

# Writing Center Work Bridging Boundaries: An Interview with Muriel Harris

By Elizabeth Threadgill



*Muriel “Mickey” Harris has been one of the most influential figures in writing center research and practice for over three decades. She is currently Professor Emerita of English at Purdue University. She founded The Pur-*

*due Writing Center which she directed from 1976 until 2003. She also founded Purdue’s Online Writing Lab (OWL), and the Writing Lab Newsletter (<http://writinglabnewsletter.org/>) for which she continues to serve as the editor. She has contributed over 90 written works to the field, including several books and textbooks and many book chapters and journal articles. Professor Harris is an innovator of writing center theory and practice and an advocator for students, tutors, colleagues, and the work of the writing center. She has received many awards and honors from several professional organizations, including the National Council of Teachers of English Exemplar Award. Most notably, for her service to and scholarship in the fields of developmental education, learning assistance, and writing centers, Dr. Harris has been honored with a festschrift, The Center Will Hold: Critical Perspectives on Writing Center Scholarship (a festschrift in honor of Muriel Harris), and a namesake award, the Muriel Harris Award for Outstanding Scholarship, which the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) awards tri-annually.*

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**Elizabeth Threadgill (E.T.):** I know the work of the writing center does not merely center on writing; recent work in writing centers to incorporate conversation groups for English-language learners and to make safe spaces for quiet study are examples of what seems to be an important extension. What can you share about the developing nature of writing centers from your over 30 years of work and observation in writing centers?

**Muriel Harris (M.H.):** Because writing centers

move forward along with composition instruction and because both classroom instructors and writing center tutors recognize the constant innovations of technology as tools for communication, writing centers are indeed taking on more challenges, as are composition programs. For example, in the constantly changing world of new technologies, a major area of growth has been to learn about all the new modes of communication and ways to use them effectively for instructional purposes. Students come into writing centers with multimedia presentations, documents designed for the web, and so on; so tutors of writing have to increase their awareness of the use and effects of visual rhetoric and visual literacy. As a result, visual aspects of a document, audiences of different genres of texts, and style (especially concerning writing for the web, e-mail, and/or multimedia presentations) become part of the writing tutorial conversation.

Because online interaction with writers has increased so rapidly, some tutoring has moved online in the form of synchronous and asynchronous online conferencing, e-mail, blogs, video conferencing, iChat, and other ways of reaching students not meeting in the traditional face-to-face tutorial. These new modes require new ways to think about, practice, and offer instruction in effective written and nonverbal communication.

Writing centers are also much more active in being resource centers for teachers and students. Some of the more recent videos developed in writing centers are available on writing center websites or YouTube and are directed at a wider audience of both instructors and students. So there is this aspect of providing resources for instruction for any classroom where writing is either taught or is a component.

Another area of growth in writing centers has been to expand into community service. Centers may offer tutoring to people in the community, build bridges with high schools, and, in some cases, assist in the startup of secondary school writing centers or have college tutors work with high school students.

Finally, given all the skills writing tutors have to acquire, there have been studies noting how rich the tutoring experience is for tutors. For

example, the extutors who responded to a survey in a longitudinal study (Hughes, Gillespie, & Kail, 2010) talked about interpersonal skills, professional knowledge, and communications skills they gained as tutors which serve them well in the working world. This major study confirms numerous more limited studies demonstrating that the training and experience tutors acquire greatly enrich and deepen their education. And future classroom teachers also gain teaching experience from their tutoring experience.

**E.T.:** What part do you see writing center research playing in developmental education and learning assistance as a whole?

**M.H.:** Aspects of writing center research are related to developmental studies, particularly in relationship to answering questions such as how students learn to improve their critical thinking and communication skills and how individual differences create the need to apply different teaching and learning strategies. Investigating the verbal and nonverbal interaction between tutor and student leads to a better understanding of what successful one-to-one conferencing can do to enhance learning for all students. One of my research interests focuses on gaining some insight into how writers differ because attending to individual differences is a core ingredient of successful tutorials.

