

JORDANA GARBATI

Wilfrid Laurier University

BOBA SAMUELS

Independent Scholar

ANALYZING STORIES FROM CANADIAN ACADEMIC WRITING INSTRUCTORS: A COLLABORATIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

ABSTRACT. Garbati Jordana, Samuels Boba, *Analyzing Stories from Canadian Academic Writing Instructors: A Collaborative Autoethnography* [Analiza opowiadań kanadyjskich nauczycieli pisania akademickiego: zbiorowa autoetnografia]. *Studia Edukacyjne* nr 38, 2016, Poznań 2016, pp. 331-345. Adam Mickiewicz University Press. ISBN 978-83-232-3013-7. ISSN 1233-6688. DOI: 10.14746/se.2016.38.20

Writing instruction in Canadian universities takes a variety of forms. While there are few formal departments for writing studies, many institutions do have a writing centre – a place that offers writing instruction to varying degrees. The writing centre may be housed within a department, a library, or within a student services unit. Its position within a university may indicate the degree to which writing is valued by the administrative body. The goal of our paper is to share insights into the ways that writing professionals perceive, work in, and adapt to current demands for writing instruction in higher education.

Using a collaborative ethnographic approach, three scholars at different career stages explore their experiences with writing centre work. Using data consisting of individually written reflections, our analysis revealed four major themes: (a) initial experience with writing centres, (b) community, (c) frustrations and tensions at work, and (d) mentorship. In this paper, we discuss our findings within the framework of positioning theory in order to understand how we position ourselves as scholars, mentors, and educators, and how we are positioned by others within the fields of writing studies and higher education. This study raises awareness about the value of writing centre professionals' contributions, the place of mentorship within higher education, and the support required for continued writing centre work.

Key words: academic writing, writing centre, autoethnography, positioning theory

Providing support to university students as they learn to write in the academy is the responsibility of a variety of informal or formal institutional units, depending on the country and university in question (see Thaiss, 2010 for an international overview of writing programming, and Russell, 2002 for a history of the development of American writing instruction). These institutional units range from individual professors within the disciplines to academic departments, student support services, and a wide variety of credit-bearing writing courses. Courses may include first-year composition, language-specific courses (e.g., English-as-a-Second-Language), discipline-specific courses (e.g., writing for biology), courses in rhetoric or oral communication, and genre-specific writing courses (e.g., grant writing for graduate students). Complicating matters, universities may offer a range of overlapping supports in either systematic or haphazard fashion.

In this paper, we explore the experiences of three writing instructors working in Canadian writing centres – a typical student writing support unit available in North American universities. Using our own stories as data, and recognizing that we each represent instructors at different stages of career progression in universities with different writing support programming, we examine the personal and administrative challenges we face as we teach university students to write effectively. We then use positioning theory¹ to examine how our experiences are shaped by institutional and social forces. In telling and analyzing our stories, our goal is to contribute insights into the ways that writing professionals in faculty and non-faculty positions perceive, work in, and adapt to current exigencies in university educational contexts.

Writing Instruction in Canada

In traditional Canadian universities, writing instruction for students has yet to find a home.² While in some institutions writing instruction falls under the direction of the English Department, in other universities writing courses are grouped together in programs that may be housed in stand-alone Writing Departments or are affiliated with other departments, most often in the Faculty of Arts (e.g., Modern Languages or Communications departments). In other institutions, no formal writing courses exist, and writ-

¹ R. Harré, L. van Langenhove, *Positioning theory*, Oxford 1999, UK.

² R. Hunt, *Writing under the curriculum. Afterword/response*, [in:] *Writing centres, writing seminars, writing culture: Writing instruction in Anglo-Canadian universities*, Eds. H. Graves, R. Graves, Winnipeg, Manitoba 2006.

ing instruction is left to individual faculty members within their disciplines. Practices are varied across the country.

