

Reclaiming and Re-Centering the Craft of Writing: Writing Centers Raise the Bar

Ann Mott

Keynote address; MENAWCA Conference, February 17 -18, 2011

The American University of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates

Thank you for inviting me to speak here today. I am honored to be among so many distinguished colleagues and leaders in writing center practice and theory.

What we do, we do so well. We serve an indispensable function in our willingness and ability to engage students to talk about their writing one to one, face to face. No one else in our respective universities wants to do this work; no one else in our respective universities can do this work, but everyone wants it done now.

When writing center people come together at important gatherings like this one in Sharjah, two features stand out: one is the number of differences in our centers, from our student population and where on campus we are located, to who staffs them and in which context we do our work. In spite of these distinctive characteristics, however, we all share the goal of championing writing and the culture of writing at our universities and mentoring writers on their path to writing more effectively. Various models but shared missions and goals exemplify our writing center community.

Before I speak about how indispensable our work is in our respective university communities today I would like to touch on our contemporary world of liberal arts academe and our role as the guardians of writing.

Some say we are in the midst of a predicament, others say academic storms are on the way, but what we are is at a crossroads. And sounding an alarm on the crisis of liberal arts education is nothing new but in our current moment this alarm is accompanied by a much wider crisis in the university as a whole.

In particular two ideas seem to be becoming part of the conventional wisdom of higher education. The first is the notion that a liberal arts education and justifying the humanities are no longer

relevant in today's competitive global economy. The second related idea is that universities undervalue the importance of the liberal arts and the teaching of the humanities in favor of STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) pre professional courses and career oriented training (Kantner, *The Relevance of Liberal Arts*).

In recent months articles with woeful and provocative titles like "The Death of the Liberal Arts" have appeared in *Newsweek* and the *Wall Street Journal*. Each article reports on both the shuttering of classics departments and eliminating languages and philosophy from the curriculum, as well as the astronomical hikes in tuition and enormous cutbacks in federal and state funding that are putting universities and certain programs into a tailspin.

The University of California system, for example, has just raised their fees by 32%. Closer to us, consider our IWCA colleagues in Great Britain where both houses of parliament have approved measures that allow the cap on tuition to increase exponentially 200%, from 5 to 15 thousand pounds, while at the same time the central government funding will be cut by 80%. This has already lead to dire consequences not only for our colleagues whose centers for writing have been put on the shelf but for current and future students who will no longer be able to seek guidance from the only ones on campus able to do so. I just keep waiting for an article in *The Guardian* entitled "The Death of Writing in today's British universities."

Recently Stanley Fish wrote an op/ed piece in the *New York Times* entitled "The crisis of the humanities officially arrives." In it he speaks to the October actions of the President of SUNY Albany who gave the axe to the French, Italian, Russian, Classics and Theater programs. According to President Philip, who made his decision while the faculty was away from campus, the programs are too expensive to continue carrying. Comparatively fewer students are enrolled in them in comparison to STEM courses and state funding to state universities is being cut 30%.

From a consumer standpoint and for the economic health of a university, the liberal arts, especially the humanities, seem less and less important. They do lack importance if we think of the university as solely a place that trains its students for vocations (Pandya, *The Crisis in Liberal Arts Education*). In a recent *International Herald Tribune* article supportive of the liberal arts, columnist David Brooks summed up the prevailing thinking as "When the going gets tough, the tough take accounting."

When it comes to justifying the humanities, those courses traditionally the bedrock of writing at our universities, the wrong questions, according to Stanley Fish, are what benefits do they provide to society and are they cost effective. The right question should be how do our programs of research and teaching fit into what we are supposed to do “as a university?” “As a university” is the key phrase for it recognizes the university as an integral unity with its own history, projects and goals, goals that sometimes intersect with the more general goals of the culture and sometimes they don’t. But whether they do or not must not be the basis for deciding whether a program deserves a place in the university or deserves to be axed.

Universities are places where students come not just for a career but to become an active citizen. Courses that teach our students how to analyze, how to think creatively, how to expand their imagination, and through writing and talking about writing, should be part of any professional education.

Central to what we in this room want at our respective universities are courses that not only invite students to engage in a dialogue with the course content but also guide them to develop and nurture their powers of imagination, criticism and expression that will ultimately inform and shape their writing. Teaching writing from this point of view makes of it a liberal art. Teaching writing from this point of view makes the mind more attentive and more alive than almost any other activity. We don’t all begin as gifted writers, but eventually we do recognize that writing alongside content has the power to cultivate the writer’s intellect, to give strength to expression, to awaken one’s understanding and to enhance their sense of principles. This is at the heart of what it means to write in all disciplines, to consider writing as a liberal art. And conferences like these allow us to take stock of our role as guardians of writing, mentors to our university writers and guides to our colleagues.

