PUNISHMENT AND POSSIBILITY:
REPRESENTING WRITING CENTERS,
1939-1970

There is perhaps no term more feared by those who work in and direct writing centers than remedial. After all, remedial teaching holds little cache among state legislators, who don’t want to fund it; academic disciplines, who are reluctant to recognize it as a legitimate intellectual enterprise; and students themselves, who don’t want to be told—yet again—that their learning has been incomplete or inadequate. Nevertheless, the stigma of remediation continues to shape writing center identity. Take, for example, the wording of a recent call for a journal issue dedicated to current writing center theory and practice: “Many centers are established initially as ‘remedial’ centers. How does the image of the writing center as a fix-it shop affect the work we are able to do?” (Ahern). As likely any writing center director can attest, despite extensive campus outreach—and a growing disciplinary presence—faculty colleagues will still pull you aside and whisper in harsh tones, “I told one of my students to go to your writing center, but I’m afraid it’s hopeless.”

Contemporary writing center directors resist this remedial label in a variety of ways. One method is to create a contrast between an imagined writing center past and a bright writing center future. For some, writing center history simply doesn’t exist, such as the 1985 statement that “once a rare phenomenon limited to a few innovative schools, the writing center or writing lab is now a common program in colleges and universities” (Harling-Smith, et al. 1), or, more recently, the claim that “if you look back at the history of writing centers, you will discover that few existed before the 1970s” (Bower, et al. 1). The absence of historical accounts also extends to book-length...
histories of the larger field of composition studies. In James Berlin’s *Rhetoric and Reality*, Robert Connors’s *Composition-Rhetoric*, and Sharon Crowley’s *Composition in the University: Historical and Polemical Essays*, one finds only the barest mention of writing centers, laboratories, or clinics, whether as a practice or as an intellectual endeavor. If history is “dredged up” at all, it is usually to point out the ways that early writing centers were solely remedial. One common fall guy is Robert Moore, who wrote in a 1950 *College English* article that “writing clinics and writing laboratories are becoming increasingly popular among American universities and colleges as remedial agencies for removing students’ deficiencies in composition” (388). Moore’s use of the R-word has made his article the example of early writing center scholarship in two recent book-length collections (Murphy and Law; Barnett and Blumner) and given rise to Stephen North’s charge in his highly influential 1984 article “The Idea of a Writing Center” that Moore’s thinking represented a “limited conception of what such places can do—the fix-it shop image” (436). Early writing center history, then, is best avoided, ignored, or consigned to an early, forgettable era when white-coated “clinicians” treated unfortunate students with endless grammar worksheets until they were “cured” of the malady of poor writing.

While this version of writing center history provides contemporary writing center directors some comfort that they’ve progressed considerably since those bad old days, it is only partially true. Certainly writing centers have long been associated with punishment for the under-prepared, and contemporary directors work hard to ensure that their centers serve a broad clientele and embody what we currently know about effective ways to teach writing. However, an examination of writing center representations in two composition journals, *College English* and *College Composition and Communication*, shows a competing identity that most contemporary writing center directors would likely welcome—the writing center as possibility, whether as a “safe haven” or as an alternative to misguided classroom practices. Still, the ways that this identity has often been squelched by the long-standing association between writing centers and punishment provides an important cautionary tale. From 1939 to 1970, the promise of writing centers had been constrained by working conditions in writing centers, by a reliance on graduate students and part-time staff, and by the ease with which remedial programs and writing centers were jettisoned when institutions decided to flex their muscles about “standards” and “excellence” in the late 1950s. As a result, the intellectual work of writing center studies—the building of a body of research and theory—received a relatively late start compared to composition studies, and it continues to struggle for acceptance.

For writing centers today the contrast between the center as punishment and the center as possibility defines day-to-day existence. As I show in what follows, this contrast also defines writing center history and can provide contemporary writing center directors a map of hazards to be avoided if they are to achieve the professional status for which they yearn.