Likewise, where Canadian university writing centres exist, they demonstrate various organizational forms. What they typically have in common is a core tutoring function in which individual students bring their writing assignments for feedback from a writing expert.³ These writing centres may be part of an academic faculty or department (e.g., an Engineering Writing Centre), or they may be paired with other student support services such as mathematics support centres and study skills centres. Most recently, the creation of a central “learning commons” is a popular variant: an institutional unit in which a number of support services are housed together, including writing tutoring, learning strategies, subject matter tutoring, and library support. Writing centres are often staffed with a variety of professional and student employees, including undergraduate student volunteers, undergraduate and graduate student paid employees, part-time and full-time staff (i.e., non-faculty members), or faculty members. Non-student employees may hold a variety of academic credentials ranging from bachelor’s degrees to doctorates in a variety of disciplines and fields usually not limited to those that are writing-related or education-related. For a more detailed description of Canadian writing centres see Graves and Graves, 2006.

Discussion about Canadian writing centres has focused on anxieties about their positioning within the academy, lack of a standard model, lack of trained instructors, need for funding, the employment status of staff, and reporting structures.⁴ All of these issues are usually described in terms of challenges for writing centre directors and staff. Despite these challenges, it has been argued that writing centres hold growing power in universities.⁵ By reason of their work with writers from any discipline in the university, writing centre staff inherently have the ability to raise awareness of writing issues across disciplines. These issues may be ones that are common to all or several disciplines, or ones that are specific to a discipline. In addition, writing centre workers may articulate reasons for the existence of centres regardless of curricular and institutional changes. In other words, writing is usually regarded as a necessary outcome for all students, as widely recognized

³ M. Procter, *Talking the talk and walking the walk: Establishing the role of writing centres*, [in:] *Writing in knowledge societies*, Eds. D. Starke-Meyerring, A. Paré, N. Artemeva, M. Horne, L. Yousoubova, Fort Collins, CO 2011, p. 415-440.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

both within education⁶ and by the public.⁷ Finally, through their work with students across disciplines, writing centre staff gain insights into academic learning patterns, knowledge which is potentially valuable across the university.⁸ The extent to which these factors apply in the context of each university's writing centre, of course, varies. Nevertheless, most writing centre staff recognize that in order to continue to have a strong academic presence in post-secondary institutions in Canada, writing centres must maintain their position as a valuable resource for students, staff, and faculty.

Context for This Study: About Us and Our Writing Centres

Three writing instructors provided data for this study: the two authors and a colleague from a university in a nearby city. Therese holds graduate degrees from the sciences and arts, and has held her current position as Communications Program coordinator and manager of the writing centre at King's University College in London, Ontario for more than 12 years. Boba holds a doctorate in education, focused on writing studies, and has more than 11 years of writing centre experience. Until the time of submission of this article, she had been the manager of the Writing Centre at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario for two years. Finally, Jordana holds a doctorate in education (applied linguistics), has worked in writing centres for four years, and currently works at the Laurier Writing Centre as the coordinator of the tutoring program.

All the writing centres in which the participants have worked are located in southwestern Ontario, Canada's most populous province. Although Canada is bilingual (French and English), the universities in this study all use English as their dominant language. Wilfrid Laurier University is a mid-sized university about 100km west of Toronto. In 2015, about 17,000 undergraduate and graduate students attend Laurier. King's University College, which is affiliated with the larger and comprehensive University of Western Ontario, is a small, liberal arts college and is located about 200km west of Toronto. Approximately 3,500 undergraduate and graduate students attend King's.

⁶ K. Shultz, *Qualitative research on writing*, [in:] *Handbook of writing research*, Eds. C.A. MacArthur, S. Graham, J. Fitzgerald, New York 2006, p. 362.

⁷ M.R. Bloom, K.G. Kitagawa, *Understanding employability skills*. The Conference Board of Canada, 1999, Available at http://www.accc.ca/wp-content/uploads/archive/es-ce/257_99.pdf; Holland K., *Why Johnny can't write, and why employers are mad*, 2013, November 11, CNBC, Available at <http://www.cnbc.com/id/101176249>

⁸ M. Procter, *Talking the talk and walking the walk*, p. 415-440.

Research Question

The research questions that guided this project were: What are our roles as writing instructors in Canadian universities? What challenges do we face in fulfilling our roles?

Theoretical Orientation

This study was designed as a project using narrative inquiry, focusing on our subjective “biographical particulars as narrated by the one who lives them”.⁹ The benefits of the narrative inquiry approach include the possibility for deep understanding of complex situations as details of particular stories are considered from the perspective of a variety of interpretive lenses. In writing our narratives, we began, in fact, by recounting stories of how each of us started to work in writing centres.

