970s—students often not yet sure of their position within the academic environment, students for whom a stricter, more evaluative approach had been found to be discouraging and counterproductive. Whether that culture is still appropriate now that many American writing centers have moved away from their original focus on remediation is a question for those writing centers themselves to decide. But writing centers newly established at universities in other countries need to consider carefully what “attitudes and behavior” are best encouraged as their own organizational cultures are being formed and not attempt to replicate uncritically the patterns of American organizational culture.

### Writing Centers and Cultures

One criticism that has been leveled at the American writing center model from someone working outside that context came from John Harbord of Central European University in Budapest, Hungary (2003). In response to writing-center literature promoting nondirective tutoring, processed-based approaches, and a gen-

eral antipathy to classroom teaching, Harbord advocated instead a more text-focused, teacherly, and evaluative approach to client writing. Although Harbord states that his position “better meets the needs of academic writer-learners in Europe,” it is not clear from his paper that the European (as opposed to American) setting is in fact significant in his case. Rather, because he is dealing exclusively with graduate students writing extended research papers and theses, often for publication, the short-term needs of his students for improvement clearly take priority over his students’ “writing ability in some indistinct future,” which is the primary focus of American writing centers that mainly serve students at earlier stages of their academic careers.

A more interesting example, from a cultural perspective, is that presented by Adam Turner of Hanyang University in Korea (2006). The Hanyang English Writing Lab which he directs helps clients “improve English journal articles for structure, organization, flow, logic, and style” (Hanyang English Writing Lab, n.d.); this product-based focus, as in Harbord’s case, emerges mainly from the specific needs of his clients, mostly graduate students in the sciences, to produce papers in English suitable for publication. But Turner also notes a number of accommodations he has made for the social and organizational cultures at his university. For example, the Hanyang writing center provides expert consultations by faculty rather than relying on a peer-tutoring model because, he writes (2006), “[i]n Korean culture, which is strongly influenced by Confucianism, age differences of even a year must be respected, which makes a peer model of interaction more difficult to implement.” The organizational culture of his university, specifically the key role played by laboratories rather than individuals in the production of scientific papers, also affected his center’s operations, and he “came to see the lab, rather than the individual, as my essential writing center client.”

In the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Tokyo, a pilot writing center was established in April 2008 as part of the Active Learning of English for Science Students (ALESS) program, a one-semester course in English science writing and presentation required of all first-year undergraduate science majors (Gally, 2009a, 2009b). The tutors in the ALESS Writing Center are graduate students who have taken a one-semester course in writing pedagogy, and the clientele is, as of this writ-

ing, restricted to students currently taking the ALESS course. As it serves freshmen enrolled in a two-year liberal arts program who are still years away from producing scientific writing in English for publication, the ALESS Writing Center has remained closer to the American model than have the Central European University or Hanyang University centers, and the ALESS tutors are encouraged to employ the dialogic, nondirective approach used in mainstream American writing centers. The linguistic context at the University of Tokyo is significantly different from the American case, however, with all of the writing brought to the center being in a foreign language (English) and the tutorials usually conducted in the local language (Japanese). Partly because all of the tutors (at the time of this writing) are native speakers of Japanese, but also because the clients, being at the beginning stage of their academic careers, are seen as benefitting more from a deeper understanding of the writing process (something that they are likely to retain for years) than from additional absorption of lexical or grammatical “atoms” (which they are likely to forget), the ALESS Writing Center adopts a process-based approach to tutoring. In the years ahead, if the center’s mission expands to include graduate students writing for publication or undergraduates writing in Japanese as either a first or a second language, then changes to our approach will need to be made as appropriate.

As noted above, a university unit does not need to meet any official definitions to call itself a writing center. Even within the United States, writing centers vary greatly—both between different institutions and within the same institution over time—as they evolve to meet the needs of their clients, institutions, and communities. While some aspects of American writing centers cannot or should not be applied to writing centers in other countries, this pragmatic flexibility is one cultural export that should be adopted without hesitation.

## Notes

1. The overall tone of North’s essay as well—his complaint about being misunderstood, marginalized, even victimized—is seen occasionally in other writing center writing (for example, Summerfield 1988 and

Simpson, Braye, & Boquet, 1994/1995) and heard in discussions among writing center professionals. Even milder, more constructive accounts of the position of writing centers within their institutions describe chronic conflicts, such as “the potential for misunderstanding when both tutors and faculty work closely with the same group of students” (Jefferson 2009). Such feelings are not uncommon among other university people—literature scholars resenting the higher budgets of science departments, scientists questioning the prestige of literary studies—but they may be particularly acute among writing center professionals because of the ambiguous status of writing centers in serving an educational purpose without being integrated in the formal curriculum and their consequent inability to justify their budgets based on student tuition payments (as writing centers nearly always offer their services at no charge).

2. A noteworthy hybrid case is the writing center at Waseda University in Tokyo (Sadoshima, n.d.). Established originally within the university’s School of International Liberal Studies, in which classes are taught in English, the center began very much in the American model, providing tutoring mostly in English to students writing in English. But the center also served international students within SILS learning Japanese as a second language, and in 2008 its mission was expanded so that it could also serve students from other departments in the university who are writing in Japanese for classes conducted in Japanese.
3. Writing centers in the United States, when dealing with international students, also have to deal with differences in textual organization and storytelling patterns as reflected in client writing—the issue of “contrastive rhetoric,” as originally raised by Kaplan (1966/2001) and extended and critiqued by many others, including Silverman (2006) in the writing center context and Kubota and Lehner (2004)—and with purportedly different attitudes toward plagiarism in academic contexts (Currie, 1998; Pecorari, 2003). These issues, however, are not unique to writing centers and arise in composition classes and other academic contexts as well, so they are not discussed in this paper.

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