

The De-centered Center: Embracing a Space that is Nowhere and Everywhere

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Introduction

I am the director of a de-centered writing center. A de-centered writing center is very much what it sounds like: quite literally, it has no actual location, no one space on campus that anyone can point to and say, “that’s the writing center.” It was an idea born out of necessity, but it’s one that I think poses a challenge and an answer to the resource, technology, and space problems many communication center directors—who share many of the same challenges a writing center director does—face.

While much of my experience is born out of running a writing center, which at my relatively small university is also the site where students come for assistance with non-written communication assignments, the argument I make—that portable technology now allows us to operate face-to-face tutoring sessions in any space—is, I believe, applicable to all sites which strive to help students with the basic and advanced tenets of communication in all forms.

Communication centers and writing centers have a lot in common; while the final medium for delivery is different, scholarship on communication centers discuss a lot of the same pedagogical concerns as that on writing centers. For example, in “Critical Perspectives on Group Consultations at Communication Centers: Communication Accommodation Theory, Immediacy, and Persuasion,” Bryant, Cuny, and Davidson (2016) address the basic concerns communication center tutors need to be trained to address. While the argument

is rooted in Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), the article addresses both tutor training as well as the focus of sessions in much of the same terms that tutor training for writing centers do. It speaks to the ways in which a tutor can make students comfortable coming to them (pp. 34-36) in many of the same terms texts like Ryan and Zimmerman’s (2009) *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors* do. Throughout their article, Bryant, Cuny, and Davidson discuss style, ethos, audience, persuasion, organization and other rhetorical topics that are the focus of writing center appointments as well. They even discuss how appointments end in much the same terms writing center tutors are taught to end their sessions. The conclusion Bryant, Cuny, and Davidson reach is focused on the rhetorical situation: “Ultimately, it does not matter what area of study is being supported, peer educators who enter into meaningful dialogue (with their student peers) need a clear understanding of the motivations behind people’s communicative acts” (p. 50).

Many assignments students bring to centers are no longer simply written or oral; communication in general is increasingly multimodal; both written texts and speeches (or other oral communicative acts) are often expected to incorporate some sort of visual (and even aural) text be it displayed through PowerPoint, Prezi, or some other software. Communication centers, as I discuss below, are increasingly called on to assist students with these multimodal texts and to help

them think about how the aural and the visual work together with the primary text. Therefore, it makes sense that a university might have one center designed to address all of these needs. Certainly at my university, which is relatively small, there is only space and money for one center and that one tutoring space needs to be adept at helping students with all of these tasks—and I would assume that many universities are in this same position of needing one center which can serve multiple communication needs. That writing and speaking would be attended to in one center isn't a new idea; in "The Combined Centers Approach," Maugh (2012) writes about her combined center stating, "We did not want to create a center that offered tutoring in speaking and writing, rather we strove to provide universalized tutoring related to communication concepts" (p. 177). The work of Bryant et al and Maugh, as well as other scholarship in both fields, demonstrates that while the medium for delivery is different, writing centers and communication centers share many of the same goals and the same kinds of operational challenges. What I want to argue here is that flexible use of public spaces and portable technology can address and, perhaps, ultimately solve many of the space and material challenges all centers face.

The Problem

My university, a small, liberal arts school, markets itself as a "boutique" university; on the academic side, we have developed many services meant to cater to students' personal needs and struggles. We're not unique in our desire to provide these services to students. Given the competitive market and political pressure to prove the value of a campus-bound education, many universities are creating

more personalized academic services for students. My university wants to be a leader in this movement. But, all of these academic services require funding and space; when I was asked to take over the writing center, I asked for my piece of the funding and space pie. I got much of the funding, but none of the space.

Not only did I not get the larger space I asked for, but the writing center was booted out of the tiny corner it once occupied in the library. I had a few days until the new school year started, ten eager tutors, and nowhere to send students to meet with them.

What has happened since that moment is an example of theory following practice. I began with the necessity of creative problem solving brought about the reality of material conditions and the looming deadline of opening day, and then underwent a process of more carefully thinking through what works and what doesn't. This has brought me to a place where I have theory to justify my choices as well as practical experience that allows me to continue on with my de-centered center and to feel good about that choice.