We can't approach each learner formulaically, and those who work in developmental education understand this. It's important to gain better insights into how each learner functions in order to help that person learn. Is there a problem with motivation? Does this person perhaps have a learning disability? Does this person learn more effectively in one way than another (e.g., visually, verbally, and/or kinesthetically)? Are there outside influences hindering this person's progress? What has been the person's literacy history? What outside constraints (such as jobs, family responsibilities, and so on) are limiting the student's ability to engage with the tutor in learning? All of these student characteristics impact learning, and educators in developmental education programs, learning assistance centers, and tutoring programs can apply such writing center research to their settings.

A recent project in Toronto in which groups of underprepared high school students were invited to attend special classes and use a writing center at nearby Ryerson University exemplifies writing center research with strong implications for developmental education and learning assistance (Moussu, in press). Ongoing assessment of that project will help developmental educators explore expanding the reach and scope of similar projects in order to better prepare students in high school for a successful career in college.

**E.T.:** What modes and venues do you envision professionals utilizing to complete the important future work of educating members in the field of developmental education and learning assistance on writing center theory and practice?

**M.H.:** Clearly, publications and conferences will continue to be important venues for educating each other about common interests. Although educators have to confront the economic realities of decreased funding for travel to conferences, they are increasingly aware of the need to talk, share ideas, and explain different contexts and concerns so that they can learn from each other across fields.

Interdisciplinary work is also important to educate professionals across fields; this work permits educators to move beyond the confines of their academic specialty to learn from people across the campus. Institutions of higher learning are promoting and supporting people coming together to offer a broader pool of ideas,

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methods, and experiences that address common or shared concerns. My area of tutorial instruction in writing supplements and supports courses in a variety of disciplines where writing is integrated into the curriculum as part of the "writing to learn" movement. In addition, writing centers are also able to assist distance learning programs via online writing instruction.

In Europe, academics are involved in what is called "dispersed publication," with the same work being shared in many venues, that is, in online publications as well as print publications, in video-conferencing, via faculty exchanges among universities, on websites, on listservs, and so on. The channels through which information flows back and forth have indeed widened. And much of what is learned from writing center scholarship shapes the materials that are offered online in all fields of education.

**E.T.:** The *Writing Lab Newsletter*, which you founded, provides a national forum for sharing challenges and best practices in writing center work. I know you also participate regularly in guiding those with writing center questions posed in the WCenter listserv conversations. You model the understanding that communication in all of these layers is important by advocating publishing in writing-center and non-

writing-center journals and various electronic forums. Would you talk a bit more about the work professionals do to interweave such varied forms of communicating with professionals in and beyond their immediate field of study and work?

**M.H.:** Well, on one hand, the advantage for me is that I truly enjoy and am invigorated by talking about the work of our field, so I tend to get up on my soapbox wherever I can. People tend to seek the segment of communication they prefer or find most useful. We simply meet each other in many different places now.

And I advocate venturing into other fields of study so that we can share knowledge about areas of mutual concern. Moreover, because writing centers are so often misunderstood as to what is involved in tutorial interaction and how tutorial instruction differs from classroom teaching, writing center scholars do need to help others outside our area of interest understand more about this nontraditional approach to learning. Some instructors have been heard to state that the work of a writing tutor is to proof-read and correct a student's paper, in essence to clean it up before the teacher reads it, an oversimplified and erroneous generality. Similarly, I assume developmental educators also contend with simplistic or simply wrong ideas about developmental education; it is important to share ideas and experiences about how to overcome such misunderstanding. And all too often, we contend with the efforts of administrators to end our auxiliary services either because they perceive no need or are trying to cut back to make up for deficit spending.

On my campus there was also a Teaching Academy in which more experienced faculty met as mentors with small groups of newer colleagues to talk about teaching. I mentored a group that consisted of faculty from engineering, education, mathematics, and humanities. We traded insights on effective teaching, visited each other's classes, traded resources, and reported on work in each of our fields. Such efforts can stimulate moving outside individual fields to learn about what colleagues across disciplines are engaged in.