We in writing centers foster and encourage the individual thinker and writer. And our centers allow for that to happen

- We are THE centers of consciousness about writing on our campuses
- We are a kind of physical locus for the ideas and ideals of university writing
- We are the ONE place where students can break through the mental and emotional static that often accompanies writing, and liberate their energies.

We exist to TALK to writers and invite them to talk about their writing. Consider the great talker and tutor Socrates (perhaps the first professor in the humanities and he would NOT be happy about today's axing of philosophy programs) who, as a critic of Athens, set up shop, one open to all thinkers and free of charge, offering a continuous dialectic. This heritage of conversation is what makes the writing center such a rich and integral part of our university communities today. Through TALK Socrates first treated the thinker, not the thinking. And so in writing centers we try to follow his time honored directive – through talk, through conversation and collaboration, we first treat the writer, and then treat the writing, for whatever assignment, course, discipline or academic direction our universities may decide to take.

But we know first hand that not all students call upon others to enter that private tension we have with ideas, with words, with shaping writer based prose into reader based prose. Either they

- take little time with their assignment
- or feel no need to call upon another voice or another view as what they write once is what they submit.
- And far too often they have not been offered another way to go about the process. They have not been initiated into our writing discourse community.

Nor have some of our colleagues. Rather than talk about process, they require a product, usually the ubiquitous end-of-semester 10 page paper, and have disregarded and overlooked the many vital steps that are integral to cultivating critical thinking, to nurturing the writing process, to make the writing both a learning experience and an enjoyable learning experience. Rather they present academic writing as an inhospitable domain, and the eventual essay or paper becomes something generic and stale. Students feel cheated and rightly so. And many of these students, just to get the paper out of the way, fall back on a cookie cutter approach to writing, the straight from the box, easy to use 7-step recipe they learned early in their academic careers: from narrowing the topic to crafting an outline to developing the thesis to drafting to revising to editing, to submitting. This formula makes writing appear seamless and linear, but it is dull, flat and uninspired. We see our students' eyes glaze over, we hear them mutter, "I hate to write" and who can blame them? As writing is thinking made visible, they need to know is that at any number of points in the process of writing, the thinking needs to be messy because that is how we think, in a recursive spiral.

To take that one important step forward we often need to retreat 2 -3 steps. We need to encourage our students to constantly tweak their topic, to brainstorm throughout, not just at the beginning, and to outline at the end to make sure the ideas in the argument are in conversation with each other. We need to invite our students to revisit their structure, revise ALWAYS as this is where the game is won or lost (*not* just step 6), and I would love to meet the person who decided the thesis comes at step #3 . . . it *never* comes then and it *never* happens at the same time for any writer. As John Bean says, it comes at that moment of discovery, that moment of clarification . . . what he calls the AHA moment.

Students want to be invigorated and inspired as writers, as thinkers, not filled with anxiety or dread, or worse, boredom and an attitude of “Why bother?” They want professors who will help bring out their writer’s voice, not stifle it. They yearn for classes that invite them to stretch as thinkers and become more than mere head-nodders. Writing, guided writing, thinking writing, talking writing is what they want and what they deserve.

And we are the ones on campus best placed and most motivated to ensure this happens.

It is here where everything that succeeds inside our warm and welcoming writing centers must be shared with our community at large. One of the defining features of the writing center today is our expanding beyond the physical boundaries of a single space which in turn allows our voice, our mission and our expertise to extend beyond our 4 walls.

Many of your writing centers consist of multiple sites and have connections to other programs (libraries, academic resource centers, learning commons, graduate school programs, student publications, and all departments, not just the English Dept).

As the “guardians” of writing we have assumed a major role in the teaching of writing. Many institutions seem to be looking at alternative ways to deliver writing instruction, and to this end, writing centers are taking on key roles as a result of our connections with WAC, WID, first-year seminars, learning communities, capstone programs and the like. Infact, the theme of this conference “Situating, Sustaining, and Serving” clearly speaks to the fact that the battle to cast off our remedial image and marginal status is behind us and we have become central to the teaching of writing.

We have any number of supporters at our universities, colleagues who appreciate what we do and who have seen the positive consequences to their students' working with us, colleagues who have a vested interest in the writing their students do, colleagues who have already joined our discourse community. But what can we do to invite the others into that community? Kenneth Burke's 'unending conversation' metaphor, his Burkean parlor may help us here:

Imagine you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.

The "Burkean parlor" might be taken as a parable for a lot of things: Here the "Burkean parlor" stands for the experience of being initiated into a new academic discourse. Consider the following scenario. A professor wants to introduce writing as a learning tool for her students rather than a teaching tool, but struggles to understand how she can move from being sage on the stage to being guide on the side. She also frets that too much time in class will be taken away from lectures and her weekends will be spent trying to assign grades on writing which she has never done. Over the course of the semester she keeps trying to learn more, she reads more books and articles, talks with colleagues in various disciplines who have succeeded, attends Writing Center retreats and workshops, keeps trying to learn more, tries to be patient with the changes she and her class incur. The next semester she sees that her students have become active participants in their learning rather than the passive recipients to knowledge she has had for years. She has even become creative and is now implementing multiple-draft assignments, peer response groups, student writing published in class books, and assessment of both process and product by writing portfolios.