My university has expanded quite a bit in the last decade; while we're still small, we've gone from a school with a little more than 1,000 undergraduates to one with close to 5,000 and along with expanding the student population, there's been a lot of building as well. All the buildings which have gone up have large foyers with gorgeously appointed lobbies filled with lovely furniture and tables. They are intended to impress—and they are impressive. They are also largely unused: few people hang out in these lobbies. Students and professors pass through on their way to a classroom or an office, but rarely do they linger. When asked what I was going to do for space, I jokingly

remarked to a colleague that I was going to set up shop in the School of Communication's lobby and see how long it took anyone to notice I was there. It started as a joke—but then I thought about it for a few minutes: there are many lobbies—and other unused spaces—like the one in the School of Communication and students pass through them all day long. Why couldn't they stop there for an hour to meet with a tutor? I developed my motto for the year: if I can't be anywhere, I'm going to be everywhere. All I needed was technology to make that happen—and, I decided, that technology was iPads.

In a matter of about 24 hours, the Writing Center, using iPads, apps and an online scheduling program¹, became a spaceless, face-to-face service which could be located in any public area on campus. Of the five meeting places I chose, four easily allow tutors and students to move to a quieter space in case the student needs to work on a presentation or requires privacy². A center can be anywhere—what I've come to realize is that the space doesn't matter.

Considerations of Space and Place

Asserting that the space doesn't matter flies in the face of much research on writing centers as well as research on communication centers that discuss space or provide narrative descriptions of these centers. Space and resources are significant material concerns and, although it sometimes feels un-academic, they're the focus of a lot of conversations about what goes into making a center successful.

Almost all research on writing centers that discuss space describe that space as part and parcel to daily operations, tutor productivity and client satisfaction. As McKinney (2013) argues in *Peripheral Visions for Writing Centers*, there's a master narrative of what a writing center is and what it does.

McKinney devotes an entire chapter of her book to the narrative about writing center space. She argues:

Of all the pieces of the writing center grand narrative, I think the idea that a writing center is—and should be—a cozy, homey, comfortable, family-like place is perhaps the most firmly entrenched. [...] Specifically, descriptions of writing center spaces often mention round tables, art, plants, couches, and coffee pots with such frequency that these objects almost become iconic.” (pp. 20-21)

McKinney argues that part of the motivation behind creating writing center spaces that look a particular way—often characterized as homey or comfortable—“reveals an effort to construct a space different from classrooms and other impersonal, institutional space” (p. 22). She reads many institutions' descriptions of their writing centers and notes that they are connecting their descriptions of their place and the objects in them with adjectives meant to fit into the narrative of the kind space a writing center should be: “soft, calming, welcoming, comfortable, attractive, familiar, non-threatening, and friendly” (p. 23), a direct contrast to the way institutional spaces like classrooms or faculty offices are described. McKinney's project is largely to break down

¹ I use WOnline which was initially created to serve Writing Centers, but since it's essentially an appointment scheduler, it could be used in any tutoring context.

² The fifth space is in our student center outside of a Starbucks, and doesn't have an easily accessible

private space to move to. But, this could certainly be addressed by advising students to choose a different location depending on their needs.

this master narrative, arguing that this master narrative is causing writing centers to be created with a mythical ideal rather than the practical use of the space in mind. “For example, it is one thing to have a coffee pot, it is another to have a coffee pot that is so grimy that no one uses it and cleaning it becomes a source of tension amongst tutors” (p. 29). Scholarship on communication centers also focuses on the space as part of the ethos of the place. Writing about the Noel Studio for Academic Creativity at Eastern Kentucky University in their chapter “Communication Center Ethos: Remediating Space, Encouraging Collaboration,” Carpenter and Apostel (2012) stated that the, “space encourages fruitful collaboration and beneficial feedback” (p. 165), arguing, “that space and ethos are inherently connected [...]” and “the communication center should also fulfill the need for a safe, collaborative environment” (p. 166). Carpenter and Apostel are arguing for the need for a particular kind of dynamic space in which to situate an effective communication center, the opposite of what I’m arguing here. However, what I want to point out is that what McKinney and Carpenter and Apostel have in common is a focus on the way in which we tend to see space as integral to fulfilling both the practical and emotional needs of students. But, I want to suggest (echoing a bit of McKinney’s argument, but in a different way) is that this narrative is both impractical and unnecessary.

McKinney’s text and Carpenter and Apostel’s chapter stress different considerations; McKinney is much more focused on the accoutrements that are often incorporated into centers while Carpenter and Apostel focus on technology and creating separate spaces for different parts of the composing process. Offering coffee is a nice idea; but does the coffee pot function in the way we intend? And, creating the ideal

space for each activity involved from invention to presentation has an appeal. But, what I want to ask is what does a space actually need to be effective for a tutoring session? I think the answer is “not much.” And, certainly not as much as scholarship suggests.