As we carried out analysis and coding of our stories, we drew on positioning theory¹⁰ because it became clear that rather than merely identifying a particular viewpoint or common actions that occur within a group such as a university or a writing centre, we needed a framework for understanding how people position themselves, and how they are positioned, within such groups. According to positioning theory, “positions” are dynamic, rather than static “roles”¹¹, and they may change depending on the context. People may identify with more than one position and these may be contradictory. For example, a person may hold a position of *expert* in one context, and a position of *novice* in another context. In addition, while someone may view him/herself as an expert, s/he may be not be positioned as such by others within the group.

In this study, positioning theory helps us to understand how we individually position ourselves within our institutions (e.g., as writing instructors, mentors, learners etc.). It also guides our reflection on how we may be positioned by others and by our institutions. Finally, we used positioning theory to help us think about how we position student tutors and other writing staff in our writing centres. Throughout this study, we reflected on the changing nature of the positions we hold.

⁹ S. Chase, *Narrative inquiry: Multiple lenses, approaches, voices*, [in:] *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed.), Eds. N.K. Denzin, Y.S. Lincoln, London 2005, p. 651.

¹⁰ R. Harré, L. van Langenhove, *Positioning theory*.

¹¹ J. Lave, E. Wenger, *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*, Cambridge 1991, UK.

Methodology

To conduct this study, we adopted a methodology known as the collaborative autoethnography (CAE) approach¹², which is defined as “engaging in the study of self, collectively” (p. 11). Using this approach, each participant contributes to the collective work in his or her own distinct and independent voice, with the result that “the combination of multiple voices to interrogate a social phenomenon creates a unique synergy and harmony that autoethnographers cannot attain in isolation” (p. 24). Autoethnography thus is ideal in this project because the three participants in the study exemplify professionals at various stages in our careers, and the opportunity to share our stories enables a “harmony” to emerge that is able to more fully capture the phenomenon of working in a writing centre than is possible through the telling of our stories in isolation.

Methods

In keeping with the research on CAE, our methods followed an iterative process involving four main stages. First, we collected preliminary data. In this stage, each of the three participants wrote a narrative/reflection about our experiences as writing instructors in writing centres. We then shared (via email) our written narratives with one another and, individually, wrote notes and comments during our reading. Afterwards, we shared our notes and ideas about each of the reflections in a meeting via conference call. We subsequently took part in a second data collection stage. In this individual writing stage, we added supplemental information to our initial narratives and responded to some of the comments and ideas that were raised during our conference call meeting. After sharing our revised narratives, we individually coded and analysed all of our documents using an open coding technique.¹³ Following this coding, we met again over conference call to discuss our codes and identify common themes in our analyses. The process of identifying themes followed our interest in elements from each others’ narratives. The texts thus became prompts that helped to generate themes and

¹² H. Chang, F. Wambura Ngunjiri, K.-A.C. Hernandez, *Collaborative autoethnography*, Walnut Creek CA 2013.

¹³ M. Baralt, *Coding qualitative data*, [in:] *Research methods in second language acquisition: A practical guide*, Eds. A. Mackey, S. Gass, Malden MA 2012, p. 222-244; J. Corbin, A. Strauss, *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*, Thousand Oaks CA 2008.

clarify what was prominent in all of our accounts. In the final stage, the report writing stage, we communicated via email and met face-to-face while preparing a conference presentation on this project. We focused on critical reflection about our findings, subjecting them to scrutiny for how precisely we articulated our ideas and whether they authentically represented our previously unvoiced thoughts.

Findings

Individual coding and group analysis of our narratives revealed four major themes: (a) initial experience with writing centres, (b) community, (c) frustrations and tensions at work, (d) mentorship.

Theme 1: Initial Experiences with Writing Centres

As noted above, all three participants began their narrative accounts with a recount of their initial experiences at a writing centre. While perhaps unsurprising as a starting point, this theme was prominent because these recounts were obviously more than simply a starting point – they typically identified a bridge from a previous generic interest in writing or language to a specific geographic location: the writing centre. Boba, for instance, wrote, “I was taking a third-year educational psychology course with a practicum component ... [this] gave me an excuse to do something I’d been thinking about for some time: go to the writing centre and ask if they needed anyone to work for them” (Boba 1)¹⁴. Similarly, Jordana referred to the way her background provided a bridge to the writing centre: “I was put in contact with the manager [and] because of my education background, my graduate work, and my research focus in applied linguistics, working at the writing centre seemed to be quite a good fit.” (Jordana 1). In a variation of this notion that our past linked us to the writing centre, Therese recalled that it was a move *away* from the past that prompted her to go to the writing centre: “While I started to recover [from an illness,] a Guardian Angel ... suggested that I might like to volunteer at a Writing Centre” (Therese 1). In all of these recounts, the geographic space (“at the writing centre”, “to the writing centre”) was prominent.

