Redefining the Writing Center with Ecocomposition

🔶 SHARE f 🐦 ✉ … [http://www.addthis.com/bookmark.php?v=250&username=compforum]

Bonnie D. Devet

Abstract: Writing centers are like organisms, performing in and living in an educational environment: evolving, altering, adapting. Given this organic quality, a key way to understand how writing centers handle the teaching of writing is to examine them through the lens of ecocomposition. Focusing on the organic nature of writing, ecocompositionists borrow the concept of ecology as a central metaphor, seeing writers and their environments as dynamically intertwined. Student writers, then, are part of a web of connections. Woven into the theory of ecocomposition are perceptions and ideas that explain the work of writing centers today. This paper applies to centers each of ecocompostion's pivotal concepts—interrelationship, place, and voice—in order to provide new insight into the nature of centers as they help students and to show that centers are not colonialists, they are not outsiders, and they are very capable of adding to Composition Studies.

As a long-time director of a writing center (twenty years and counting), I have constantly heard comments like the one a student once told me: "I'll go the Writing Center before I turn this paper in so I can get it checked." Or what I heard a professor mention over coffee at Starbucks: "As a director of a writing center, you must be making your fellow professors happy. Quality papers are a joy to grade when it is only content that must be scrutinized." These remarks make any director cringe, but they no longer surprise me because I have encountered them (or their ilk) over and over again. Such comments indicate that writing centers and their missions are misconceived, with many students and faculty seeing centers as mere comma clinics or "grammar garages" (Waldo 450), where run-ons are repaired and comma splices drained like dirty oil.

Granted, there is an historical reason for this misconception. Many centers originated during the Open Admissions of the 1960s and '70s, being established to assist first-generation, inexperienced students who, not being fully prepared, might have needed help with editing, such as for run-ons and comma splices. Although it is true some centers do pre-date the era of Open Admissions (Carino), many were started at that time because desperate administrators and frustrated faculty clamored for help. So, in assisting basic writers, these centers often began as fix-it shops, hence, the limited role often attached to centers.

Of course, since the 1960s and 1970s, centers have expanded and matured far beyond being Jiffy Lubes. Rather than being static comma clinics, centers are dynamic organisms, performing and living in an educational environment: evolving, altering, adapting. Given this organic quality, how can students and faculty understand the true nature of writing centers? I believe a key way to grasp how centers handle the teaching of writing is to examine them through the lens of the latest theory of composition: ecocomposition. Woven into this theory are perceptions and ideas that explain the work of writing centers, today, readily dispelling lingering misconceptions about centers.

First, let us examine key writing center scholarship in order to see that prominent scholars have already hinted at ecocomposition but have not applied it, yet, to describing the functions of writing

centers. Then, this paper will do just that: apply ecocomposition to writing centers to show ecocompositon's pivotal ideas of place, interrelationship, and voice make the theory a useful "conceptual tool" (Dobrin and Weisser, *Natural* 59), providing new insight into the nature of centers as they help students and establish their role in composition studies.

Seeds of Ecocomposition in Writing Center Scholarship

The majority of writing center scholarship began to appear in the 1980s, with several key articles attempting to explain how centers work. Many of these seminal pieces, written before ecocomposition arrived on the scene, nevertheless foreshadow basic concepts of ecocomposition, even if the ideas are not so fully developed as ecocomposition will describe them. For example, the two keystone articles of the 1980s Stephen North's "The Idea of a Writing Center" and Muriel Harris's "Talking in the Middle: Why Students Need Writing Tutors" stress, among other points, the idea of "place" as applied to centers. These articles argue that centers are special spaces which help students (often called clients) in ways not found elsewhere on campus so that, as it is so often cited from North, the writer and not just the writing is changed (69). Here, "place" seems to mean an alternative to formal, classroom education.

More recently, Nancy Grimm also recognizes that centers embody a place or space that is unique, but she provides a slightly different perspective than do Harris or North. Seeing clients as travelers on a journey, assisted by consultants (tutors), Grimm believes a main tenet of any consultation is that consultants start wherever clients are in their journeys as writers, knowing students bring to the center's space numerous experiences with writing, many of which may not be academic but, nonetheless, are valuable to consultants when helping clients. Over and over, consultants point out that while student writers may use contractions or even incomplete sentences in e-mails, or write short one-sentence paragraphs for a newspaper story, the new place (discourse) in which clients find themselves means changing in order to write a history term paper or a biology lab report. As consultants point out the alterations in the terrain, clients move into a new space. "Writing center coaches [consultants] are," as Grimm succinctly states, "experienced travelers who can make explicit the often unspoken conventions, values, styles, and assumptions of competing discourses" ("New" 14). So, while North and Harris stress the center as a place offering a different education than one found in classrooms, Grimm describes centers as helping students move or negotiate through spaces. As we will see below, these views of centers as places are useful, but ecocomposition can add to North's, Harris's, and Grimm's ideas about writing center spaces.

Besides place, the scholarship also hints at another ecocomposition concept: "interaction." Again, however, the interaction as described by the scholars will be just a beginning, with ecocomposition able to enlarge and expand on the concept.

As early as 1991, Lisa Ede describes the special interaction between consultants and clients, an interaction showing clients a new view of themselves as writers. What does it mean to be a writer? Ede replaces the view of the isolated person in a garret with the image of a writer being engaged in an exchange where he or she is influenced by other texts, other authors, and ideology. As a result, consultants help clients understand that writing is not done in isolation, a central tenet of what Ede calls "the theoretical foundation for writing centers" (3). Her article points ahead to ecocomposition, which also emphasizes that no writer writes alone. In the same vein, Anne Johnstone's 1991 article, "The Writing Tutorial as Ecology: A Case Study," explains that readers and writers interact to elicit change in each other, in what may be called "collaborative learning." As Johnstone writes, "The forms and purposes of texts and ideas informing them develop interactively" (55). Here, again, is emphasized the interaction of writers and readers. As it will be seen, such a relationship is a vital component of ecocomposition.

