

Writing Center Administration and/as Emotional Labor



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Abstract: Scholars have offered research and theory about emotional labor and the feeling of emotion in rhetoric and composition, but we have little if any such research on writing center work specifically. Drawing on data from a year-long qualitative study of writing center directors' labor, this article examines writing center directors' emotional labor as valuable yet undervalued, fulfilling yet fraught. Emotional labor was work our participants had to do—and often wanted to do and enjoyed doing—in order to accomplish (smoothly, swiftly, or at all) the other tasks on their to-do lists. Emotional labor included tasks such as mentoring, advising, making small talk, putting on a friendly face, resolving conflicts, making connections, delegating and following up on progress, working in teams, disciplining or redirecting employees, gaining trust, and creating a positive workplace. Ultimately, participants suggest that emotional labor is difficult not because they must devote so much time to it, but because they have not been adequately prepared to expect and negotiate it.

In 2012-13, we followed nine new writing center directors for a year as they transitioned into administrative positions. Participants were a diverse lot, including directors at different levels (high school, community college, four-year university), geographical locations (both U.S. and abroad), and types of institutions (HBCU, for profit, public university, private college, charter school, boarding school). These directors held varied credentials (BA, MA, and PhD) and had different levels of experience in writing centers (ranging from no previous experience to several years of experience). We interviewed participants two to four times each semester, focusing on the labor they engaged in, the labor they wanted to engage in but didn't, and the host of factors that compelled or prevented labor they both did and didn't do.

We identified three significant forms of labor our participants engaged in: everyday (administrative), disciplinary (knowledge-making), and emotional (relational and performative). In this reflection, we briefly discuss how two of the new writing center directors in our study experienced emotional labor to illustrate the ways in which such labor is both valuable yet undervalued, fulfilling yet fraught. Emotional labor was work our participants had to do—and often wanted to do and enjoyed doing—in order to accomplish (smoothly, swiftly, or at all) the other tasks on their to-do lists. Emotional labor included tasks such as mentoring, advising, making small talk, putting on a friendly face, resolving conflicts, and making connections; it also included delegating tasks and following up on progress, working in teams, disciplining or redirecting employees, gaining trust, and creating a positive workplace.

The emotional turn in rhetoric and composition writ large is relatively recent. Published in 2003, Dale Jacobs and Laura Micciche's edited collection, *A Way to Move: Rhetorics of Emotion and Composition Studies*, sparked a growing interest in research on emotions and in theories of emotional labor that is just now making its way to writing center studies. Thus far, we have largely anecdotal accounts about the feelings and expression of emotion in tutoring (Barnett, Bisson, Hudson, Mills, Murphy, Speirs, Weintraub), but there is little, if any, empirical research on writing center administrators' emotional labor specifically.^[1] The research we do have on writing center directors, while clearly valuable, focuses on how positions are configured and staffed (Balester and McDonald; Erwin; Charlton; Griffin, et al.; Isaacs and Knight). A notable exception is Anne Ellen Geller and Harry Denny's recent award-winning article, "Of Ladybugs, Low Status, and Loving the Job: Writing Center Professionals Navigating Their Careers," which offers glimpses into writing center professionals' lived experiences and explores some of the potential consequences of participants' labor choices (administration over scholarship) on disciplinary knowledge making and institutional presence. Our research extends the work of Geller and Denny by bringing writing center directors' labor, including emotional labor, into focus. In doing so, we draw on Holt, Anderson, and Rouzie, who define emotional labor (they use the term "emotion work") as follows:

responsive attention to the emotional aspects of social life, including attention to personal feelings, the emotional tenor of relationships, empathy and encouragement, mediation of disputes, building emotional solidarity in groups, and using one's own or others' outlaw emotions to interrogate structures. (147)

Directors in our study, even those who would be considered the most "prepared," find the emotional labor of their positions difficult. Ultimately, we suggest that the invisibility of emotional labor in job descriptions and the dearth of scholarship on writing center director emotional labor might contribute to some of the surprise and difficulty of being a new writing center director.

Two New Writing Center Directors

Of our nine participants, we highlight just two here: Allison and Joe. They are similar in background (both have PhDs in rhetoric and composition), experience (both had extensive writing center experience in graduate school), ambition (both sought out writing center director positions for their first jobs), current institutional settings (both are at mid-sized, public MA-granting universities), and positions (both are in tenure-track faculty positions). Though all of our participants engaged in emotional labor, and we easily could have discussed any of them here, we selected Allison and Joe because they were the only two who became writing center directors as their first choice in careers and because they are the two that are in positions perhaps most familiar to other scholars in the field. We worried it might have been easier to dismiss the emotional labor of participants who fell into writing center work as simply an issue of their unfamiliarity with the discipline or their lack of experience. Our selection here, then, is affirmation that even our most conventionally prepared participants (in arguably the most ideal positions) engaged in and struggled with emotional labor in their first year on the job.

Allison

Allison's challenge in the first year is to reconcile her preferred approach to emotional labor with her chair's suggested model. Both see Allison's investment in relationship building with tutors and faculty across campus as central to the writing center's success. They differ, however, in ideas about what emotional labor should look like and how it should be accomplished. Allison favors a mentoring approach to tutor relations and a responsive partnership with faculty. Allison's chair admonishes her to supervise tutors and to lead faculty rather than to submit to their demands. Allison's chair fears the potential consequences of Allison's approach. Establish a mentor relationship with tutors, the chair reasons, and Allison risks being taken advantage of, her ethos compromised. Establish outreach with faculty and other units on campus, and Allison risks leaving insufficient time to write and publish, conditions of employment in her tenure-track position.