Notably, the accounts also share a tone of good fortune or serendipity around this initial experience of coming to the writing centre. As Jordana (1) put it, “I feel that I came to writing centre work by chance.” Therese noted:

¹⁴ Quotations are taken from text transcriptions and identified by the writer/speaker and a number indicating first, second, etc. document from that writer being referenced.

On reading my colleagues' stories, I cannot help but notice that none of us actually aimed for a career in teaching Writing - we are all there by default. So, I suppose, we have to address the question of how we actually arrived there despite coming from different backgrounds, different disciplines, and different times. (Therese 2)

Though she uses the word "default," Therese also referred in her initial account to a "Guardian Angel," a friend who suggested she go to the writing centre to volunteer. This sense that working in a writing centre was somehow a stroke of good luck and not a planned undertaking permeated each participant's narratives.

Theme 2: Community

A similarly positive tone was used when discussing the second theme, that of a community found at the writing centre that was welcoming and supportive. This sense of community was strong and provided impetus to the participants to remain at the writing centre because it was seen as an environment that was good for them. "I think the supportive environment in which I worked was essential to my success. ...I met with colleagues regularly to discuss topics in writing, approaches to instruction, assessment, etc." (Jordana 1). Like Jordana, Boba also identified the sharing and collegiality of the writing centre as aspirational: "The memory of that first writing job and my experience of it as a welcoming, lively community of writers and thinkers remains for me the model and the reason for my continued work in writing centres" (Boba 1).

This sense of engagement and strength through community was not uncomplicated, however. Therese noted, "Community has not always been easy to find. When I started at my current position about 12 years ago, I cannot really say that I was truly welcomed. Some of my own department feared I would dilute Writing by taking it away from Literature" (Therese 2). In this quotation, a perceived division at King's University College between writing and literature can be used as a foundational metaphor for a division between the writing centre and the rest of the university, a frustration that is remarked upon in the next theme (below). The sense, however, that the writing centre is a place that draws people in remains: "If it were not for the wonderful and cooperative writing pros who have joined our merry band over the years, I do not think we could have survived" (Therese 1). This notion of a "merry band" - a group that perhaps comes together spontaneously, but remains together out of a shared and joyful purpose - was again prominent in the positive comments about working with colleagues in the writing centre.

Theme 3: Frustrations & Tensions at Work

Although all three participants were enthusiastic about their early experiences in the writing centre and the community they found there, they were equally passionate about describing the frustrations they identified with their current work. Therese brought up the issue of the positioning of the writing centre and its work as problematic:

What I might term our 'humanistic agenda' has enthused and encouraged many, but we still have to be careful lest we are thought 'uppity' – as my most trusted [part-time] Prof. puts it. Many people tell us we have made massive contributions to both the intellectual and creative life at the college, but we still have to STRUGGLE for recognition and respect in some quarters. There is sometimes disparity between our imagined position ... and our assigned. (Therese 2)

Boba also commented on the frustration around the writing centre's position in the university:

The problems of the job rarely have to do with students or pedagogy. They usually have to do with administration. ...It is difficult to work in a position that is so academic when you are recognized as a staff member. ...It is difficult to do writing centre work when the university you are in doesn't value writing, except via lip service, as I would argue most universities do not. It is difficult to work with [student services] colleagues who don't understand what you do and are always on the alert against signs of your 'elitism' and identifying too closely with faculty members. (Boba 1)

These quotations highlight the sense that writing work is poorly understood by both academic staff and faculty members alike. The reason for this lack of understanding is attributed not to individual people or the institution itself, but more generally and systemically across all university contexts. In Therese's words: "There is a reluctance to accept Writing as a full-fledged discipline – we are more the unwelcome cousin than the loved sibling" (Therese 1).