**1939-1949: REPRESENTING “DIFFERENCE”**

Writing centers (or their precursors known as “writing clinics” and “writing laboratories”) have long been intertwined with the teaching of composition. As early as 1895, John Franklin Genung of Amherst College described teaching writing as “laboratory work” (174), and in the early 20th century many colleges utilized the one-to-one teaching of writing in one form or another. From 1939, when *College English* first appeared, to the 1949 launch of *College Composition and Communication*, authors frequently made reference to writing laboratories and clinics. For example, a 1940-41 NCTE survey of 292 institutions on “the organization of composition courses” reported that 34 used a writing “laboratory” and 58 claimed an English “clinic” (Grey, et al.).

One reason for the relative prevalence of writing centers was the dramatic increase in college enrollments, both throughout the 1930s (Levine) and following World War II (Berlin). Whether students were the children of urban immigrants in the 1930s or returning veterans in the 1940s, higher education found itself ill equipped to deal with this “new” type of student. As a result, the curricular focus was on general education and the creation of communications courses to address students’ lack of preparation in writing, speaking, reading, and listening (Berlin 96). This essentially skills-based approach led to the creation of clinics or laboratories for students to practice those skills under the guidance of an instructor. Another outcome was frequent hostility in *College English* accounts toward both under-prepared students and those consigned to work with them. However, beginning a pattern that would appear in each period to come, alongside the hostile accounts are those that offer writing center work as a true alternative to classroom practice—if not to the entire idea of first-year composition. It was the writing program versus the writing center, classroom composition versus one-to-one instruction, remediation versus reclamation.

Capturing the view of those who depicted the writing center as punishment, W. Alan Grove of Miami University of Ohio voiced a familiar refrain in the first volume of *College English* in 1939:

Like the professors, we, the younger, less experienced college English instructors have heard and continue to hear... that students
no longer know how to write, how to organize in essay form even their painfully immature conclusions, or, as the final crushing exhibition of incompetency, how to project on paper a modest paragraph without a number of blatant errors in sentence structure, punctuation, and grammar. (227)

At Grove’s institution, the solution was to create a required non-credit writing laboratory tied to the regular composition course for students who fell below a certain score on a placement exam. The work in the laboratory was primarily limited to the completion of drill-and-practice grammar/usage worksheets, which were then given to another student who dutifully graded the exercise and returned it to its “owner.” Given 75 students for each lab section and the expected boredom that would accompany such work, the instructor was, according to Grove, akin to the “circus ringmaster. To secure a total of forty-five minutes of drill in one ring he permits, on occasion, a total of fifteen minutes for recuperation in the other” (236). The result was that “class and instructor emerge, surprisingly convinced that the experience was ‘not so bad’” (236).

Alvin Fountain of North Carolina State took up this theme in his 1939 survey of engineering colleges nationwide. Breaking his article into sections titled “The Disease,” “Remedies,” and “Partial Diagnosis,” Fountain found writing laboratories and clinics in use at a variety of places, most for “special drill work.” Fountain’s attitude towards under-prepared students is best summed up by his lament about the open admissions policies of many state universities: “By removing all restrictions we have taken away from solid education one of its strongest motivations, exclusiveness” (318).

In one of the clearest examples of the writing laboratory as punishment, the “CC Laboratory” of the University of North Carolina literally marked students as delinquent: Faculty could attach to students’ final grade a “cc” (for “composition condition”), and students were then consigned to work in the writing laboratory until they were “able to write as well as the ‘average’ college student in America” (Bailey 146). At that point the “cc” was removed, and students were seemingly “cured” of their condition. As Elizabeth Boquet has noted about this lab, “the bodies of writers [were] thus publicly marked for their deficiencies and treated appropriately” (“Our Little Secret” 469).

