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Sharing Our Stories: Using Narrative Inquiry to Examine Our Writing Centers

Introduction

Writing center tutors occupy an interesting role in the academy in that they exist on the border between instructor and student. Such a position affords them a unique perspective—while they, usually students themselves, can readily empathize with the students who visit their centers, they are members of an often exclusive community that gives them the power to advise their peers, makes them privy to English department drama and faculty quirks, and offers them, in many cases, a second home. Tutors’ existence within these realms can be so uniquely multidimensional and complicated that only they can truly understand the inner workings of the writing center community. While writing center work has largely been theorized and published in the form of more empirical research, the use of narrative inquiry to afford a glimpse into the writing center community is an extremely valuable yet overlooked method of inquiry. This is not to say that anecdotal contributions are nonexistent in writing center research. In The Everyday Writing Center, Geller et al. weave their own lived experiences as directors with those of tutors and students to offer a deeper understanding of what goes on behind writing center doors; however, they do not name narrative inquiry as their research methodology. Likewise, in Facing the Center, Harry Denny acknowledges the value of narrative in writing studies in that it “open[s] up this conversation about the policies of difference and identity for self-awareness, learning, and literacies” (19) and describes interactions that have taken place in his own writing center but
does not discuss narrative inquiry as his own methodology. The overall lack of attention given to narrative inquiry as a specific method of research has motivated me to use it in my own research.

My interest in this topic was sparked by an assignment in which I wrote my own critical narrative pertaining to my experience as a tutor at my undergraduate institution. I found that, through the writing of my narrative, I was able to unveil some deeply probing questions about my own tutoring practices as well as the actions of others that I observed during my time in the writing center: How does the notion of community manifest in the writing center among tutors, students, and faculty? Who is excluded from this community? How does language become a vehicle for both community and exclusion? As I tried to focus on a single thread to pull from that narrative and examine, I realized how intricately woven these threads were. I had intertwined my thoughts on community, exclusion, and language in such a way that they became something much bigger and posed much larger questions than I could muster by restricting my focus to just one area. The thing that gave my narrative its spark was not hiding in just one of those threads but existed within the story I was telling. This realization led me to question not only how valuable but how viable narrative inquiry could be as a method of writing center research. We can observe writing centers and theorize based on those observations, but the firsthand accounts of actual writing center tutors can convey the thoughts and emotions behind decisions made during appointments, the biases that lead to exclusive practices, and the profound connection that tutors have to their respective writing centers.

My specific research questions are as follows:

- What does autoethnography tell us about the notions of “community” and “exclusion” in the writing center?
• What autoethnographic narratives do I want to share with the writing center community?
• What is it about these narratives that convey the sort of information and provoke the sort of questions that I want to examine in writing center studies?
• What do these narratives suggest about the writing center culture and my place within it?

I will also examine a series of “subquestions” in order to provide some background and context to my research questions: Why have I chosen to focus on writing centers? Why have I chosen narrative inquiry as my method of research? What is narrative inquiry? What has been said thus far about narrative inquiry as a form of research, specifically pertaining to writing centers? What makes writing centers a particularly effective topic for narrative inquiry? Why is it more valuable to read about writing center practices from the perspective of narrative inquiry than it is to perform an empirical study? These “subquestions” will serve to provide a definition of narrative inquiry and allow me to articulate my reasons for selecting both narrative inquiry and writing center studies as the two pillars of my research project.

That said, this will not be your typical thesis. My first chapter will introduce and address the two questions that serve as the foundation of my research: why writing centers and why narrative inquiry? My first chapter will also include an exhaustive literature review that addresses what has been said about narrative inquiry and how narrative inquiry has been used in writing center research thus far. My second chapter will take a closer look at narrative inquiry as a method of research and discuss why it is particularly useful for the specific questions I want to explore. Chapters three and four will feature my own critical narratives in the form of vignettes,
each interrogating aspects of writing centers that I am interested in researching, specifically the ideas of community and exclusion in the writing center. Chapters three and four will also contain subchapters in which I provide a reflective analysis addressing both on its narrative form and contribution to writing center studies. In chapter five, I will tease out strands from these vignettes to afford a closer look at some of the issues that arise within my narratives. I will conclude my thesis by assuming a more academic standpoint and asking what it is that we draw from the use of narrative inquiry in writing center research.

It is possible that some of my own biases and limitations may color the analysis of my findings. I have a bachelor’s degree in creative nonfiction, so it is possible that I favor narrative as a form of writing more than others might in the academy. It is also possible that, with my experience as a writing center tutor, some may view narrative as I am arguing for it as too narrow-minded; some may argue that my experience could color my reflections in such a way that does not accurately report what other tutors, tutees, faculty, and administrators experienced. It could also be argued that I have not gained enough distance from my experience as a writing center tutor, as many writers like to put a considerable amount of time between an event or experience and writing about it.