She likes it and she thinks, that wasn't so hard to accomplish? What was so complicated about that? The professor has been initiated into the discourse community and is now ready to join the conversation.

Each of you has already done so much to bring your colleagues into the fold so to speak, into your Burkean parlor.

And not just your colleagues, but your entire student body, awakening in them a desire to write, to be a part of writing at your university. You have all worked hard to encourage your students to enjoy writing and to recognize it for the powerful tool it is; they are becoming engaged in specific disciplines and are developing a sense of scholarly belonging.

It is amazing for me to think that your organization is so young. November next will mark your 4th anniversary as a charter member of the IWCA. Each of you is dynamic, inventive, invested and passionate about your work and your association is definitely committed to fostering communication and providing a forum for concerns for writing centers in the region. And in less than 4 years you have hosted your second major conference. The IWCA has great reason to be proud to have you as part of their family.

At conferences like these each of us in a learner, me most especially and the wonderful sessions I attended yesterday have given me great insight into what you do and how unique your centers are. In studying your websites over the past few weeks I have learned a great deal about you and if you will bear with me I would like to brag about you to everyone:

Several of you have ongoing projects with colleagues across disciplines, thereby creating closer links between Writing Center tutorials and classroom teaching;

Several of your universities offer the capstone experience to seniors whereby they are integrating knowledge learned inside and outside the classroom in context of real world problems and settings and writing plays a role in their success.

Several of you have created small groups of students – writing fellows - from the same disciplines who meet over the course of the semester to provide oversight and guidance to keep group

members focused on achieving their goals. You are using peer review and participants are receiving constructive critiques of their writing in progress.

It also seems to me that your tutors do more than just tutor students: they are advocates for effective academic writing within the university – most likely are role models in their classes and across campus

Your tutors are able to discuss the technical, rhetorical, cognitive, and psychological issues that surround the writing process. Many of you work with students already channeled into their professional fields outside the humanities, where issues of writing may not be fully explored or discussed; often these students feel unprepared for the writing task ahead of them as they start larger projects. Because fruitful writing does not happen in a vacuum, but is socially situated, your tutors are nurturing an essential sense of community among undergrad and graduate students who otherwise would be writing in isolation (Gradin, et al. *Praxis*. Spring 2006, Volume 3 Issue 2: Beyond the Humanities).

Many of you are giving birth to a rich heritage of student publications, newspapers, and creative writing journals dedicated to showcasing the talents of emerging and established writers on your campus:

AUS has their student literary journal *Realm* and their bi-weekly student produced newspaper, *The Leopard*. Paula Haydan, from the College of the North Atlantic, and her Advanced Writing Center have just celebrated 29 writers with the 2nd edition of *Mosaic*. And Mark Hill and his colleagues at UAEU, Al-Ain showcase a Writer of the Month on their Writing Center website as well as sponsor short story and poetry contests.

What you advocate through your mission statements, your philosophies, is admirable:

The philosophy of the AUS Writing Center is to make students better learners by helping to guide them through the process of constructing knowledge, rather than presenting the knowledge to them. Here their mission highlights how they are taking the once passive recipient and guiding them to become active participants in their learning.

The University of Nizwa, Oman Writing Center is a learning support service designed to promote a dynamic writing culture for students. The center will aim to improve student English

writing composition skills, reinforce quality study habits, support critical thinking, and encourage creativity and innovation.

The AGU, Dubai Writing Center is dedicated to improving student composition and rhetoric regardless of their university discipline.

The versatility of your writing centers should remind your entire university community that your services and missions are not simply about papers, but rather about writers and the culture of writing. You are helping guarantee that your graduates have vigorous critical thinking skills, the proficiency to work successfully with people from varied backgrounds and cultures, and the ability to work in teams and across borders. Lest we not forget that we in our Writing Centers are central to the accomplishment of our university's mission.

Teaching writing is teaching a liberal art. Learning to write one's own texts, critically and creatively, is as much a liberal art as learning to read, critically and creatively, the texts of history, philosophy, or literature.. The liberal arts are, after all, about making sense of one's culture, making meaning from one's life. Reading teaches you what you don't already know; writing teaches you what to make of what you read and experience. Learning to write is the most direct way of learning to reflect; it is not the content, but the process of the liberal arts. Nowhere does such critical and creative engagement happen with more intensity, both individually and socially, than in an open-topic, research-driven, process-oriented, small-group-centered collaboration among student writers inside and outside of our writing centers (Fulwiler, University of Vermont).

My hat goes off to each of you –so much energy, so much expertise, such heartfelt commitment to your work.

Thank you.