The urge to punish students by consigning them to writing laboratories where they would complete rote grammar exercises is the legacy of higher education’s attitude toward the under-prepared (Rose) and has been recycled in each era’s literacy “crisis.” However, representations of writing laboratories as an alternative to the hostility of mainstream composition practices also appeared in *College English* during this period. For example, in 1940 Elbridge Colby described the writing laboratory at George Washington University as “similar to that of the average scientific laboratory, where the instructor gives personal guidance to individual work in process” (67-68). Designed as a supplement to composition classes, the GWU writing laboratory was also open to any student and was part of “a step toward close co-operation between the English and other departments of the university” (9) or, as is true for many contemporary writing centers, part of an overall writing-across-the-curriculum plan. Rather than completing graded drill-and-practice worksheets, a student would come to the lab with a draft of a paper, receive the instructor’s “general comments on the outline and on the development and scope of the subject,” and then continue to work on her or his essay in the lab, getting “specific direction and further aid if he [or she] needs it” (68). Colby described this writing laboratory as a “refuge,” “a convenient place where students may work continuously on their writing” (69). In short, the GWU writing laboratory achieved many of the theoretical, pedagogical, and programmatic goals most contemporary writing centers would hold.

Some researchers claimed that the writing laboratory not only acted as a student refuge but offered a superior alternative to required composition. These early “abolitionists” included Harold Scudder and Robert Webster of the University of New Hampshire, who reported that UNH “abolished its course in freshman composition and has adopted a new procedure to take its place” (492). After completing a diagnostic exam, roughly half of the incoming first-year class was consigned to work with “a freshman staff instructor, for tutorial, individual instruction in the elements of English grammar and composition” (494). Scudder and Webster also noted that this writing laboratory was “open to all students in the university, graduate and undergraduate, and the instructors in attendance were there to assist in any way possible the students who came” (497).

Similarly, Elizabeth Campbell of Park College in Missouri reported replacing first-year composition with a humanities survey course supported by a writing laboratory. As was true for other laboratories at the time, students worked on writing in progress as the instructor circulated around the room. One feature of this lab was the assistance of two undergraduate English majors—one of the first mentions of peer tutors. Campbell also noted that it was not necessarily the mechanics of English that were the focus of lab instruction; instead, students “learned to write not by the study of grammar and rhetoric but by practice in writing papers for a course whose subject matter is unlimited” (403).

While these *College English* representations demonstrated a great deal of promise for the writing laboratories and clinics, economic pressures held this promise in check—a condition that would repeat in each era. Simply put, writing laboratories were asked to make do with few resources. For example,
the writing laboratory at George Washington had space for 120 students and was staffed by one instructor at a time. In his account, Colby noted that the instructor “has to move, I will admit, to get around his-class!” (68). In addition, the teaching crew largely consisted of graduate students and staff instructors, a group without much institutional clout.

Nevertheless, many of the accounts offered in this era showed some degree of variation and an inkling of the possibilities for writing center work. These possibilities would get much wider exposure in the next era with the creation of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) and its journal, *College Composition and Communication*.⁶

1950-1958: REPRESENTING POSSIBILITY

In 1949 the first CCCC took place, and the energy and enthusiasm of this professional gathering extended to those working in writing centers. Workshops on “The Organization and Use of the Writing Laboratory” appeared during the first three CCCC’s, 1949 to 1951. In published accounts, the period 1950 to 1958 was a productive one for writing labs and clinics; references to them appear 25 times in the pages of *College English* and *College Composition and Communication* (compared to 10 articles appearing in *College English* in the previous 10-year period). Seven of these appearances occur in the form of CCCC workshop reports, and the other 18 are entire articles either devoted to the concept of a lab or clinic or referencing these entities in descriptions of larger composition programs. In terms of survey research, Moore noted in 1950 that 70% of the institutions he surveyed either had created a writing clinic or lab or were considering starting one (388), and Earl Sasser reported in 1952 that 36% of his survey respondents made “clinic service” available.⁷