But neither Ede nor Johnstone provides enough detail about the nature of this interaction. Alice Gillam does, though, even adding "voice" to the mix. She explores the forces pushing and shaping clients, forces arising from the academy itself (such as students being required to document with APA), from the inner voice of the writer, and from the dialogue between consultants and clients in the writing center, all shaping a consultation ("Writing Center Ecology"). In her influential essay "Writing Center Ecology: A Bakhtinian Perspective," Gillam characterizes other influences on clients: the students' idiosyncrasies of language and background (Gillam's "centrifugal forces") press up against the demands of university writing ("centripetal forces") (5). Gillam's emphasis on interaction and on the student's having a voice points squarely ahead to ecocomposition, which will elaborate on this interaction to show how clients and even tutors are woven into a discourse linking them to all the other voices that have come before.

So, scattered in the influential writing center scholarship from the 1980s to the first decade of the twentieth century are intimations of ecocomposition: North's, Harris's, and Grimm's sense of place as well as Ede's, Johnstone's, and Gilliam's description of voice and the interactions between clients/tutors and the academy's demands.

While these examinations of place and interplay are valuable, however, it must be acknowledged that these scholars have only laid a foundation, not yet providing a full, complete picture of the dynamic, organic (with emphasis on *organic*) nature of the work of writing centers. There is more to the center than is dreamt of in these scholars' philosophies; ecocomposition provides this more encompassing way to describe centers.

I will give a brief definition of this important theory and then provide concrete examples from my center to demonstrate how the key principles of ecocomposition (interaction, place, and voice) help explain a center to students and faculty alike.

"Nature" of Ecocomposition

Dating back at least to a panel at the 1998 Conference on College Composition and Communication (Dobrin and Weisser, *Natural* 9), the term *ecocomposition* has been best explained by its two main proponents, Sidney Dobrin and Christian Weisser. Although ecocomposition shares some features with its predecessor social constructionism, it extends its concepts. Not to simplify too much, social constructionism argues that each writer is part of a system comprised of race, class, gender, and culture, with the writer being shaped by all these forces; as the theory implies, the writer is constructed "socially." To this mix, however, ecocomposition also adds *place* or *environment*: "It asks that in addition to the ideological, cultural contexts in which we have situated writers in recent times, that we look to physical environments, textual relationships, and the locations from which language and discourse arise. It asks us to see writing as an activity of relationships" (Dobrin and Weisser, *Natural* 146). In other words, "ecocomposition is the study of the relationships between environments (natural, constructed, and even imagined places) and discourse (speaking, writing, and thinking)" (Dobrin and Weisser, *Natural* 6).

While the words *environment* and *ecocomposition* may seem to imply writing about birds, bees, and trees, ecocomposition does not necessarily limit itself to the natural world. Instead, it looks at *wherever* discourse occurs. Take the technical writers for one of the world's leading airplane manufacturers— Airbus. Its writers function in an ecosystem where they learn to write manuals and reports for the company, thereby operating in an environment or place. This place can be characterized as the relationship between the manuals and the company where the writings are produced, the manuals and other technical writers at Airbus, and the manuals with all other manuals

written at Airbus. As Dobrin and Weisser explain, ecocomposition examines "relationships between discourses and environments, discourses and writers, discourses and other discourses" (*Natural* 23).

Acknowledging that social constructionism sees writers shaped by forces, ecocomposition also emphasizes that writers, in turn, *affect* those environments, be they cultural, racial, class, or gender derived. Here, an analogy helps. Social constructionism conceives of writers as visitors entering a revolving door at the entrance of a building, with the door controlling visitors, forcing them to slow down or speed up; ecocomposition, though, famously believes writers are both part of a web and are interacting with the web or environment to shape and alter it. Such an approach of stressing relationships envisions the reader-writer interaction as highly intricate, with multiple forces shaping meaning and identity. Margaret A. Syverson explicates this complicated sense of relationships:

[T]he wealth of reality is richly complex, interdependent, and emergent; we are embedded in and co-evolving with our environments, which include other people as well as social and physical structures and processes. Although composed of many individuals acting independently, the dynamics of processes occurring in these ecosocial environments is irreducible to discrete individuals. (xiv-xv)

So, even though environments influence how writers create documents—Airbus makes certain demands for writing a memo—writers also affect their environments: the memo will, in turn, have an impact on the Airbus culture. Here, then, is the ecology part of ecocomposition. Just as scientists study ecosystems where organisms work together, exchanging energy in order to live and function (Oak trees drop acorns to the forest floor, thereby helping squirrels who might eat or even bury the acorn, fostering a new tree), so, too, do ecocompositionists look for the systems where writers work, contribute, function, and are, in turn, affected, or—as Anis Bawarshi explains, "the self and the social [are seen] as *recursively* at work on one another, as engaged in an ecologically symbiotic relationship" ("Ecology" 70; emphasis added).

Recently, in my writing center, an a situation occurred that illuminated these multiple layers of ecocomposition. A freshman English student brought in an assignment asking her to analyze a public park named for the first president of the United States, a park located in a prominent Southern city, near whose entrance stands a monument to Henry Timrod, the Poet Laureate of the Confederacy of the American southern states. The student was tasked to examine the meaning of this monument in a park in such a city, especially since the American South lost the Civil War and since, today, the poet Timrod is little known and rarely read. The student also had to describe what meaning the park and its monument held for *her* since she was reared in a major northern American city.

This client was extremely frustrated with the assignment: her familiarity with other discourses hampered her. In terms of ecocomposition, she could not see herself as part of the ecosystem the professor wanted her to explore. While she had produced many high school term papers where "self-effacement" or a neutral voice was the norm (Keller 206), this assignment seemed to her so complex that she could not draw upon her previous discourses, knowing neither how to begin the paper nor how to structure it. She needed to discover her voice by analyzing the multiple connections inherent in visiting a park in a city located in the South and in finding out the meaning of this place both for the local people and for herself. In this way, she could experience the full rhetorical context (Coe). So, she had to travel from one discourse place to another (Drew), asking herself what she already knew about essays and term papers and what she could apply here. Then, she could ascertain the multiple systems of the park, the monument, the poet chosen, the city, her sex, her own origins, and her race that were involved. She would see her self as part of a system as evidenced by this place.