However, as much scholarship suggests, I do think convenience is a consideration for a center, so the buildings I’ve chosen as possible locations for students to meet with tutors are all located closer to the middle of campus, in the paths students tend to travel and in buildings that house majors and schools other than English and other humanities disciplines. Dechert, Richards, Zawacki, and Giraud (2014) emphasize centrality in their article, “Exploring the Learning Commons,” an article about creating a Learning Commons which includes a writing center. Centrality is noted as a key benefit they found in moving their writing center into the library’s Learning Commons. Despite their concerns about what the change in physical location might mean, the new, central location of the writing center led to increased traffic. Additionally, moving their writing center out of the English department and into the library “had the effect of making the center less an English resource and more a campus resource” (p. 127).

Beyond the convenience of being centrally located, that these centers be seen as a resource which can serve all students and faculty is a message I am trying to send as well; it’s a critical part of my work to grow and improve my writing center and this centrality would be equally critical to a communication center which also seeks to serve the whole campus and not be discipline specific. One of my reasons for placing tutors out in the open spaces of buildings that house programs and amenities other than English and the humanities and

books is that placing tutors in these buildings suggests, in a visible way, the intersections I am trying to create. Communication of any kind is an interdisciplinary activity, ubiquitous across the university. Those who work in centers of any kind know this; I want students and faculty to be able to see it as well. What started out as a convenient choice based on which buildings were newest—and thus had the biggest and best lobbies with chairs, tables, sofas and other versatile furniture—has become not just a practical choice, but one based in theory that asserts we need to change, at least in part, the narrative that characterizes a center, what it does, and which students it serves.

Ideally, a center that focuses on any kind of communication is a place where students go to learn how to engage in the composition process and make that process work for them, and to grow as writers, speakers, and communicators. Every discipline on our campus assigns writing and presentations at some point in the curriculum and at every level. If we didn't think all communication skills were important, it wouldn't be such a primary part of assessment. Speaking and writing are important pedagogical tools, though not necessarily one that every professor on campus is well versed in teaching. But even in courses where the subject matter is going to be assessed through a presentation or a paper, how to communicate effectively is often a peripheral conversation, one that can be taken up in a more specific and focused way outside the classroom, in communication centers.

Part of what I love about the de-centered center being everywhere is the visibility; tutoring is going on out in the open, so students walk by and see their friends or people they recognize from a class being tutored. Since that work of composing

is such an integral part of the university, the message of the de-centered center is that it can, and should, happen anywhere and everywhere. As all writers and speakers—including professional ones—know, composing, whether for the page or for oral presentation, can be a struggle; working with a tutor can be a pleasantly helpful activity to help mitigate that struggle. Often times, what students struggle with aren't the remedial skills of grammar or basic organization; the hard work is in coming up with an idea that feels original or finding research that gives a broad sense of the conversation surrounding a topic, tailoring the material for the intended audience, or presenting it in an appropriate style. These are the building blocks everyone must use for any project, no matter the genre or medium. I agree with Carpenter and Apostel's premise that the ethos of the center is important to encouraging students to see centers as a collaborative and productive space. However, I would argue that our considerations for how a space can do that are different—and one of the considerations I want to stress, is the public nature of communication that spaceless centers put out in the open.

Technological Considerations

The increasing sophistication of technology as well as its ubiquitousness in the workplace has prompted many universities and professors to create multimodal assignments that develop these skills. Increasingly, students are coming to centers with projects—written and oral—that require the rhetorically savvy use of images and sound. The more regular incorporation of multimodal elements into class assignments has prompted a call in texts such as the edited collection *Multiliteracy Centers: Writing Center Work*,

New Media and Multimodal Rhetoric for multiliteracy centers: centers that can offer feedback on not only traditional texts but a variety of media and mediated texts as well. Part of what Sheridan's (2010) introduction to the collection highlights is the way in which one mode of communication is often not enough anymore:

Salient among the many changes currently transpiring is the increasing reliance on the integration of multiple semiotic components that span across aural, visual, and verbal modes: written words, spoken words, music, still images, moving images, charts, graphs, illustrations, animations, layout schemes, navigation schemes, color, ambient noises, and so on. (pp. 1-2)