**E.T.:** On a different note, just as there has been a shift in language from "remedial" to "developmental" education over the years, there has been a shift in the language used to title and describe writing centers. These spaces began their work as "writing labs." The current "writing center" title more aptly describes a space centered on writing, the process of writing, the thinking process involved in writing, and the social interaction often involved in writing processes. "Developmental" education may not have yet reached

its full potential in the holistic vision of the language used to describe it (especially in terms of shifting focus to the stages and processes of all learners). I'm wondering if there is any truth to this being a possible analogy to the "writing center" not yet reaching the full, holistic potential present in the language of that title? Related to that, would you shed some light on what it means for Purdue's Writing Lab to be a writing lab in a field of writing centers?

**M.H.:** It's difficult for names to accurately reflect the reality of different learning contexts. I suspect that "developmental" still has connotations of being a euphemism for "remedial." There's a common (and somewhat reductive) belief that "centers" evolved from "labs." They both exist and have existed simultaneously for years, and yet the names often reflect little about what goes on in that environment. One of the earliest "labs" is at a regional campus of the University of Wisconsin; it was—and is—a superb place that addresses multiple aspects of communication and encourages creative writing. And it's a "writing lab." There's a "writing center" in one of the California colleges that is almost entirely a "skill and drill" and self-instruction venue. The myth that "labs" offer older kinds of instruction whereas "centers" offer newer forms of instruction is simply incorrect.

When a few graduate students and I started the Writing Lab at Purdue, I realized that the word "lab" was one that would resonate with students at my institution as being a "help" place on campus. At Purdue, students augment their learning in "labs," and "centers" (there are dozens at the university) are either for faculty research or for mental and physical health (The Student Health Center, the Psychological Services Center, etc.). "Labs" are for seeing what works and what doesn't, for breaking chemistry beakers in the process of hands on experience, for working on processes by doing, or for asking questions and getting immediate feedback.

Labs on the Purdue campus are informal, open, and (I hope) student-centered. The same is true in other institutions, but on some campuses, "writing center" resonates better with students as a less formal, comprehensive individualized learning environment. It's a matter of local context. Names should be decided on a local, institutional basis.

As to the terminology, perhaps the most puzzling "name" for writing center specialists is what to call the people who work in a writing center. Many use the word "tutor," though that is misleading in some ways because it suggests someone who will "teach" students, even though writing tutors interact with students in ways that differ from most instruction. In some writ-

ing centers they are referred to as "consultants" or "coaches." So there's a linguistic challenge to come up with a term that conveys the type of collaborative interaction that happens between the tutor and writer.

**E.T.:** During an International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) conference workshop, you gave new writing center directors practical advice for establishing a new writing center. Do you believe that the work of establishing a writing center in today's educational climate is similar to or different from the work you put forth to establish the Purdue writing center in 1976?

**M.H.:** The work of starting a writing center is vastly different now given the new roles that writing centers have taken on, the advances in technology involved, and the need for accountability in times of diminishing resources. These factors were not as closely scrutinized back in the 1970s. Now there are also graduate programs that offer graduate-level seminars on writing

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center administration, and there's a wealth of scholarship in books, PhD dissertations, resource manuals, conferences, the WCenter listserve, the International Writing Centers Association website and its vast number of resources, and publications. And newcomers to the field now have a week-long Summer Institute for new writing center administrators, an intensive series of workshops in which more experienced writing center scholars work with people just entering the field. All of this scholarship is available to help the newcomer. So in that sense, people can start off much farther along the road than newcomers back in the 1970s and '80s. At the same time, expectations for demonstrating measurable impact of services on student success are greater.

**E.T.:** In some of your writing, you mention that the administration of writing centers is usually structured in a way that is collaborative and nonhierarchical (Harris, 2002). Would you elaborate on this structure of writing center administration?

**M.H.:** As an example, I'll offer an explanation of how the Purdue Writing Lab was structured. I insisted that since it was a nonhierarchical organization, everyone should take part in making major decisions. And that's what happened. In

terms of staff selection, the graduate and undergraduate peer tutor staff and I interviewed applicants for the peer tutor training course, and the peer tutors had the major voice in selection. They also selected from the training course the students who would become staff members with them. Together the current staff and I decided factors such as hours, length of tutorials, data collection policies, how technology was used, what proposals should be written and submitted, and so forth. There were also discussions to create budgets and assign other administrative tasks. This is not uncommon in writing centers.