Ecocomposition scholar Dobrin provides a way for her to realize how, indeed, "writing takes place," offering a list of sites through which she and all clients move ecologically. Dobrin suggests writers consider the physical environment where they compose ("Writing" 19); the client had taken notes

while in the park and had brought them to the center to use while writing on the center's computers. She was also writing under time pressure with the paper due the next day. Other factors influencing her as a writer are the "cultural, social, and ideological environments" (Dobrin, "Writing" 19). For example, as this client walked around the park to examine the monuments, she played the role of a visitor, acting accordingly, following the pathways, expecting to see labels on trees to identify a Water Oak or stopping to read engravings on monuments. She also assumed an additional identity when she entered the park, that of a visitor as opposed to what she might have been before she entered the place (she was a skateboarder). The park, then, became a cultural site or habitat that shaped her.

But, even as a visitor, she shaped the experience so that she and the park formed their own ecosystem of interaction. Calling the place "a park" meant she also summoned up visions of nature shaped and pruned, containing sidewalks and benches as well as being well-groomed with street cleaners removing fallen autumn leaves. Historic forces are also at play (Dobrin, "Writing" 9). She had her own views of history, such as how someone from the northern U.S. views the "War of Northern Aggression" (as American Southerners sometimes refer to the U.S. Civil War), and her assumptions about who should be honored with a monument (Timrod's bust on a monument reflects the values of the local area). In addition, the park is named for a Revolutionary War general and the first President of the U.S., while the Timrod monument honors a poet who celebrated the disintegration of the Union. So, she had to consider why Timrod is now forgotten, but the person for whom the park is named is enshrined in the pantheon of American presidents. What does the park also say about a city that honors both Timrod and Washington? To add to the mix, she had to realize that as a white female she reacted differently than if she had been an African American female (How would an African American react to a celebration of a Confederate poet?). Finally, Dobrin suggests that part of the ecosystem of writing in which the client finds herself entails economic contexts ("Writing" 9). How did the student's being from the middle class affect her reaction to the park? If she were a homeless person, would she have felt the same about the Timrod monument? The client, in ecological terms, is discovering "how we operate within and against the systems in which we find ourselves" (Fleckenstein et al. 392). Thus, the client sees herself holistically (Spohrer 7). As a writer she was "immersed in a multi-leveled, multifaceted environment" (Fleckenstein et al. 393), a full system of which she was a part and which, in turn, she helped to create. She had brought certain perceptions to the assignment and was, in turn, influenced by the park, by the city, by the topic. So, because the client could not call upon her usual mask of self-effacement (her high school term paper voice), she had to consider how her other personas contributed to her composing process (Keller 202).

For the student, writing was no longer just crafting a linear "cause-and-effect chain" (Fleckenstein et al. 393); it meant, "We are as influenced by the places we inhabit and our connections with the other organisms that share those sites as we are influenced by human relationships" (Weisser, "Ecocomposition" 86). By traveling from her comfort site (her hometown, her being from the North, etc.) to another site, she made new connections, rethinking her relationship to the park. She experienced what Derek Owens advocates in *Composition and Sustainability:* she moved out of her safe, comfortable box to examine many angles at once so she had "simultaneous comprehensions in multiple dimensions" (160-61). When she returns home, it could also be said that the client's seeing herself as interplaying in the web helps her to ask the same questions about her own home places and cultures; she had encountered all the intricate layers of the web of meaning surrounding, defining, connecting her to her places and her world and her self. So, this place—a park and her reactions to it—is epistemological, a discourse with many interweaving facets.

Ecocomposition Applied to Writing Centers: Interaction, Relationships, or Interplay

Now, let's examine ecocomposition's application to centers by focusing, first, on the concept of interaction. While Ede, Johnstone, and Gillam indicate that there is much interplay between consultants and clients, ecocomposition offers more detail about this relationship.

Over and over again, ecocompositionists use the words *interaction, relationships*, *interactivity*, implying that writers and their writing are a web so that pushing on one part affects the others, much as Marilyn Cooper described the writing web in her well-known *College English* article "The Ecology of Writing." As explained by Cooper, this "ecology of writing" has "textual forms" (conventions like term papers), "cultural norms" (how being in a social group affects one's writing, such as using student talk versus academic speech), "interpersonal interactions" (how students relate to their fellow students linguistically and socially), "purposes" (what they want to achieve as students), and "ideas" (how the academy arrives at new concepts) (369-70). Each of these forces operates at once, constituting an ecosystem. Often a college writer is unaware of the system, with the student's situation being like the man in the well-known anecdote who tries to understand an escalator while he is riding it (Fleckenstein et al. 396).

Centers embody this "webbiness" of ecocomposition. To help clients to think about their place in the academy, consultants show them as being part of the ecosystem of the writing done in the university. It then becomes the job of consultants to point out how clients participate within the system, such as the social and linguistic conventions of college (when to use Standard Edited English), how clients fit into a particular discipline (the differences between a history paper and a biology lab report), and how clients can use the academy's textual conventions (MLA citation, for instance, as opposed to the footnotes used in the Turabian system). Centers, thus, make the "eco-collegiate" system apparent to students, placing the center squarely in ecocomposition.

The interaction with the systems of the university applies not only to clients but to the consultants, sometimes referred to as "the forgotten clients" (Devet). Frequently, students are not writing papers in the consultants' own majors, so consultants must draw upon their knowledge and expertise with writing clients. If a client taking an English class asks the center for help writing a biology report, the consultant points out that the thinking processes used for a lab report overlap with those for analyzing a short story (hypothesis, analysis, synthesis), thus establishing cognitive links between disciplines, a web of connections. Although different writing features exist among discourse communities, consultants show clients that writing in one discipline is symbiotically related to another field, what Derek Owens calls "a panoramic inquiry" (133). When consultants relate different discourses to each other, they create an environment where clients become aware of forces that they shape and that are shaping them.