This misunderstanding and denigration of writing centre work and workers results in difficulties related to employment status, staffing, and funding. Boba noted, "It is one of the downfalls of this field that writing and composition are not well-recognized in Canada in terms of tenure-track academic positions." (Boba 1). In fact, none of the three participants held an academic (tenure-track) position, nor were these available in their universities. Therese concurred that staffing was a frustration:

I am sure you can hear my bittersweet thoughts for the future. The Write Place [writing centre at King's] now employs more than a dozen Peer Tutors and four Specialists – demand for the Centre is tremendous – we are open

five days and four evenings – yet none of these positions is permanent or full-time and I am continually begging for funds. (Therese 1)

Receiving approval for faculty-level positions has also proved difficult: “We have grown to more than forty half-sections [single-term courses] – bigger than many departments, but even my requests for a limited duty position have been denied” (Therese 1). The reluctance to fund positions adequately was also extended to writing centre budgets in general, as demonstrated by Therese’s remark that, “Another goal we worked towards was exposing our students to a positive culture of writing by bringing in many famous and local writers for readings and workshops ... students have loved this... We have managed to do this with a miniscule budget” (Therese 1).

The frustrations regarding employment status and funding resulted in participants worrying about effects on the quality of work they were able to produce, primarily because of a sense of inadequate opportunities to read about developments and research in the field. As the youngest and most junior member of the group, Jordana particularly noted this concern in relation to her work. “Most days I feel qualified for this position. Some days I feel like I don’t know anything about writing. ...I try to apply what I know from research and experience ... but there is still much for me to learn” (Jordana 1). As suggested by Jordana’s remark, the frustrations associated with trying to keep up with new knowledge in the field was usually faced not with despair, but with conviction and some optimism. “I say that we must keep doing what we do best and what we know, and the quality will win out. But it is frustrating” (Boba 1).

Notably, the frustrations related to limited funding, increasing demand, lack of support from upper administration, and misperceptions of writing work were identified primarily by Therese and Boba. As managers of their respective writing centres, they had responsibility for budgets and staffing, so it is not surprising that these were the issues they identified as concerns. Jordana, on the other hand, had fewer responsibilities related to managerial issues, so her frustrations centred on the heavy workload demands and limited opportunities for personal skills development.

Theme 4: Mentorship

A strong theme around mentorship emerged from comments made by all three participants. These comments can be divided into three categories: (a) the benefits of early mentoring as a novice to the field, (b) the importance placed on mentoring others, and (c) the ongoing value of mentorship.

Jordana identified the role that actively seeking out opportunities to learn from mentors while still a graduate student played in her writing development: “Working with the two professors [during my Master’s] was

a really great opportunity for me to see how people approach writing” (Jordana 1). Similarly, Therese recognized the early mentorship she received:

“Working at two writing centres under the mentorship of two very different, but equally talented, mentors whilst teaching allowed me to reflect and observe my own philosophy and praxis” (Therese 1). These comments highlight the notion that mentorship – the personal support, encouragement, and instruction provided by a more senior colleague – is an important element in the enculturation of new members to the writing centre community. This is clearly seen in Boba’s comment:

Through Therese, I met other writing colleagues who have formed the ‘first ring’ of colleagues I turn to in my field. These are the people from my early years in writing centre work who I still call on and work with. ...I am honestly so honoured that I can count these accomplished, thoughtful people as colleagues. They have invariably been generous to me. (Boba 1)

As noted by Boba, early mentorship was recognized and repaid by continuing alliances with these colleagues.

In addition to the benefits to participants of early mentorship, comments about the importance of mentoring others were identified by all three participants. Jordana noted this responsibility and its rewards in her work:

I am now in charge of the 17 undergraduate and graduate student tutors we have employed part-time and I have really enjoyed watching them develop their tutoring skills. ... It’s a big responsibility to mentor them, to teach them, and to problem-solve with them, but it’s also very rewarding to watch them learn and teach one another. (Jordana 1)

Boba also commented on this continuing responsibility to mentor others: “As a new manager of a writing centre, I am very conscious of my role as a mentor to my new writing consultant and to our student tutors” (Boba 1).