The nature of the research method itself can also pose limitations in that it is based primarily on storytelling. Storytelling relies on memory, which as we all know can vary from one individual to the next. The way that I remember an event occurring may not be the same away another involved person remembers the same event occurring. However, narrative inquiry operates under what is often referred to as truth criteria; the examples given in Robert Nash’s *Liberating Scholarly Writing: The Power of Personal Narrative* include “trustworthiness, honesty, plausibility, situatedness, interpretive self-consciousness, introspectiveness/self-
reflection, and universalizability” (5). Jerome Bruner in *Acts of Meaning* adds “coherence, livability, and adequacy” to this list (as qtd. in Nash 5). In *Personally Speaking: Experience As Evidence In Academic Discourse*, Candace Spigelman references Aristotle in her reminder to “consider the ‘timeliness’ and ‘appropriateness’ of emotion-laden disclosures” (20). These scholars as well as others reinforce the notion that the criteria we use to evaluate qualitative research, namely narrative inquiry, is necessarily different from what we would use to evaluate quantitative research.

**Review of the Literature**

To help frame my argument that narrative inquiry is an effective vehicle for writing center research, I like to imagine my sources as existing within a car dealership—only the dealership sells methods of research in lieu of cars. In walks the only customer of the day: The Writing Center (who, since writing center studies tends to be a primarily female-dominated field, will adopt the pronoun “she”). The Writing Center is looking for a method of research—a vehicle, if you will—that will encapsulate her everyday goings-on—from the appointments to the administrative work to the inside jokes shared by tutors—and tell her story in such a way that provokes questions, inspires reflection, and creates meaning. “What sort of features are you looking for?” asks the salesman.

“Well…” she begins. She gives *The Everyday Writing Center* as an example of the sort of subject she would like highlighted in this research. She likes how Anne Geller, Michele Eodice, Frankie Condon, Meg Carroll, and Elizabeth Boquet collaborate to provide a collective perspective on the seemingly mundane details of everyday writing center life and transform those details into opportunities for learning. Their mission is best summarized by Kurt Spellmeyer in his proposition that instead of turning to theory, “we might start to explore an
alternative so mundane that we have passed it over time after time in our scramble for sophistication and prestige. That alternative is ordinary sensuous life, which is not an ‘effect’ of how we think but the ground of thought itself” (qtd. in Geller et al. 6). Their focus on “trickster” figures in the writing center, those “who teach us a habit of mind that helps us notice and revel in the accidental, the unforeseen, the surprise,” who facilitate “a community of practice that allows for change, mutability, learning” (12) is just the sort of thing she wants highlighted in a method of research. Instead of discounting the parts of everyday writing center life as irrelevant to the “actual” work that is being done—the mugs of hot tea shared by a director and one of her tutors during an impromptu afternoon conversation, the mystery of who keeps arranging the pushpins on the bulletin board to form a friendly greeting: “HI”—she’d like those to become a focus. While they’re at it, she’d like to see Etienne Wenger’s _Communities of Practice_ examined as well, since The Writing Center herself is a unique learning community where knowledge is formed during interactions between tutors and tutees, tutors and tutors, tutors and director, etc.

Luckily the salesman has just the thing for The Writing Center: narrative inquiry has been on the road since 1990 when F. Michael Connelly and D. Jean Clandinin coined the term in their article “Stories of Experience and Narrative Inquiry,” but is still considered an innovative approach to research today. He takes The Writing Center out onto the lot for a closer look. Opening the passenger’s side door and reaching into the glove compartment, he pulls out the owner’s manual: David Schaafsma and Ruth Vinz’s _On Narrative Inquiry_. Schaafsma and Vinz start by asking “Why does narrative matter?” and move on toward explaining why narrative is a uniquely effective method of research in the field of education. They state that “[r]esearchers in education who gravitate toward narrative inquiry are inherently interested in details,
complexities, context, and stories of human experiences of learning and teaching” and that “[n]arratives often reveal what has remained unsaid, what has been unspeakable” (1).

“That sounds a lot like what I’m looking for,” says The Writing Center. “Go on.”

Schafisma and Vinz emphasize that narrative is more than just storytelling, however—rather, it “give[s] shape to the telling” of the story (3). They offer different examples of how one might go about performing narrative inquiry as research—having both researcher and participant give their accounts of a particular situation in what they call “tandem tellings” (3), how to move toward purpose in a narrative account (12). Their book includes actual narratives to demonstrate the richness and variety that narrative can encompass as a craft.