The interaction/relationship concept of ecocomposition is apparent in another way: the cooperative interaction between clients and consultants. While students often cast their own teachers as sages on stages, consultants eschew this hierarchy, forming, instead, a community of cooperation with their clients: students and consultants learn from each other, participating in an interchange where both benefit and support each other. As clients learn from consultants, so, too, do consultants gain knowledge working with clients as they discuss an assignment or dissect an awkward sentence in the students' drafts. How many times have I as a director heard tutors exclaim how much *they* are learning from clients? This interaction can be characterized by the ecological or biological term as "mutualism."

This term, which has a direct corollary with writing center work, dates back to the 1902 study *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* by the Russian biologist Peter Kropotkin, who defined mutual interaction as "how survival was often enhanced by or even dependent on, one individual helping another, or one species aiding another for mutual benefit" (Odum, *"Ecology A Bridge"* 200). In this relationship each has "vital goods or services needed by the other" (201), so that the organisms support each other. Take, for instance, the rhino's being helped by the oxpecker, a companion bird riding on the beast's back, feasting on ticks that otherwise would endanger the larger creature; or consider the coelenterates (like jellyfish) growing on a crab's back, providing camouflage for the crab, who, in turn, transports the "partner" and secures it food when the crab captures prey (Odum, *Ecology* 108).

Such cooperative interaction is applicable to the relationship between consultants and their clients. Just like in ecological mutualism, neither tutors nor their clients seek power or control; instead, they establish a collaborative model. Clients help consultants by telling about the context of the paper, and consultants help clients with structure and development of ideas. They create a mini-ecosystem between consultants and clients, where both flourish as a result of mutualism, reflecting ecocomposition's concept of interaction.

Ecocomposition Applied to Writing Centers: Place

While early scholarship regarded the center as being only an alternative place to the classroom, ecocomposition expands place to refer to *all* locations affecting discourse, such as "classroom[s]" or contexts that are "political, electronic, ideological, historical, economic, natural" (Dobrin and Weisser, "Breaking" 573). Ecocompositionists employ the key word "place" in several ways, all of which are applicable to centers.

One definition of place is what may be called the *rhetorical locality* created between writers and audience. In "Writing Takes Place," Dobrin explains: "When we write, we create rhetorical environments that we inhabit and that we reinvent, reinscribe" (22). Writer and reader together, symbiotically, generate an environment with roles assigned to each. Centers, too, create a rhetorical space or locality, pulling from clients and consultants alike roles they enact with each other. Consultants, for instance, assume clients are rhetorically capable writers who need only reassurance and guidance from consultants. Clients, in turn, create a rhetorical environment with consultants, eliciting from them the roles of helpful peer assistants. There is, of course, no such thing as a "true" peer tutor (Trimbur), since tutors are hired in the first place because they are good writers who can talk to others about writing. Nonetheless, consultants do enact the roles of helpful assistants, roles clients elicit from them, establishing a rhetorical environment or place where peer influence helps students develop. And peers do sway each other in making judgments; the dynamic of peer pressure means clients defend and modify their ideas so that they "develop and express new ideas and make judgments based on a wider perspective than on that of their own teachers" (Hawkins 8). They are engaged in Kenneth A. Bruffee's well-known "conversation of mankind"—interacting and growing, as they interplay with each other. It is no wonder, then, that clients often tell consultants how much the sessions have helped them, or that consultants, in turn, say that working in the center has been the most rewarding job they have ever held.

In ecocomposition, place also refers to genres through which writers travel**,** a discursive environment that can be examined for how it shapes writers and how writers affect it. In fact, exploring genres is central to the work of centers. As part of the ecology of the academy, centers introduce clients to different types of writing. When consultants pull from the center's file handouts explaining the step-by-step creation of a lab report or a term paper, these aids are not neutral; they are based on an ideology and enactment of that in order to create an environment of which clients become a part. So, writing centers "reenact and reproduce" types of writing (Bawarshi 75). As consultants help clients

enter these spaces of various academic genres, consultants and clients sometimes find a professor's assignments "restrictive" (Mahala 9). One consultant recounted how a professor told his English class to analyze only one symbol (a bookcase) from hundreds of symbols found in a novel. The consultant and client examined the genre required by the professor (textual forms, cultural norms, interpersonal interactions, purposes, and ideas) in order to discover "openings" (Mahala 9), where the client could contribute to the system. The student writer, then, practiced what the professor wanted —a literary analysis of only one symbol —even while developing her own interpretation of the novel's image. The consultant helped the client discover an ecological niche so that she could weave herself into the web of the academy and, in turn, contribute to as well as affect that web.

If genres are structures or acceptable forms that reflect social needs, then centers in and of themselves can also be said to be genres. Embedded in centers is the concept of providing assistance based not on tutors' telling clients what to do but on interchanging or discovering through conversation between writers (Bruffee). One way that consultants help clients enter into this writing center genre is by having them fill out an information sheet. This sheet creates a world where clients know data (they provide their e-mail addresses and cell numbers) and thereby conditions students, from their first visit, to see themselves as sources of information, rather like on the popular PBS series *Antiques Roadshow*, where clients come to the center with information (the background on the paper or "antique"), thus establishing themselves as contributors to the consultation.

Consultants also create another genre: the center as a place of collaboration. At the beginning of a session, they ask clients to read aloud their papers so clients hear their own texts. This reading aloud shapes students to enact the roles of clients, collaborating with consultants, becoming part of a dynamic interconnection, an ecological feedback loop. The forms clients sign on their first visit and the directions consultants give students at the beginning of each session enact the center's ideology that, in turn, reinforces that ideology, shaping both consultants and clients to form a genre. Centers, then, are a collection of what centers believe to be "knowable, doable, and possible in any given situation," so that the ideology of centers is enacted, becoming "social practices" (Bawarshi 76). Clients are socialized to become part of the writing center genre so that many of them return just to write on the computers because, as they explain, "I like the atmosphere."