Another way to work collaboratively was to establish coordinator roles for some of the tutors who were willing to invest the time needed and had strong skills to do so. They took turns coordinating the peer tutor group, leading the ESL conversation groups and being liaisons to the ESL program in the department, training the special group of peer tutors to work with professional writing (mostly resumes and applications), and, at various times, coordinating or being the liaison to other groups.

Instructor and student input also influenced data collection processes and resource selection. For example, students could try out some instructional resources and give feedback, help create data collection forms, and share their experiences and successes with writing center resources. In short, there wasn't a power structure in which the director made decisions independently; all of the stakeholders involved were consulted and given an equal voice. There were no top-down decisions, other than the one rule I asked all tutors to follow: "Your first comments about the student's writing must be positive, not negative."

**E.T.:** Purdue's Online Writing Lab (OWL) was a pioneer in online writing assistance, inspiring many other writing centers to establish online writing assistance centers, which the field has come to call OWLs after Purdue's own OWL. What purpose and audience did you have in mind when you established Purdue's OWL?

**M.H.:** My original intention was to make our cabinets of dozens and dozens of handouts available to students when the lab wasn't open (e.g., Sunday nights, when many students typically wrote their papers that were due on Monday). At that time, only e-mail was available, so all handouts were made available on an instant retrieval e-mail system. A student who wanted to check on an MLA format question, for example, could e-mail the system and get the MLA handout returned in a matter of seconds. Teachers who needed a handout to use in class could

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download whatever they wanted, print and make copies of it, and distribute it in class.

But I noticed that somehow, even without advertising, people all over the world began downloading those handouts. As I learned more about the Internet, the whole idea of freely sharing information online was obviously very appealing. When the technology developed further, my original focus of making OWL materials available to Purdue students and faculty remained, but the staff also freely answered questions sent in from around the globe. And I hoped that this would help writing centers everywhere to be seen as major educational resources for writing assistance. It became clear that this international use meant there was an international audience, too.

The idea of the Internet as a global space for freely sharing resources and ideas was an exciting concept, though it was difficult to convince

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administrators to provide funding, however minimal, to continue and to develop further. As our OWL expanded, an added bonus was the professionalization of the graduate students in the English Department who became the OWL Coordinators. Some of them have moved on to major roles in the field of computers and composition.

Readers might be interested to know that the term OWL began when a graduate student and I searched for a login for the first e-mail address. We thought about using "word" but worried about being seen as infringing on Microsoft's product and rejected "writing" because it is so often misspelled (most commonly as "writting"). Finally, as the graduate student and I stared at the computer monitor, we came up with Online Writing Lab and settled on the acronym OWL.

**E.T.:** Do you believe that the purpose of the OWL as a writing center component has changed over the years along with the students the OWL serves and the mode of online assistance (from asynchronous to synchronous online tutoring modes)?

**M.H.:** Most definitely. Writing center websites now have promotional videos to introduce students to the center. There are also videos on

using instructional materials and PowerPoints that writing centers use for workshops. Early on, we recognized the importance of making those PowerPoint presentations available on our website for teachers to use also. There are multiple forms of online tutoring (both asynchronous and synchronous) that use e-mail, audio and video conferencing such as Skype and iChat, software programs that allow both the student and tutor to see the student's paper on their separate computers, and even cyberspace centers in Second Life which provide the opportunity for writing center administrators to meet and discuss their concerns in a virtual format. Writing center websites are offering interesting data that can be used for research as well. The vast expansion of distance learning also makes such resources on websites even more important.

**E.T.:** You mentioned in another discussion we had that developmental educators might be particularly interested in research concerning how writing centers are integrating with learning centers and with libraries. Would you tell readers about some of these initiatives?