Not all of these accounts trumpeted the possibilities of writing center work. The idea of writing center as punishment held firm, particularly in Moore’s “The Writing Clinic and the Writing Laboratory,” which appeared in *College English* in April 1950. Moore surveyed clinics and laboratories nationwide and noted that “most of them offer the service without a charge, accepting the handling of remedial composition problems as a necessary, if deplorable, part of the task of American colleges and universities” (393). Additional accounts of remediating under-prepared students through writing tutorials came from New York University’s “Booster System” (McCloskey and Hornstein), the University of Texas (Hudson), Florida State University (Stevenson), Purdue (Maize, “A Writing Laboratory”), Colgate (“Has English Zero” 75), and Tennessee (“Has English Zero” 89-90). Most of these accounts represented students in ways similar to that of Moore—a student was consigned to the English Laboratory at Texas until “in the opinion of the laboratory supervisor he has corrected his deficiencies” (Hudson 406). At Purdue, the writing laboratory was geared toward “retarded students” (Maize, “A Writing Laboratory”). At NYU, offering a slight glimmer of hope, the student or “laggard” was “treated not as an abnormality or a nuisance but as a significant social being whose ailment, it is hoped, is curable” (McCloskey and Hornstein 339). As I note above, such attitudes are firmly rooted in higher education’s distaste for students who come unprepared for college-level work. The underlying thinking was meritocratic, perhaps best expressed by Frank McCloskey and Lillian Hornstein at NYU:

The student is taught in an atmosphere of the utmost sympathy and patience, optimism and good spirits. If under such circumstances he cannot adjust himself to college, the faculty, in dismissing him, can feel satisfied that they have fulfilled the more than formal obligation which the granting of admission to the college creates, and, more broadly, that at least in the area of their responsibility the man has been given his birthright in a democracy—a full opportunity to grow and develop to the limit of his powers. (339)

That colleges would determine these “limits” based upon a set of cultural assumptions that privileged white, middle-class male culture over any other is a clear historical legacy.

However, as was true in the 1940s, not all accounts of writing clinics and laboratories were hostile and condescending. The descriptions of the first three CCCC workshops in *College Composition and Communication* display the diversity of writing center identity and the struggle against the remedial stigma. The account of the 1949 session (which appeared in 1950) notes five different types of writing laboratories based upon the reports of those in attendance, types that on the whole largely describe the contemporary world of writing centers: 1) the remedial laboratory, 2) a laboratory tied to first-year composition where attendance is optional, 3) a laboratory available to any student at the institution, 4) a laboratory that is tied to first-year composition where attendance is compulsory, and 5) a laboratory solely devoted to helping students pass “a standardized English test required by the college in lieu of a formal course in composition” (“The Organization and Use of the Writing Laboratory: The Report of Workshop No. 9A” 31).

In the next year, workshop conversation focused on “the problem of the remedial laboratory” (“Organization and Use of a Writing Laboratory: The Report of Workshop No. 9” 17). However, participants did not spend their time complaining about student error; instead, the politics of remedial writing laboratories—politics that imbue the world of contemporary writing centers—were discussed. In many of the comments, one can see participants

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At some institutions, writing laboratory pedagogy was not only offered to the under-prepared. At Indiana University, the Writing Laboratory gave "informal supplementary help for the great middle class of composition students, those who are doing only average work and want to improve" (Millet and Morton 38). At Brooklyn College, the "English Workshop Program" offered English faculty release time to meet one-to-one and in small groups with students who "come on their own time to learn something they need and want to know" (Ernst 33). At Western Michigan College, the Writing Laboratory was for honors students or those whose entrance exam scores exempted them from first-year writing. There "the students produce about twice as much writing as is done in a standard class" (Limpus 4).10

Perhaps the best theoretical justification for these practices came from an article far ahead of its time. Barriss Mills's "Writing as Process," which appeared in *College English* in 1953. Mills, of Purdue University and the chair of the NCTE College Section, lays out a treatise on the connection between classroom practices in first-year writing and contemporary thought in linguistics and psychology. Ultimately, Mills concludes, "some sort of laboratory approach seems to be the best method" (25) because it would "make possible a more or less continuous co-operation between student and teacher during all steps in the writing process" (25). Mills also presents grammar and usage instruction in the context of his "process" approach:

Problems of mechanics can best be solved in the midst of the process of actual writing; the student learns more about grammar and punctuation by solving particular usage problems as they arise, and with the teacher's help, than from "correcting" usages in his paper long after the writing has grown cold. (26)

Mills ends his essay with a call that says more than he perhaps realized about the challenges to understanding writing as a process and teaching writing as a system of continuous practice and feedback: "This kind of teaching will require more knowledge and imagination and ingenuity on the part of English teachers than has been expected of them in the past—perhaps more than we have any right to expect of people who are already overworked and poorly paid" (26). Because those working in writing laboratories and clinics were often staff members at the lowest rung of the employment hierarchy, they were not only the first fired when institutions began eliminating remedial programs in the late 1950s, but they were cut off from the funding, security, and position to stake their own claim in the emerging field of composition studies. Their conditions were barely conducive to survival, much less to
establishing writing center work as a viable pedagogical and intellectual endeavor. Thus, by the mid-1950s, these conditions squelched the possibilities of writing centers. In the accounts of CCCC’s workshops, the multi-faceted writing laboratory of the early 1950s dwindled quickly. By the 1953 account, writing laboratories were lumped in with a workshop on “Clinical Aids to Freshman English,” which included reading, writing, and speech clinics. After a year’s hiatus, the 1955 account of “Writing Clinics” offered several versions of such places, but each version was essentially tied to remediating the under-prepared. The final two workshop accounts, appearing in 1956 and 1958, fully establish the connection of writing center as punishment. In both, participants discussed “skills laboratories” for “the lower percentage of the entering groups of college students.” Such programs “can be justified either as good public relations and as an attempt to salvage students in the lower third, or as a method for draining off the poorer students who would inevitably drag down the level of regular class instruction” (“Skills Laboratories” 143).

The end of this period is marked by the appearance of James Ruoff’s 1958 College English satire of writing clinics, “The English Clinic at Flounder College.” While satire is, perhaps, an indication that writing clinics were an established presence, Ruoff’s tongue-in-cheek attack on one-to-one instruction displays a backlash of sorts, one that would well predict the disappearance of writing clinics as student demographics and institutional attitudes changed. The institution’s relationship to the writing clinic was uneasy at best, and Ruoff’s satire captures that discomfort in arguably humorous ways. As he writes, “In spite of its obvious superiority to outdated methods of teaching composition, the English Clinic concept will, I suspect, meet with fanatical opposition from waspish reactionaries who fire salvos of polemics at every progressive idea that appears in the field” (350). Ruoff was right. It would be another four years before any mention of writing clinics or laboratories would appear in College English, and it was Albert Kitzhaber’s finding that such places were “being abandoned” (477).

In 1958, readers of College Composition and Communication also saw George Wykoff’s offer of the Writing Laboratory as an option for “teaching maximum numbers with limited faculty” (76), and in an account of the previous year’s CCCC’s workshop on “Remedial English: Luxury or Necessity?” we learn once again that several institutions dropped remedial English and instead turned to a writing laboratory. However, such proposals were overwhelmed by an on-going discussion about completely abandoning remedial programs—including writing clinics and laboratories. Once the University of Illinois announced in 1956 a plan to drop its “sub-freshman, non-credit course in English fundamentals” (“CCCC Bulletin Board” 50), many institutions followed, taking advantage of the rise of the junior/community college system and funneling large numbers of under-prepared students into those less-expensive and more localized options. By 1960, the heyday was over; writing centers were few and far between, and those adjunct staff and temporary faculty who had worked in such places would have to wait for the Open Admissions era before the “modern” writing center would be created (Boquet, “Our Little Secret”; Carino, “Early Writing Centers”) and a disciplinary niche could be scratched out.