Another angle of the center as a genre is found both in the progress reports written after each consultation and in the handouts distributed by consultants. In the reports, which can be read by clients, consultants enact the role of informants for professors and the role of a neutral party between professors and clients. Here is a typical report on a consultation: "When Jane brought in her paper on 'A Good Man is Hard to Find,' we worked on formulating a clearer thesis, structuring topic sentences, and editing for comma splices. She plans to return tomorrow to read aloud her new draft. We worked together about forty-five minutes." Such a report is a script creating a rhetorical environment, portraying the client as a participant eager for admission to the world embodied by the professor and by the assignment. The language is also referential and informative (Kinneavy), that is, like *Dragnet*'s Joe Friday, giving only the facts, not judging or evaluating the students' writing; that task is usually left up to clients and professors. While it is true that reports may sometimes reduce a complicated consultation with its many winds of change to a mere list of topics, the genre of the progress report — in an ecocomposition sense —creates a rhetorical environment for professors, clients, consultants, and the center alike.

Besides the progress reports, a center's handouts also establish a "biosphere of discourse" (Bawarshi 74). They imply that knowledge is available, like take-away at a fast-food place, even though consultants do advise clients that the handouts (like writing a thesis or analyzing characters in fiction) are so general they must be adjusted for the clients' particular needs. Consultants' walking over to the files and rooting around for the most useful handout, however, re-enforces its ideology: consultants

care about clients, taking time to dig out appropriate handouts for them. So, even as simple a task as giving a handout on how to do APA documentation or how to write a history paper re-enforces the genre of centers as supportive places. It is a "habitat that makes habit possible and the habit makes habitat possible" (Bawarshi 78). With the information sheets, collaborative sessions, progress reports, and handouts, centers become a "macro-environment" not only created but also mediated by these genres (Bawarshi 74).

Ecocomposition Applied to Writing Centers: Voice

In addition to the concepts of interrelationship and place, another pivotal concern of ecocomposition is the way a writer's voice is formed or shaped. "Voice," of course, has played a vital role in rhetoric, being characterized as *ethos* (simply put as "credibility") and often as seen as "stable and unified" by the Western liberal humanist tradition (Keller 200). Post-structuralists and ecocompositionists, though, see voice differently; it is a "collision of discursive forces" affected by "historical, economic, cultural, social, and political discourses" (Keller 200). While the scholar Gillam indicates that students possess an inner voice, ecocomposition goes further to characterize the numerous forces shaping the voice, forces of which student may not be aware.

A concrete example of how centers help clients to see the complexity of voice (that is, its formation, alteration, and effect on its environment) can be found in how a consultant described a tutorial:

An old lady in her 60s taking First-year English was one of the most intriguing clients I had tutored because she had led such an eventful life. Her paper was full of grammar errors, but it was understandable and captured her cultural background. She hoped to write a book which was why she was taking the class. I helped her with grammar and other problems like any other client, but before she left, I told her that people try to capture what she has, not to let the class take that from her, and *to let her influence the class*. (emphasis added)

The student's writing may have differed from what is considered the academic norm, but "who we are and what we have to say is in so many ways interwoven, directly, and indirectly, consciously and unconsciously with our local environs" (Owens 37) that the center should enact an ideology of celebrating a student's language (Brannon), showing her that her expressions contribute to the academy and the academy is richer for the contribution. In fact, in the post-modern world where so many diverse groups are empowered, it cannot be assumed there is a universal "logic and perspective" (Grimm, *Good* xvii). As Grimm argues,

[R]ather than helping the Other become more like us, the work of the writing center might instead include developing the ability to see ourselves as the Other, to recognize the limits of our world views and our cultural assumptions and to regard our discourse practices from the perspectives of those outside the mainstream discourse. (*Good* 14)

Working with the older woman, the consultant was trying to establish this web-connection for her so that this woman saw the intertwining of her voice with that of the academy. Centers celebrate voices by putting them into a larger context.

Ecocomposition's emphasis on intertwined multiplicities, in fact, benefits all students. They advance more quickly when they sense what shapes them. As Mark C. Long argues in "Education and Environmental Literacy: Reflections on Teaching Ecocomposition in Keene State Colleges' Environmental House," "I have to believe that students benefit from learning how, and why, their relationship to their surroundings has been constructed in particular ways" (136). The client develops

intellectually by seeing that many forces have formed her voice, and she can, in turn, have an impact on those forces.

Ecocomposition and Self-reflection for Writing Centers

Writing centers should, as good members of their institutions, constantly try to understand their places in their schools and in composition studies as a whole. Only by such reflection do they grow, and, it may be said, do they become accepted on their campuses and by the composition world. Because ecocomposition fits well with centers, this theory helps centers explore vital perceptions about themselves, especially the charge that centers are colonialists, that centers are outsiders, and that centers could be contributors to Writing in the Disciplines and Composition Studies.

Centers as Colonialists

Since their inception, centers have, unfortunately, often been seen as servants to the academy, with this servitude being labeled as "colonialist." Arguably, the most famous essay on writing centers, North's "The Idea of A Writing Center," unintentionally laid the groundwork for centers being labeled this way; however, seen through an ecocomposition paradigm, centers are far from being the henchmen taking away students' language and culture.

The colonialist charge itself can be traced to the essay "Postcolonialsm and the Idea of a Writing Center," where Anis Bawarshi and Stephanie Pelowski contend that North's well-known statement, "in a writing center, the object is to make sure that writers, and not necessarily their texts, are what get changed by instruction" (69), shows centers are focused only on changing writers. Centers are, supposedly, not giving writers critical awareness about the discourse communities of the academy so that, as Bawarshi and Pelowski argue, in the post-colonial world, centers are in the "business of acculturation" (46) with the goal of bringing students up to a school's "acceptable standard" (46). Centers, in other words, play a key role in a "hegemonic agenda" (46):

> [T]he university, too often with the help of the writing center, imposes on students one more subject position to which they [students] "willingly" consent because they are not conscious of its as being a subject position, a particular, politically embedded, and discursive way of experiencing and articulating knowledge and reality. (Bawarshi and Pelowski 49)

Thus, students feel their home discourses are not honored and are, in fact, even subordinated to what the academy considers right and proper (47). As Bawashri and Pelowski argue, centers enact this subversion when telling clients how to write, say, lab reports or history term papers; the center, thus, is characterized as "colonialist" (45).