Allison tells us, for example, that while the chair has asked her to write and send out a press release to increase the writing center's visibility across campus, she has discouraged Allison from responding to department and division requests for workshops, especially when such collaboration takes Allison out of the writing center. Allison's chair isn't opposed to workshops, but she wants to ensure that Allison gets proper credit for conducting them. Whereas Allison values relational aspects of teaching and service, her chair values the credit Allison will (or will not) receive for those acts of service. Allison locates the value of her work in the effect it has on faculty and students. Her chair likely values this particular end result as well. What the chair also recognizes, however, is that Allison will secure tenure via tangible and explicit markers of leadership—in this case, as the person who plans and executes programs from within the writing center itself.

Allison's emotional labor with others is mediated by the emotional labor she must engage in to maintain good standing in her chair's eyes. This applies to Allison's relationship with her own tutors as well. Allison's chair encourages her to adopt a hierarchical, top-down leadership style with tutors. She tells Allison early on that, in her relations with tutors, Allison is to be their "leader," their "boss"—their "boss with a capital 'B'" to be exact, and she mandates that tutors call Allison "Dr." Allison tells us that she recognizes her chair's impulse to protect her: "I get that she wants me to get tenure and promotion. I get that she wants me to be successful within the university structure." As the disciplinary expert, however, Allison dislikes the hierarchical leadership model her chair encourages her to take up with tutors, especially its mandate against a particular form of emotional labor: "I don't think that's how writing centers work. I think you have to be somebody they [tutors] can feel comfortable saying, 'This went terrible. I did a bad job. I don't know what happened.' So that's been a constraint that I've been dealing with—negotiating being a leader while also being approachable."

Joe

Joe is his university's first tenure-track writing center/WAC director. As such, much of Joe's labor early on is focused on relationship building. Joe wants to build a writing center community, and he wants to garner tutors' trust in him as a leader. He knows that this relationship building work doesn't happen overnight and that he must be present to build those relationships. However, his status as faculty, writing center director, and WAC director means his time is divided. If he also wants to change the culture of writing and the teaching of writing on campus—and he does—he knows he must spend a good deal of time outside of the writing center, meeting and talking with faculty. He thinks strategically about going out to departments that might be persuaded to hold the same vision as he does. At the same time, he thinks about how he must be present in his home department so he can build relationships with his colleagues, a move he feels is significant for his tenure bid. However, Joe can't physically or emotionally always be everywhere. He often worries out loud about his health during our interviews, half joking about working himself to an early grave.

Joe also believes he must manage his emotional face by masking emotions and performing a particular, socially acceptable, and valued emotional stance. He thinks that in order to build his particular image of the writing center he has to appear friendly, welcoming, and warm. He explains, "I do think it's pretty much just like [I'm] 'always on'—just as a resource or to, you know, answer questions and things like that. I think that's just unavoidable." As he walks from writing center to home department and elsewhere on campus, Joe keeps up his performance by making sure he smiles—looks friendly and approachable. Doing so, he demonstrates behavior Arlie Hochschild's early work theorized: he engages in emotional regulation to appear as performing the expected emotion.

Conclusion

Guy, Newman, and Mastracci state that emotional labor is an "invisible, but necessary element in person-to-person transactions" (12); as we see, writing center work is driven by these person-to-person transactions. Most anyone who has directed a writing center knows that emotional labor is a crucial component of administration. What Allison's, Joe's, and our other participants' experiences bring into stark relief, however, is just how many relationships played into the writing center directors' labor and just how politically complicated those relationships were: directors had to forge, maintain, and grow relationships with their staffs, administrative assistants, supervisors, faculty, administrators, students in their classes, and users of their centers. Writing center directors' labor often involved weighing which relationships to prioritize. Sometimes one set of relationships jeopardizes another, as Allison's case illustrates. Further, as Joe's case suggests, directors in the study felt compelled to be "always on." Despite this, our participants told us again and again that the relational work they did was one of the most rewarding aspects of their job.

Our sense at the end of the yearlong study was that it was a shame or problematic not that the directors have to devote so much time to emotional labor, but rather that they hadn't been prepared to expect and negotiate it. Moreover, in the larger study, which we explore in much more detail in *The Working Lives of New Writing Center Directors* (forthcoming from Utah State University Press), we pay attention to how the emotional labor each of the nine directors intersects with their everyday and disciplinary labor. Sometimes, for instance, the relational work of emotional labor greases the wheel and makes other tasks easier, lighter, and faster. Other times, the exhaustion of emotion work can have consequences for the other tasks; long days of putting on a friendly face, mentoring, and negotiating leave little time and energy for our participants to do disciplinary labor. Though writing center lore has long suggested that directing a writing center is hard work, our participants' discussions of their work puts a finer point on this. Not simply fortifying stories of conquest or woe, the purposeful documentation of the working lives of writing center directors opens the door for richer discussions of writing center administrator labor.

Notes

1. Scholarship exists on the emotional labor of directing a writing *program* (for example, Micciche), which sheds some light on directing a writing center; however, our study suggests that writing center directors might have emotional work unique to their preparation, institutional settings, and the configurations of their positions. ([Return to text.](#))

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Return to [Composition Forum 34 table of contents](#).