Another helpful source the salesman suggests is *Narration as Knowledge: Tales of the Teaching Life*. At the start of the project, the editor, Joseph Trimmer, called upon English teachers to “write a personal narrative—a story about some event that had transformed lives” (x). He also asks them to “avoid presenting themselves as heroes”—to avoid glorifying the moments when they were the ones to finally break through and make the students understand something, but to more humbly acknowledge “the partiality of their knowledge and the vulnerability of their power” (xii). What follows are stories about reading, stories about writing, and all of the other things that go into what it means to be a part of an English classroom. They reveal the thought processes of an overzealous first-year TA as he is grading papers in his office (61), love affairs with professors and almost with students (191), and the trials and triumphs of an advanced composition class (84). While the collection is purposefully all story and no theory, it is deeply insightful, forming profound conclusions about what it is to teach and to be taught by one’s students in the most unexpected ways.
Candace Spigelman’s *Personally Speaking: Experience as Evidence in Academic Discourse* also uses actual narratives as examples, but her argument is that narrative can be blended with more scholarly discourse to provide a greater understanding of the learning that goes on in a school setting. She uses the term “personal academic discourse,” which she describes as a “blended approach [that] creates useful contradictions, contributes more complicated meanings, and so may provoke greater insights than reading or writing either experiential or academic modes separately” (3). She gives as a recurring example a student named Michelle who weaves stories about her family into school assignments, sparking the conversation on whether or not that combination is “appropriate” for academic writing (2). “Is that something you had in mind?” asks the salesman.

The Writing Center looks pensive. “Yes, those are all good things,” she explains, “but I’m also looking for something a little more… *critical*. My work is not always hot mugs of tea and friendly messages on bulletin boards. Sometimes my work is a little more complicated—issues of power dynamics, class, language, race, and sexual orientation come up and can be divisive among directors, staff, students, and faculty. Sometimes what we need to examine most are the everyday things that aren’t easy to talk about.” She offers Jackie Grutsch McKinney’s article “Leaving Home Sweet Home: Towards Critical Readings of Writing Center Spaces” as one such example in that it complicates what are perceived to be “necessities” in our writing centers in an attempt to make the space feel like home: the cozy couch, the coffee maker, the potted plants, the artwork on the walls (6). “At first glance, this organizing metaphor of home appears unproblematic,” McKinney states. “However, when we consider that ‘home’ is read differently by different people, the fissures in this metaphor appear” (7). When we promote this metaphor, we promote our interpretation of what “home” is like or should be like, which could
conflict with others’ realities of “home” depending on, for example, their economic class. On a different note, many students seek an environment that is different from “home” to be productive and get their work done, so if we strive to make our writing centers feel like a living room, we are doing these students a disservice. More seriously, many students do not have comfortable or safe home lives and thus have a negative interpretation of “home”; by making our writing centers more home-like, we could be alienating these students who might otherwise turn to our space as a safe haven. “So it’s not just the everyday interactions in the writing center that I want to have researched, it’s the seemingly mundane details of the space in which those interactions occur that interest me as well,” explains The Writing Center.

Harry Denny explores the issue of identity that arises within our everyday writing center interactions. *Facing the Center: Toward an Identity Politics of One-to-One Mentoring* is divided into chapters on facing race and ethnicity, class, sex and gender, and nationality. He directs our focus to the struggles that those of us in writing centers, directors, tutors, and students alike, face on a daily basis in regards to identity:

Identity is ubiquitous to the everyday life of writing centers. For them, struggles with face involve a complicated juggling of identities in relation to perceived audiences. A consultant calls me aside and shares an experience with racism that peers would dismiss as hypersensitivity. Other tutors’ tell me of students’ sexual advances, and another group speaks about gendered differences in students’ and consultants’ approaches to tutoring. Colleagues and students alike confide embarrassment at people’s reactions to their accented English. (8)

It is easy to pretend that our writing centers are neutral territories for tutors and students, but a closer examination of our everyday interactions can reveal otherwise. A tutor casually lamenting
to another tutor how frustrating her last appointment with an ESL student was can be overheard by another ESL student and give him reason to believe he is not welcome in the writing center. A student refusing an appointment with a gay tutor poses questions about how our identities create conflict in the writing center and what can be done about it.