Centers, seen through an ecological lens, are not colonialists. Far from denying the validity of students' languages, centers give agency to students, and ecocomposition can offers an enriched perspective on this liberatory role.

Labeling centers as liberators has a long history in writing center scholarship. In one of the earliest anthologies about centers (Gary Olson's *Writing Centers: Theory and Administration*), Tilly Warnock and John Warnock proclaim that instead of the banking model of education where students are told what they should know and what to do with it (Freire 209), centers make students and their writing the focus of attention: "[centers] help students revise their attitudes towards themselves as writers and towards writing … [by restoring] to students the sense of their own authority and responsibility" (19). Harris also stresses this concept of free-to-be-me, where students feel open and can be direct:

"[Students] talk move freely and more honestly because they are not in the confines of a teacher/student relationships where they are penalized for asking what they perceive as 'dumb' questions" (*Talking* 28). So, students gain agency because they–not necessarily faculty and textbooks –become the authorities in consultations.

It is true that centers give clients a chance to be star performers in a consultation; seeing centers through ecocomposition offers a more nuanced view of this liberation. Agency in ecological centers means clients are part of a larger system, able to critique what the assignment wants and what they themselves can bring to it (a moveable feast of ideas)

The students' ecological niche fits with that of the disciplines in which they are writing, allowing the writers to add to the discourse who they are even as they adjust to a new ecology of the biology lab report or history term paper. As Cooper argues in "Really Useful Knowledge: A Cultural Studies Agenda for Writing Centers," agency in centers means helping students "actively construct … subject positions that negotiate between institutional demands and individual needs" (114).

This ecological liberation can be illustrated with the following: for a biology assignment, a student located two writings on the same topic: a *New York Times* article on whether or not bees can recognize faces and a scientific article from which the *New York Times* reporter gleaned his information. The student had to summarize both writings, critique the popular reporting found in the newspaper article, and link the two articles to course readings as well as to other courses. The client felt the professor had in mind an ideal text, so she was desperately trying to second guess what she thought the teacher wanted. The consultant, however, explained that the professor did not have a Platonic ideal; the client just needed to adapt and adopt her material to represent *her* view of the articles. Liberation arises not only from letting the client explore her own ideas (as Warnock, Warnock, and Harris argue) but also from being able to see her text as part of a larger system to which a student contributes, as this client did when her paper argued that the *New York Times* article heavily distorted and simplified the scientific facts. Two ecologies interact: the students' views and the demands of the assignment. Yes, centers liberate clients to speak freely to consultants (Warnocks and Harris), but through an ecocomposition's perspective, this liberation also means clients see their own ecological value as it meshes with that of another system, the professor, the assignment, and the academy. *Liberation*, then, means adjustment and adaptation.

Therefore, far from being colonialists, centers, today, are enacting the postmodern ideal which Bawarshi and Pelowski advocate as a role for centers: "[T]he writing center, in addition to helping marginalized students function within academic discourses, should also make explicit how these discourses affect them—how these discourses rhetorically and socially function" (53). As part of an ecological system, centers demonstrate Bawarshi and Pelowski's "rhetorical and social function" of discourses by showing clients how to adjust to the ecological networks into which clients wish to enter. Pointing out to clients the nature of the academy's discourses helps students better understand what happens to their language even as they adjust or adapt to that of the various disciplines. So, instead of being seen as part of the hegemonic structure of a school, centers should be viewed as ecologists.

Centers as Outsiders

Besides being liberators, centers hold another cherished view of themselves: they are outsiders, renegades, or James Deans on their campuses, proudly–even defiantly–offering an alternative form of education from what classroom teachers do (Harris *Talking*). Centers, in fact, revel in this role; if they cannot be part of the campus, then at least they will be proud of their difference.

Even though centers do offer this alternative educational framework, seeing themselves as rebels limits centers. As Erika Spohrer has explained, "While some of our specific interests may indeed conflict with certain aspects of the institutions, we are nonetheless a vital part of that institution… . We cannot see ourselves as outsiders" (9). Given the ecocomposition paradigm, centers should, instead, perceive themselves as part of the school's network (Spohrer 9). Like trees that support birds and nourish the soil with roots, centers are a system within the web of their schools, and as centers grow and shift, they affect their network just like in any ecological relationship: 'While some of our specific interests may indeed conflict with certain aspects of the institution, we are nonetheless a vital part of that institution, and our actions connect us to the actions of, say, the management department, the grounds crew, the administration" (Spohrer 9). As result, ecological centers should be even more active on their campuses. They do not necessarily have to take on more jobs; after all, directors are already abundantly pulled by too many forces, such as helping with retention, providing orientation sessions to new students, and conducting classroom presentations. But centers should see that these roles interlock and interrelate. As Spohrer states,

We've have always felt pressure from our institutions. But an ecological paradigm insists not only that we feel—and acknowledge—that pressure but also that we recognize that the health of the whole [institution] determines the health of its parts. … Practically, this means taking an active role in committees and discussions that affect the health of the college. (10)

Being part of this web, directors can sit on college-wide committees to represent voices of those not always heard, like those of minorities or international students; centers can also encourage their universities to establish programs like Writing Across the Curriculum, Writing in the Disciplines, Learning Communities, Freshman Seminars, and even reaching beyond the institution to the community at large with Service Learning (Spohrer 10). If centers are aware of their networked stance in their schools, they can foster the "health" of their ecosystem, thereby helping themselves as well.

Centers' Place in Writing in the Disciplines and Composition Studies

Ecocomposition describes another vital component of writing center work: assisting clients with Writing in the Disciplines (WID). Seeing centers through ecocomposition can conceptualize this WID work and provide insight into how centers contribute to Composition Studies as a whole.