Sheridan argues that we need to be able to keep up with the multimodal requirements students are now being asked to navigate in order to remain effective. An ideal multiliteracy center would need to "invest in the technological recourses that citizens as media producers increasingly exploit" (p. 8), technologies I won't list in full, but which, for Sheridan, include items such as external hard drives, DVD burners, and a library of print resources. His vision of the ideal center is, like many visions, tied to the space it would inhabit. While I think he is absolutely correct in asserting that centers have to be able to work with the increasingly multimodal way in which we compose, I disagree that the space is integral to housing the technology we need to tutor. His 2010 list of what a multiliteracy center would possess is extensive, but it seems to me that two of the three resources I've listed above demonstrate how, in just a few years, advances in technology have already made the space requirement obsolete. Between virtual drives and the cloud, actual external hard drives seem unnecessary; students who

don't have a cloud account can email their work to themselves or, with even more ease, upload their work to Google Drive (a nice option since this will also allow them to easily share and collaborate on their work with others if desired). They can use a jump drive if they want to keep their work off the networks for a while. The library, a universal feature of college campuses, also houses print resources and it seems unnecessary to duplicate those holdings in a center. While there are some resources that are helpful for tutors to have immediately on-hand (grammar and citation guides, for example), those are largely available online (or, in apps). No need for the print version, especially when an added bonus of sharing an online resource with a client is that that client leaves knowing how to access that resource from anywhere with an internet connection. My question for Sheridan, and others who have made similar arguments about what a multiliteracy center needs to house, is why the need for redundancy? In "Planning for Hypertexts in the Writing Center... or Not", Pemberton (2003) states, "Ultimately, we have to ask ourselves whether it is really the writing center's responsibility to be all things to all people. There will always be more to learn. There will always be new groups making demands on our time and our resources in ways we haven't yet planned for." (p. 21). I agree with Pemberton's fundamental premise: why does such a center need to be all resources for all students, especially when those resources are housed in other places?

Put another way, shouldn't the focus of what a center does be more on the appropriate rhetorical uses of the technology rather than teaching the skills to use that technology? As Moreau and Normand (2012) conclude about the role of communication centers and technology, "[a]ccustomed to digital communication in

their social lives, Millennials can be proficient at using technology to create multimedia messages. However as these students transition into college, they will need support transferring their social technical acumen to the academic environment” (p. 246). In other words, our students largely have the basic skills to manipulate the technology; what they need help with is applying those skills to the rhetorical situation in academically savvy ways.

In her chapter “The New Media Revolution: Multiple Models for Multiliteracies,” McKinney (2010) describes the two paths that writing centers—and I would add communication centers—seem to have as options; she differentiates them as an all-in-one model (AIO) or not all-in-one. An AIO model has the resources (both equipment and personnel) to address “functional, critical, and rhetorical” technological literacies (p. 209). This means that writing center staff can both address the merits of the work as well as teach students how to use the technology necessary to create a multimodal project. McKinney’s argument is one that waivers back and forth, seeing the merits of being an AIO as well as the practical limitations of AIO as a universal model. In the end, McKinney concludes that no one model can serve every center, that our decisions about what an individual center looks like and the services it provides are determined largely by the context in which it is situated, though she does seem to lean towards the AIO model when she argues that in her experience “teaching multimodal texts, web, and document design to this generation reveals that the technocompetency of this generation is decidedly mixed. (Why would we need multiliteracy centers if it were not?)” (p. 214)

While I understand McKinney’s argument for the benefits of an AIO model, I want to take the position that a center shouldn’t be the place students come to find the tools or skills lessons they need to work on a project and, thus lean more towards her reasons against an AIO model. There are lots of practical reasons for this, not the least of which is budget (something McKinney addresses in her chapter as one reason for not implementing an AIO model). But, there are also pedagogical reasons, for me, to resist the AIO model. One of McKinney’s arguments in favor of the AIO model is that functional literacy can be part and parcel to the rhetorical literacy required to create a sound product. She uses as her example the e-portfolios the education program requires as part of its licensure check list; the template for those portfolios is, in her words, “poorly designed” and “it does not take advantage of the possibilities of the genre” (p. 216). Her conclusion: “The lesson in this for me is that if we are unwilling to support functional literacy, someone else probably will. This is potentially a good thing: functional literacy skills should be encouraged in both classroom spaces and nonclassroom services. But if we are not willing or able to support functional literacy, we cannot really complain about how others do it” (p. 217).

McKinney uses two different terms here: technocompetency and technical literacy. For me, the distinction between the two is important to parsing out what centers should be responsible for when it comes to technology; I read these two terms as the difference between proficiency utilizing software versus understanding the rhetorical power of multimodal elements incorporated into a project. Fundamentally, I want to argue that the latter is something all centers should be concerned with, while the former is the purview of others.