Finally, mentorship was valued not only for its role in personal development and in enculturating people to a writing centre community, but also because it provided a defense against the problems and frustrations of writing centre work as identified in theme 3. As Boba noted,

Each of us has commented on the important role that colleagues and mentors played in initiating us to the field of writing. These colleagues are ones we continue to call on for support. It seems as though many of the frustrations and conflicts related to the low status of the field are ameliorated for us by the very strong reliance we have on each other. It feels a little bit like ‘us against the world’. (Boba 2)

This comment repeats the sense of a “merry band” identified by Therese – the notion that writing centre colleagues are set apart from other faculty

and university staff colleagues, and that this separation feels imposed on us and is one which we defend against by holding tightly to each other through strong mentoring relationships.

Summary

Together these four themes suggest that perceptions of our roles as writing instructors evolve from initial enthusiasm and sense of mission to participation in and encouragement from a like-minded community; to rising awareness of problems and frustrations; to ongoing need for support from colleagues to deal with these frustrations.

Discussion

This project began by asking what our collaborative autoethnographic study could identify about working in writing centres in terms of our perceived roles as writing instructors and what challenges we face in our work. Our findings suggest that the ways in which we (and potentially other) writing instructors are positioned in the university has a limiting and negative effect on our abilities to teach students to write. In particular, the comments show that we perceive ourselves as positioned outside of membership as faculty members of the university despite academic credentials that are identical or similar to that of many faculty. This perception is reinforced by the fact that few tenure-track appointments in writing exist in Canadian universities or university writing centres, and the fact that of the three participants, none of us holds a faculty position despite academic credentials and extensive experience in the field. Thus, the positioning of writing instructors as experts in written communication and pedagogy while simultaneously denying them official recognition of this status means that writing instructors may feel their positions are tenuous and always contingent, often upon the goodwill of an understanding dean or administrator. This tenuous positioning is confirmed by the practical, everyday frustrations of working with limited budgets, with limited opportunities for professional development, and oft-thwarted desires to maintain currency in the field.

Despite this marginalized positioning by others, we position ourselves as educators, scholars, and academics, making use of extensive mentoring practices to build supportive communities in which members value each other even as our external university community ignores or misunderstands us.

A comment by Boba identifies the developmental trajectory for individual writing instructors that common institutional contexts instigate:

It is interesting to see the changes in individuals that this ongoing struggle creates, if we take our three narratives as examples of a typical trajectory:

1) Excitement and uncertainty about writing in about equal measure, figuring out writing's place in the institution and our own academic lives,

2) Commitment and effort to proselytizing by spreading the 'message of writing,' taking advantage of opportunities and overcoming problems as they arise,

3) Frustration and resignation as institutional uncertainty and lack of ongoing commitment and support take their toll. (Boba 2)

This move from idealism to resignation is exemplified in the narratives of this study's three participants, who themselves approximate the three stages though their own positions as early, mid-career, and late-career writing centre professionals.

The institutional imperative that influences this developmental trajectory is not limited to this study, but is well recognized as a problem of modern universities:

Cross-curricular writing instruction goes against the grain of the modern university, with its research orientation, specialized elective curriculum, and insular departmental structure – all of which make it extremely difficult to change faculty attitudes toward writing instruction...[d]espite strong administrative support and an enthusiastic core of faculty members¹⁵...

Our narratives demonstrate some ambivalence towards faculty in other fields and disciplines – on the one hand assessing their awareness and recognition of writing expertise as negligible, yet on the other hand aspiring to faculty status ourselves.

This raises the question: Why is faculty status desirable for writing centre instructors? The answer to this, of course, is that in university contexts tenure-track faculty have clearly identified high status and benefits that are denied to writing centre workers. A case in point is that of Boba, who at the time of the writing of this article, was terminated from her position as manager of the writing centre in an effort to ameliorate the financial difficulties of the university. The decision to make her position "redundant" was later contradicted by proposals for a re-structuring that would see a nine-month contract position suggested as a viable replacement. Despite a huge outcry

¹⁵ D.R. Russell, *Writing in the academic disciplines, 1870-1990: A curricular history*, Carbondale 1991, p. 268.

from the university community and the writing studies/writing centre community Canada-wide, a decision to reconsider this termination was not undertaken by senior administration. The tenuousness of writing centre positions, held by academically qualified staff without the protections allotted to faculty members, is clearly not merely perceived, but real.