Helping any client with any piece of writing for any course is a hallmark of centers. But, students, time and again, confess that they do not know how to write papers for their various courses, feeling as if a monolith has fallen from the sky, blocking their path. Being stymied and confused by the demands of various disciplines, they often, unfairly and desperately, ask consultants, "Is this paper what my teacher wants?"

The job of centers is to help clients "learn what the constraints of the discourse community might be, and we want to learn how students might traverse that unfamiliar territory without getting lost" (Evertz 4). Because clients are becoming part of the thoughts and ideas of a discourse community–all the knowledge which has accumulated in that field–writing in any discipline, then, is a matter of entering an ecological system. In other words, clients should see that when they write, "[o]ur current knowledge … responds to and reacts upon previous acts of knowledge-making… . Language, communication, knowledge, and writing are all ecological pursuits" (Dobrin and Weisser, *Natural* 146). Clients who are asked to evaluate the historical accuracy of the movie *Gladiator* (an assignment my own center has seen many times) should see that they are not simply reporting the movie's anachronistic features, such as one of the extras' wearing a wristwatch during a gladiatorial contest. In an ecological pedagogy, clients should understand that writing such a paper means entering the discipline's environment. Consultants help students begin their journey by asking them questions

that will, first of all, locate the clients contextually (How are most history papers written? How are movie reviews created?); historically (What are the students' past experiences with writing in this field and with writing in general?); and ideologically (Under what beliefs or assumptions does Hollywood operate? What beliefs, especially about facts, do historians hold?). Clients also enter the ecosystem by asking themselves about other texts (What other history papers have the clients written for this professor? How does writing for history differ from writing English papers?) and asking about other writers (How have other students written this assignment before? What are other students in the class doing?) (Dobrin,"Writing" 18). With such questions, students find ways for their "writing to fit with systems" (Dobrin and Weisser, *Natural* 73) to move into the ideology of the discourse community—they are placing themselves into the system of the discipline, and by writing in the discipline, they are learning about being literate in history.

When centers demonstrate to clients this ecological approach to writing in disciplines, centers are placing themselves front and center in Composition Studies, a place they have not truly held in spite of all the fine, special, one-to-one work of helping student writers over the last fifty or so years. Centers, like weird relatives that must be relegated to the attic whenever visitors come over, are often ignored or forgotten by the field of composition. For example, the 2009 collection of composition scholarship *The Norton Book of Composition Studies* (edited by Susan Miller), designed to introduce graduate students to the field, contains 101 fine, important articles, but not one piece focuses on writing centers and their revolutionary work. The absence in the *Norton* book of any articles by leading writing center scholars speaks volumes about the stature of centers in composition studies. It is as if the rest of the composition world has not realized, yet, the valuable role centers play in literacy. Of course, it may be that writing center professionals themselves have failed to cross the membrane or to break through the noise to get the word out about their valuable work. However, an ecocomposition paradigm–especially the centers' work with WID–shows that centers are the vanguard in reaching student writers.

And students are ready for centers to show them an ecological or "webby" approach since they come with a webby world view; many of them create their own Internet sites (and probably spend too much time surfing the web!) (Hawk 208). Accustomed as they are to webbiness, Byron Hawk argues in his *A Counter-History of Composition* that a new ecological approach can be useful: "In this new model of method and technê, particular heuristics are seen as parts of larger constellations rather than as abstracted general practices. This more open method fits our current electronic context and the complex ecologies in which students write and think" (208). Centers are right in the middle of this web approach for examining WID and literacy. By showing a new view of WID and literacy, centers can, at last, gain the attention of the composition world and be seen as making a contribution to Composition Studies.

Conclusion

With the help of ecocomposition, it can be argued that writing centers are in the middle of an important intellectual enterprise: they are demonstrating key writing principles to foster a more sophisticated perception of the writing process. Instead of seeing students as only isolated writers unaffected by their environment, writing centers—as embodiments of ecocomposition—show clients that they are part of a marvelous web of interaction, with centers and their consultants delineating the complex relationship of forces, from textural to linguistic (the ecosystem of the school) that affect student writers. Writing, thus, is not just a series of discrete Lego building blocks (invent, draft, revise). Centers show clients that writing is far more complicated, with student writers being part of larger environment that fashions them as much as they fashion it. Because centers embody this sophisticated, dynamic, intellectually rigorous approach to composition, they can, then, enact special roles on their campuses. As Christina Murphy has characterized the service of centers, "The potential

writing centers have to transform rhetorical communities of college and university campuses by extending and redefining the dialogue on literacy represents their most significant power and makes them agencies for change within academies" (285). With such a role, and with ecocomposition as a means to characterize writing centers, I, as a director, hope no longer to hear faculty tell their students: "Proofread your paper. Better yet, take it to the Writing Lab and have someone proofread it for you." Faculty should now view writing centers not as a remedy for comma faults but as places where their students come for help to sustain them in the web of the academy and all other places as well.

Works Cited

Bawarshi, Anis. "The Ecology of Genre." In Weisser and Dobrin 69-80. Print.

Bawarshi, Anis, and Stephanie Pelowski. "Postcolonialsm and the Idea of a Writing Center." *The Writing Center Journal* 19 (1999): 41-58. Print.

Brannon, Lil. "The Cultural Work of Writing Centers: Contesting Boundaries and the Importance of Local Resistance." International Writing Centers Association and the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing." 2nd Joint Conference, Minneapolis, MN, 23 Oct. 2006. Address.

Bruffee, Kenneth A. "Peer Tutoring and the 'Conversation of Mankind.'" *Writing Centers: Theory and* Administration. Urbana, IL.: NCTE, 1984. 3-15. Rpt. In *The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Writing Center Theory and Practice*. Eds. Robert W. Barnett, and Jacob S. Blumner. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2001. 206-18. Print.

Carino, Peter. "Early Writing Centers: Towards a History." *The Writing Center Journal* 15.2 (1995): 103-15. Rpt. In *The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Writing Center Theory and Practice*. Eds. Robert W. Barnett and Jacob S. Blumner. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2001. 10-21. Print.