1960-1970: Representing Absence

By 1960, representations of writing centers had become rare sightings in the pages of College English and College Composition and Communication. During the 1960s, mentions of writing laboratories or centers occurred just 10 times in these two journals combined, compared to 7 times from 1950 to 1958 and 10 times in College English alone from 1939 to 1949. Until the early 1970s almost all of these were appearances in CCCC workshop reports or in “Staffroom Interchange” or “Departmental Memo” sections of College Composition and Communication and College English, respectively, sections devoted to brief accounts of a classroom or teaching technique with little room for analysis or theory. Thus, in a period when the discipline of composition studies was beginning to legitimize itself as an area of academic inquiry with a growing body of research and theory (Goggin 68), writing centers were largely the odd phenomenon, a stubbornly persistent reminder that some students were still underprepared for college writing and would need some form of remediation.

As I noted in the previous section, by the end of the 1950s remedial writing courses had been eliminated at many institutions. In a 1960 survey of 75 state colleges and universities nationwide, Cox, Canario, and Cypher note that “over half of the institutions have either discontinued, contemplate discontinuing or have never offered the remedial English course” (243). This trend continued throughout the 1960s, as described by Thomas Wilcox in his 1973 book on the state of college English teaching:

A 1960 survey conducted by the NCTE found that 55.6 percent of all four-year colleges and universities provided special instructions for students who were “deficient in their use of English.” By 1967 that number had decreased dramatically: only 27 percent, or less than half the previous number, continued to offer remedial English. (67)

Because writing clinics, labs, and centers had become closely tied to remedial programs—despite the evidence in the early 1950s of the proliferation of
such entities to serve all students—when remediation was dropped, so were writing centers. Cox, et al. note in 1960 that “seven schools [or 10% of those surveyed] offered remedial workshops or writing laboratories” (242), a precipitous decline from the 30% reported by Grey, et al. in 1940 and the 70% reported in 1950 by Moore.

Confirming this trend was Kitzhaber, reporting in College English on his landmark study of writing at Dartmouth College and his survey of writing requirements nationwide. He wrote that one of the noteworthy changes in first-year English at that point was

the widely advertised decline in the number of courses in remedial English, a decline that seems to be accelerating. In my survey, I found less than half of the colleges still offering such a course; several of these have, to my knowledge, dropped it this year and more will undoubtedly drop it next year. (476)

Kitzhaber closely aligned writing clinics with remedial coursework, noting that “at schools where the increase in quality of students has been marked, the writing clinics and laboratories are being abandoned, since students are seldom so poorly prepared as to require special remedial services of this sort” (477). Indeed, Kitzhaber seemed quite pleased with this trend, for in his efforts to intellectualize the practice of composition and create a respected academic discipline, he saw as a clear enemy the long-standing trend to focus the first-year course on English fundamentals, rather than “to convey a full-bodied theory of prose composition and to furnish suitable practice in applying this theory” (481). If writing laboratories and clinics were primarily about drill in English fundamentals, Kitzhaber and others invested in legitimizing composition as an academic discipline were glad to see them go.

As a further blow, in the 1960s writing centers suffered the brunt of the attitude that, for a time, higher education had been too “permissive” with under-prepared students. This sentiment is perhaps best captured in A. M. Tibbetts’s “A Short History of Dogma and Nonsense in the Composition Course.” Tibbetts, writing in College Composition and Communication about the 1950s, notes that

for the experimentally minded, it was the best of times. There were clinics, reading labs, writing labs, and speaking labs. A student could get his lisp removed at the speech clinic in the morning, and in the afternoon he might learn to read the Reader’s Digest faster and faster. . . . The Remedial students were the lucky ones; they got most of the attention. It was not a good time to be bright. (91)

Nevertheless, during the 1960s, infrequent accounts of writing centers—whether for remedial purposes or as an alternative method for teaching writing—did appear in College English and College Composition and Communication, again displaying the contrasts apparent in previous eras. For example, C. B. Bordwell reported in 1965 on the composition tutorial program in the University of Oregon’s “experimental Honors college.” The success of this program led to expansion “for upperclassmen and graduate students in other schools and departments” (563). It is also important to note that according to Bordwell’s account, this tutoring did not consist of grammar drills or editing. In fact, the practice sounds quite aligned with contemporary writing center and composition practice:

In no case does the tutor simply edit or rewrite the student’s work. He does, however, point out what he considers strengths and weaknesses and invites the student to think through the consequences of alternative linguistic choices and arrangements. The final decision always rests with the student and his subject-matter professor. (563)

Additional writing center accounts came from the University of Massachusetts, which used undergraduate English majors as tutors (Wright); San Fernando Valley State College, whose “writing skills laboratory” replaced “remedial English classes” and was staffed by “full-time and part-time members of the English Department” (Carlton 49); Kansas State College (McCloy and Hemmens); and Ohio Wesleyan University, where in a program reminiscent of North Carolina’s “CC Laboratory” (Bailey), students in any course could be marked with a “U” and assigned to a tutorial program “until [they] can write an essay of four or five hundred words on a topic of [their] own choice which impresses two members of the English department as being competent” (Whitted 41). Two CCCA's workshop reports also made mention of writing clinics or labs: a 1965 session. “New Approaches in Teaching Composition,” in which a participant from Baldwin-Wallace College declared that “writing laboratories are the best way to teach composition” (208), and a 1969 workshop, in which writing laboratories were back to acting as a warehouse for the under-prepared, being singled out as “the most workable solution . . . in a program of basic studies” (“Composition Courses for the Unprepared Freshman” 249).

These two workshop accounts echo the tension inherent in the history, practice, and politics of writing centers: the possibilities embodied by a center that was an effective, if not superior, way to teach composition to any student versus the stigma attached to a center that was a compulsory, prison-like
setting for the least prepared students or the “other” that higher education has greeted with a mix of disdain and resignation. Ironic, of course, is the long-standing identification of required first-year composition courses as the crucible for these tensions when it is more likely writing clinics and labs that were both championed and despised (and, as I have shown, eliminated for awhile).

One other factor in the disappearance of writing centers was a new reliance on technology to deal with under-prepared students. As described by Harrison Hoblitzelle in 1967, “Remedial students, of whom there are still plenty, are being integrated into regular sections and furnished with special exercises on an individual basis by means of a programmed text (e.g., Blumenthal’s 3200)” (596). Taking a cue from behavioral psychology, particularly the work of B. F. Skinner, English departments increasingly looked for technological solutions to the persistent difficulty of students’ poor grasp of sentence-level grammar (Lerner, “Drill Pads”). Programmed texts and their ilk were cheaper, more “student-centered,” and more “scientific” than a writing clinic or laboratory. And if students continued in their grammatical slovenliness, an institution could be sure, at least, that it had tried to deal with the problem in an ardent and “modern” way.

Thus, this period in writing center history mirrors the previous ones in the tension between writing centers as composition alternative and writing centers as remedial warehouses. However, during this time increasingly rich academic conversations were taking place in composition studies, and a growing body of research and theory was being published, giving rise to and following those conversations. It would not be until the mid-to-late 1970s that writing center representations would recapture the diversity that had appeared 20 years earlier and when they themselves could be deemed worthy of research and scholarship. As the Open Admissions era dawned and increasing numbers of under-prepared students showed up on the nation’s campuses, writing centers were offered yet again as an effective, if not alternative, means of teaching writing (Boquet “Our Little Secret”; Carino, “Early Writing Centers”).

REPRESENTATIONS RECONSIDERED

The lessons learned from 1939 to 1970 are that writing centers—without the institutional capital of course credits or department status and often dependent upon contingent labor—are either easily ignored or else easily eliminated when they are an unfortunate reminder of many students’ lack of preparation. Yet at the same time, the promise of such sites stubbornly persists, providing an energy that would grow in the late 1970s and early 1980s into an academic field with dedicated publications, conferences, and a professional association.