For me, the distinction between technocompetency and technological literacy a natural outgrowth of a “problem” centers already face: we have to help students with the assignments they are given whether or not we like the way they were presented, the objectives they emphasize, or the rubric that is going to be used to grade them. Tutors don’t call individual professors and complain about the assignments clients are working on; they adapt their session to help the client best address the task that was assigned. Part of what any center does is help clients manage the rhetorical situation; utilizing the technocompetency the class has provided for is one part of that rhetorical situation. Providing access to the technology necessary to create that project belongs to others, not a writing or communication center. It can’t be all resources for all people. But, it can be the best resource it’s intended to be—and what it’s intended to be is a place to engage in the process of inventing, composing, and editing written and spoken texts.

Why iPads (or Tablets)?

That said, I recognize that a center can’t function without any technology given the multimodal nature of communication I’ve been discussing. But, I believe the technology necessary is minimal; in my case, that technology that makes the de-centered center possible is iPads. It’s not so much iPad the brand, specifically, that makes this possible, but the tablet and app

technology in general³. There are apps that allow tablets to become reception desks, scanners, schedulers, video recorders and players, grammar primers and more. The iPads are portable offices—and because I have them all linked to one iTunes account that I can access on my own iPad, they allow me to be the “big brother” in a way that is both effective and a little scary⁴. I’m not the micro-management type—but I could be if I wanted to, and I could manage that without ever laying eyes on my tutors. We are all still reliant on space, at least in part, because of preconceived notions of needing that space to house materials we think essential to tutoring. iPads, and other tablets, have apps which perform most functions a center needs, and requires only the space they take up in a bag. Purchasing a relatively inexpensive office package allows tablets to operate Word, Excel, and other office suite software. Platforms like Google Docs (or, online scheduling programs which allow documents to be uploaded when making an appointment) can allow documents to be shared with tutors before an appointment (useful for students who don’t have a laptop to bring with them to an appointment). There are apps for programs like PowerPoint and for online presentation platforms like Prezi as well. The iPad comes with the Safari browser (other browsers can be added)—and it’s hard to imagine any college campus today that doesn’t have a wireless network established. There are apps for the more complicated needs as well—Genius Scan allows any iPad to become a

³ I really don’t mean to be a salesperson for iPad; it happens to be the device I’m most familiar with and the brand my university provides, all tablets have these capabilities.

⁴ Linking the iPads together and enabling the location services means that I can monitor where all my tutors are at any given moment (provided they have their iPads with them) as well as what websites and apps

are being accessed and used. In practice, I don’t really do this—I have neither time nor cause to be a vigilant spy; my tutors are all really good students who are where they are supposed to be and doing what they are supposed to be doing when on the clock. However, that capability does exist.

scanner, turning whatever it scans into a PDF file. Put that PDF into iAnnotate, and a student or tutor can write on that document or record an audio file of a discussion about that document. These devices are equipped to act as cameras which can be used to record a practice presentation for later discussion. Tablets can also become editing bays (if students or tutors want to actually edit media during an appointment). In a more practical sense, the fact that tablets can record and edit, also means that they can play any media incorporated into projects. For presentations, small add-ons like portable projectors can be used for practicing with those multimodal elements projected on an empty wall. The point is this: I accept arguments (Inman, 2010; Kennedy, 2013; Sheridan & Iman, 2010) that education needs to actively keep up with the fast pace of developing technology. What I don't agree with is that there is an inherent link between technology and space. I especially don't agree with it when it comes to discussing the space a center needs.

Conclusion

In "Shaping the Future: Writing Centers as Creative Multimodal Spaces," Carpenter (2016) writes:

I would like to see a future shaped by new ways of multimodal thinking, new ways of designing spaces to respond to complex and dynamic consultation practices, and reframing media as composing and thinking opportunities that we shape for our students and faculty. [...] It's the perfect time to think about the future of writing centers: the "new media, new spaces, and all the ways writing centers work." (pp. 72-73)

I would like to echo Carpenter's call, but with a different focus. Spaceless centers and portable technology are one way to offer new ways of working, ones that aren't shaped by the old spaces and material concerns we often have to fit into. They offer us a way to change the ethos of communication centers, placing them out in the open, moving them from dark corners and basements into the dynamic spaces of the university and tying them directly to the academic conversations we hope are happening both in and out of our classrooms. I realize that not all centers can or want to be de-centered. But, I would encourage us to think about what the spaceless center brings into focus: what these centers have always done best is provide sounding boards for invention, motivators for getting past a block in the process, tutors for grammar and citation, and reviewers for drafts from all student and faculty across campus. Spacelessness and paring down the materials we use in that process is one way of highlighting that and bringing it out into the open. As communication becomes more technology laden and more multimodal, centers should be looking for ways to continue to highlight and focus on what we do best.

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