Coe, Richard. "Eco-logic for the Composition Classroom." *College Composition and Communication* 26.3 (1975): 232-37. Print.

Cooper, Marilyn M. "The Ecology of Writing." *College English* 48.4 (1986): 364-75. Print.

———. "Really Useful Knowledge: A Cultural Studies Agenda for Writing Centers." *Writing Center Journal* 14 (1994): 97-111. Print.

Devet, Bonnie. "The Forgotten Clients." *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal* 3.1 (2005): no par. Web. 11 Nov. 2009.

Dobrin, Sidney I. "Writing Takes Place." In Weisser and Dobrin. 11-25. Print.

Dobrin, Sidney I, and Christian R. Weisser. "Breaking Ground in Ecocomposition: Exploring Relationships Between Discourse and Environment." *College English* 64.5 (2002): 566- 89. Print.

———. *Natural Discourse Toward Ecocomposition.* Albany, NY: State U of NY P, 2002. Print.

Drew, Julie. "The Politics of Place: Student Travelers and Pedagogical Maps." In Weisser and Dobrin. 57-68. Print.

Ede, Lisa. "Writing as Social Process: A Theoretical Foundation for Writing Centers." *The Writing Center Journal* 9.2 (1991): 3-13. Print.

Evertz, Kathy. "Can the Writing be a Liberatory Center When It's Also a WAC Center?" *Writing Lab Newsletter* 23 (1999): 1-4. Print.

Fleckenstein, Kristie S., Clay Spinuzzi, Rebecca J. Rickly, and Carole Clark Papper. "The Importance of Harmony: An Ecological Metaphor for Writing Research." *College Composition and Communication* 60.2 (2008): 388-419. Print.

Freire, Paulo. "The 'Banking' Concept of Educaton." From Ch. 2 of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Continuum Publishing Group, 1970. Rpt. *Ways of Reading: an Anthology for Writers. 4th* ed. David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky, Eds. Boston: Bedford, 1996. 212-23. Print.

Gillam, Alice M. "Writing Center Ecology: A Bakhtinian Perspective." *The Writing Center Journal* 11.2 (1991): 3-12. Rpt. In *Landmark Essays on Writing Centers*. Ed. Christina Murphy and Joe Law. Davis, CA: Hermagoras P, 1995. 127-34. Print.

Grimm, Nancy Maloney. *Good Intentions Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1999. Print.

———. "New Conceptual Frameworks for Writing Center Work." *Writing Center Journal* 29. 2 (2009): 11-27. Print.

Harris, Muriel. "Talking in the Middle: Why Writers Need Tutoring." *College English* 57.1 (1995): 23-42. Print.

Hawk, Byron. *A Counter History of Composition: Toward Methodologies of Complexity.* Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2007. Print.

Hawkins, N. "An Introduction to the History and Theory of Peer Tutoring in Writing." *A Guide to Writing Programs: Writing Centers, Peer Tutoring Programs, and Writing Across the Curriculum.* T. Eds. Haring, et al. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1985. 7-18. Print.

Johnstone, Anne. "The Writing Tutorial as Ecology: A Case Study." *The Writing Center Journal* 9.2 (1991): 51-56. Print.

Keller, Christopher J. "The Ecology of Writerly Voice: Authorship, Ethos, and Persona." In Weisser and Dobrin. 193-208. Print.

Kinneavy, James A. *A Theory of Discourse*. New York: Norton, 1980. Print.

Long, Mark C. "Education and Environmental Literacy: Reflections on Teaching Ecocomposition in Keene State's Environmental House." In Weisser and Dobrin. 131-45. Print.

Mahala, Daniel. "Writing Centers in the Managed University." *The Writing Center Journal* 27.2 (2007): 3-17. Print.

Miller, Susan, Ed. *The Norton Book of Composition Studies*. New York: Norton, 2009. Print.

Murphy, Christina. "Writing Centers in Context: Responding to Current Educational Theory." *The Writing Center: New Directions*. Eds. Ray Wallace and Jeanne Simpson. New York: Garland, 1991. 276-88. Print.

North, Stephen M. "The Idea of a Writing Center." *College English* 46.5 (1984): 433-46. Rpt. In *The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Writing Center Theory and Practice.* Eds. Robert W. Barnett and Jacob S. Blumner. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2001. 63-78. Print.

Odum, Eugene P. *Ecology A Bridge Between Science and Society.* Sunderland, MA: Sinauer Associates, 1997. Print.

———. *Ecology.* New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1963. Print.

Olson, Gary, ed. *Writing Centers: Theory and Administration*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1984. Print.

Owens, Derek. *Composition and Sustainability Teaching for a Threatened Generation.* Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2001. Print.

Spohrer, Erika. "What Margins? The Writing Center at the Small, Liberal Arts College." *The Writing Lab Newsletter.* 33.2 (2006): 7-11. Print.

Syverson, Margaret A. *The Wealth of Reality: A Ecology of Composition.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois, UP, 1999. Print.

Trimbur, John. "Peer Tutoring: A Contradiction in Terms?" *The Writing Center Journal* 7.2 (1987): 21-28. Print.

Waldo, Mark I. "The Last Best Place for Writing Across the Curriculum: The Writing Center: *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 16.3 (1993): 15-26. Rpt. in *The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Writing Center Theory and Practice.* Eds. Robert W. Barnett and Jacob S. Blumner. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2001. 415-25. Print.

Warnock, Tilly, and John Warnock. "Liberatory Writing Centers: Restoring Authority to Writers." *Writing Centers: Theory and Administration*. Ed. Gary Olson. Urbana, IL: NCTE: 1984. 16-23. Print.

Weisser, Christian R. "Ecocomposition and the Greening of Identity." In Weisser and Dobrin. 81-95. Print.

Weisser, Christian, and Dobrin, Sidney I., eds. *Ecocomposition Theoretical and Pedagogical Approaches.* Albany, NY: SUNY, 2001. Print.

SHARE [http://www.addthis.com/bookmark.php?v=250&username=compforum]