**M.H.:** The book *Centers for Learning: Writing Centers and Libraries in Collaboration* (Elmborg & Hook, 2005) is a highly useful collection of chapters by various authors on how writing centers and libraries are integrating services and building innovative programs. And many writing tutorial services are part of learning centers, especially where there is one centralized location for all instructional tutoring services. Developmental courses with a lab component can also see the benefits of this type of integration. However, some argue that the writing center can disappear within the library or learning center and lose its unique pedagogy and training. Others see collaborations with learning centers as convenient and effective ways for tutors to refer students back and forth, for example, from a writing tutor to a tutor who can help with study skills or reading comprehension. Again, local contexts would determine how successful such collaborations can be. Numerous articles about writing centers working with or in learning centers appear in the open, searchable archives of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, which is also available on some large library databases.

**E.T.:** At the 2010 European Writing Centers Association (EWCA) Conference, you were one of the keynote speakers on the conference topic of crossing national boundaries and linguistic borders. How do writing centers, learning assistance centers, and developmental education programs cross national boundaries and linguistic borders, especially to increase access and success for underserved student populations

and to increase better technology applications?

**M.H.:** Clearly, all these groups share a mission of educating students, and the increasing communication back and forth across borders means the flow of ideas, experiences, scholarship, and research reach across borders as well. Learning centers and writing centers have an important role in assisting non-native speakers of English in American institutions. And in Europe, there is a major need for writing centers and developmental education assistance because of the Bologna Process, an agreement among 47 countries; this agreement emphasizes “the importance of lifelong learning, widening access to higher education, and mobility” (European Higher Education Area, 2007-2010). As noted in that statement, there is the need to work with students who are frequently crossing national borders to move from university to university, to increase the ability of more students to attend institutions of higher education, and to continue the process of life-long learning. Elsewhere, in Asia, Middle East, Australia, and Africa, there are similar needs to work with students not reading or writing in the language of instruction in the institution. Better technology can assist such learning, both on campus and as distance learning. In addition to accomplishing these goals, a part of our shared mission is to do

a better job of explaining what we do and can accomplish, and why it's important. This can help our programs really cross boundaries.

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## NADE News: Capitalizing on Developmental Education

By Jane A. Neuburger, NADE President

The NADE Executive Board hopes you attended NADE 2011 in Washington, DC. Many thanks to conference co-chairs Dessie Williams and Vickie Kelly and all of the volunteers, presenters, and attendees who made the conference so exceptionally exciting! NADE members visited their congress members' offices; participants heard from Glenn DuBois, Chancellor of the Virginia Community College System; and Dr. Clyde Muse offered an intimate portrait of the love of his life, Vashti Muse, former NADE member and President in 1992. Jeff Zaslow's uplifting keynote spoke of staying connected to loved ones, in his words on Captain Sullenberger (*Highest Duty*) and Randy Pausch (*The Last Lecture*). *NADE, Politics, and Hot Apple Pie*, moderated by Hunter Boylan (NCDE), provided a forum for attendees to hear about recent initiatives from Sue Cain (the Kentucky Council for Postsecondary Education), Tamara Clunis (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board), Michael Collins (Jobs for the Future), Uri Treisman (The Dana Center), and Suzanne Walsh (The Gates Foundation). Dr. Jill Biden was in attendance for part of Thursday! Participants

enjoyed international panel presentations, a cultural heritage event in DC, and over 160 concurrent sessions including a CLADEA postconference leadership institute, and the “Get Your Walk On in D.C.” provided a fun way to contribute to the Martha Maxwell Scholarship Fund.

Outgoing President Marcella Davis installed the 2011-2012 officers as follows: President-elect Rebecca Goosen, San Jacinto College District; Treasurer Patrick Saxon, National Center for Developmental Education; Secretary Betty Black, Texas A & M Kingsville (retired); and Vice President Joyce Brasfield Adams, Hinds Community College. I am now current NADE President, moving from the President-elect position at installation.

Elisa Cohen, NADE elections committee chair, is accepting nominations for the 2012-2013 president-elect, secretary, and vice president. If you are interested in serving on the Executive Board, or if you would like to nominate someone, please consult the NADE website for position descriptions and nomination forms. Nominations are due by September 15th, 2011.

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