This is not to say that the future of writing centers is necessarily secure. The problems of institutional powerlessness continue, and while writing center scholarship tags along with its older sibling, composition studies, the hierarchy between the two is clear. The flow of theory and research is almost always unidimensional: Work that appears in The Writing Center Journal, The Writing Lab Newsletter, or in anthologies of writing center scholarship frequently cite work appearing in composition studies’ journals and books, but the converse is rarely found. It is also quite rare for someone to go from the position of a writing program administrator to that of writing center director, the former more often being fully enfranchised tenure-track faculty members while the latter roles continue to be filled by contingent, non-tenure-track staff.

This story, then, is cautionary at best. While some writers decry the potential harm of constituting the writing center field as an academic discipline (see, for example, George and Grimm; Riley; Vandenbarg), writing center history reminds us of the costs of a lack of disciplinarity and status. While the field’s sensitivity to the remedial stigma is perhaps warranted, institutional and academic clout does not come from denial. Instead, the field’s history is worth studying and remembering if writing centers in the future are to continue to show the possibilities that have been offered for the past 60-plus years.14

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NOTES

1 The work of Elizabeth Boquet (“Our Little Secret”) and Peter Carino (“Early Writing Centers”; “Open Admissions”) provides an exception to the absence of historical accounts about writing centers.

2 For a history of Moore and his University of Illinois Writing Clinic, see Lerner, “Searching.”

3 Writing laboratories and clinics did come up regularly in the literature previous to 1939, particularly in English Journal and its college edition, which started in 1928. However, I follow Maureen Daly Goggin in seeing the discipline of composition studies—and thus writing centers as one component of that discipline—emerging with the appearance of journals devoted primarily to that work.


5 See Stanley for a 1943 account of the Iowa State Writing Laboratory, the oldest continually run writing laboratory in the country. See also Kelly for a history of that laboratory.
For a history of CCC, see Phillips, Greenburg, and Gibson.

For an in-depth examination of the writing center landscape circa 1953, see Shouse.

One contemporary aspect to many accounts of this period was the use of undergraduate peers to provide feedback to student writers. See Drake and Maize ("The Partner Method") on the use of peer tutoring at the United States Air Force officers school. See also Maize ("A Writing Laboratory") for the use of peer tutors in developmental writing.

J. Hooper Wise first published an account of the University of Florida Writing Laboratory in 1939 in English Journal. The two descriptions 14 years apart are nearly identical.

Given accounts of writing laboratories for honors students, it is easy to conclude that a good deal of the professorate simply never read what appeared in the journals they were publishing in. For instance, exactly one year after the description of Western Michigan's writing lab for honors students, Herbert Creek summed up these developments by noting that "writing clinics for feeble students were established here and there" (9).

The "clinical" approach of the 1950s was a marriage of emerging technologies, such as the tachistoscope for reading and the opaque projector for writing ("Clinical Aids to Freshman English"), along with a view of writing as the mastery of a discrete set of skills (Rose). For example, some institutions, such as Case Western Reserve, created a "College Spelling Clinic" as a "component to add to the speech, hearing, and reading improvement clinics, already established and widely known for their work" (McEwen 216).

The transfer of remedial English from colleges and universities to community colleges would perhaps have given rise to many writing laboratories created at those latter sites. However, two-year institutions had long worked with such students and had long created classroom options for remedial instruction (Boquet, Personal Communication). Thus, during 1955 to 1960, when accounts of writing laboratories dwindled in the pages of College English and CCC, only two accounts appeared in the Junior College Journal (Dubs; Kastner), and both mentioned writing laboratories only in passing.

One obvious irony of the title of this 1965 workshop is that the writing labs and clinics as a "new approach" had been present for more than 35 years, going back at least to Warner Taylor's 1929 survey report that six institutions had created English "clinics." Another irony is that this workshop was chaired by Robert Moore, then the composition director at George Washington University and the same Moore who in 1950 deemed labs "necessary, if deplorable" (393).

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