Implications

This study demonstrates that university writing instructors in Canada are positioned by their institutions in ways that are inconsistent with the ways that instructors position themselves. Specifically, we see ourselves as offering expertise and instruction to students that are unavailable from other university services; despite these valuable contributions, writing instructors are disempowered through our positioning in non-faculty jobs and a general de-valuing and misunderstanding of writing studies. Awareness of such disparities may provide an opportunity for universities to redress these problems and thus to improve the writing instruction available to students. One way this might be done would be for administrators to begin the process of raising awareness about writing and writing centre work by recognizing our contributions publicly. An analogy might be made to the situation faced by pre-tenure faculty members, who are sometimes viewed as being similarly underappreciated and marginalized institutionally.¹⁶ Canadian researchers using a similar narrative inquiry approach to study pre-tenure faculty concluded:

Pre-tenure faculty are the lifeblood of our disciplines and of the academy. It behooves us to ask them: What is it that brought you here?...What do you hope to have accomplished and how can we help you get there? ... Listening is not enough. We must be influenced by what we hear and find ways within our own contexts to respond effectively".¹⁷

A similar conclusion might be wished by writing centre workers in Canada and elsewhere.

Acknowledgement: We would like to thank our colleague, Therese, for her important contribution to this project and paper.

¹⁶ K.M. Hibbert et al., *The "Ten-year road": Joys and challenges on the road to tenure*, *Journal of Educational Thought*, 2010, 44(1), p. 69-83.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 80.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baralt M., *Coding qualitative data*, [in:] *Research methods in second language acquisition: A practical guide*, Eds. A. Mackey, S. Gass, Wiley-Blackwell, Malden MA 2012.
- Bloom M.R., Kitagawa K.G., *Understanding employability skills*. The Conference Board of Canada, 1999, Available at http://www.acc.ca/wp-content/uploads/archive/esc-257_99.pdf
- Chang H., Wambura Ngunjiri F., Hernandez K.-A.C., *Collaborative autoethnography*, Left Coast Press, Walnut Creek CA 2013.
- Chase S., *Narrative inquiry: Multiple lenses, approaches, voices*, [in:] *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed.), Eds. N.K. Denzin, Y.S. Lincoln, Sage, London 2005.
- Corbin J., Strauss A., *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (3rd ed.), Sage, Thousand Oaks CA 2008.
- Graves R., Graves H. (Eds.), *Writing centres, writing seminars, writing culture: Writing instruction in Anglo-Canadian universities*, Inkshed, Winnipeg, Manitoba 2006.
- Harré R., van Langenhove L., *Positioning theory*, Blackwell, Oxford 1999, UK.
- Hibbert K.M., Stooke R., Pollock K., Namukasa I., Faez F., O'Sullivan J., *The "Ten-year road": Joys and challenges on the road to tenure*, *Journal of Educational Thought*, 2010, 44(1).
- Holland K., *Why Johnny can't write, and why employers are mad*, 2013, November 11, CNBC, Available at <http://www.cnn.com/id/101176249>
- Hunt R., *Writing under the curriculum. Afterword/response*, [in:] *Writing centres, writing seminars, writing culture: Writing instruction in Anglo-Canadian universities*, Eds. H. Graves, R. Graves, Inkshed, Winnipeg, Manitoba 2006.
- Lave J., Wenger E., *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1991, UK.
- Procter M., *Talking the talk and walking the walk: Establishing the role of writing centres*, [in:] *Writing in knowledge societies*, Eds. D. Starke-Meyerring, A. Paré, N. Artemeva, M. Horne, L. Yousoubova, WAC Clearinghouse, Fort Collins, CO 2011.
- Russell D.R., *Writing in the academic disciplines, 1870-1990: A curricular history*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale 1991.
- Russell D.R., *Writing in the academic disciplines: A curricular history* (2nd ed), Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale-Edwardsville 2002.
- Shultz K., *Qualitative research on writing*, [in:] *Handbook of writing research*, Eds. C.A. MacArthur, S. Graham, J. Fitzgerald, Guilford Press, New York 2006.
- Thaiss C., *The international WAC/WID mapping project: objectives, methods, and early results*, [in:] *Traditions of writing research*, Eds. C. Bazerman, R. Krut, K. Lunsford, S. McLeod, S. Null, P. Rogers, A. Stansell, Routledge, New York 2010.