The salesman scratches his head. “Those are a lot of specifications, I’d have to check our computers to see if there’s a model that—“

“I’m not done yet,” is the Writing Center’s prompt reply. In Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times, Nancy Grimm problematizes the function of writing centers in that they train students to think, talk, read, write, and adopt the values of the dominant culture (29). Despite our attempts to be open-minded, welcoming, safe places for students (we “help” students, after all), “we are merely helping them conform to institutional expectations” (29) when we guide them toward writing the “right” way in the “right” language: usually that which is spoken by white, middle-to-upper class Americans. Likewise, in Writing Centers and the New Racism: A Call for Sustainable Dialogue and Change, Laura Greenfield and Karen Rowan address the fact that, “[d]espite producing a solid and growing body of scholarship and research, the writing center field has to its credit only a handful of published writings that explicitly address race” (6). They point out how those of us who are involved in writing centers skirt around the question of whether or not our practices privilege white students over students of other ethnicities. The contributors featured in this collection explore the intrinsic racism imbedded within our writing center discourse and practices.

“I think we can find something that will suit you,” answers the salesman. In “Critical Race Methodology: Counter-Storytelling as an Analytical Framework for Education Research,” Daniel Solórzano and Tara Yosso discuss how the mainstream academic, or what they call
“majoritarian” narrative marginalizes the stories and experiences of people of color. Critical race theorists “draw explicitly on the lived experiences of people of color by including such methods as storytelling, family histories, biographies, scenarios, parables, cuentos, testimonios, chronicles, and narratives” (26). Their methodology “exposes deficit-informed research and methods that silence and distort the experiences of people of color and instead focuses on their racialized, gendered, and classed experiences as sources of strength” (26). Their focus on the experiences of people of color through narrative serves to counter majoritarian narratives that assume white privilege is natural and that people of color are culturally deprived; for example, many educational majoritarian narratives tell the story of the unmotivated black student (31) or the overachieving Asian student without giving those students a chance to show who they really are underneath the stereotypes that society has assigned them.

Similarly, in “Resisting Institutional Narratives: One Student's Counterstories of Writing and Learning in the Academy,” Rebecca Jackson focuses on “counternarratives,” or the stories offered by students to counter the majoritarian narratives imposed on them. She shares the story of “Yolanda,” a Hispanic, nontraditional student who, because she failed the written component of an admission exam by a narrow margin, is required to attend tutoring sessions (with Jackson as her tutor) in the writing center (surprisingly enough, all of the other students who are required to attend these sessions are also female, Hispanic, and nontraditional (24)). She “has been ‘narrated’ by the university as a particular kind of student, a ‘deficient’ writer,” explains Jackson (26). However, Jackson spends more time with Yolanda, she “come[s] to know Yolanda as a much more nuanced, sophisticated, and complex woman than the featureless character she plays in the institutional narrative told about her” (26). Both Jackson’s and Solórzano and Yosso’s articles demonstrate the importance of narrative in the sense of social justice—it allows
oppressed persons to speak out against generalized narratives that make assumptions about who they are according to their age, gender, economic status, sexual preference, and/or ethnicity.

“I think I’m convinced,” says The Writing Center. “But not everyone looks favorably on narrative inquiry as a method on par with more empirical research.” In “The Politics of the Personal: Storying Our Lives Against the Grain,” several well-known scholars share their thoughts on the increasing presence of personal narrative in academic writing. Gena Kirsch and Min-Zhan Lu begin by stating, “We are concerned about some of the uncritical celebration of personal narrative in recent years and the concomitant critical scrutiny given to those of us who do not wish to represent/live the personal in our work” (42). Likewise, Deborah Brandt claims that “[r]esearch . . . is a public interest enterprise” (42) and that theory and empirical research should be given precedence over personal narrative. Ellen Cushman echoes their concerns and suggests that the personal narrative of self-reflexivity should be less about the individual and more about the relations between the researchers and participant” (46); in other words, the camera lens should zoom out from the personal and strive for more of a panoramic view of the research.

“True,” responds the salesman. “But there are also pro-narrative voices in this conversation.” Anne Ruggles Gere claims that personal narrative, especially about her religious beliefs, is so much a part of her that she cannot disentangle it from her academic writing, though she tried when she first became an assistant professor (46). She laments the insistence upon secular to the exclusion of sacred” within the academy (47) and that those who express their spirituality within the academic “risk being exoticized” (46). Anne Herrington broaches the issue with caution, acknowledging that “in some instances, there is a methodological imperative to write of what we might view as private,” but that one should only turn to narrative when it is
relevant to the subject matter (47). While she does not believe that personal narrative has a “special purchase on insight or knowledge,” she suggests that we “try to bring ‘the personal’ into our thinking in conscious and critical ways and then decide for ourselves whether and how to include it in our public writing” (49). Richard E. Miller celebrates writing that uses “emotional states of discomfort and yearning visions of relief as ways to a better understanding of the institutions that have most affected all our lives, regardless of our race, class, or gender” (50). Lastly, Victor Villanueva supports narrative in the form of critical autobiographies, those that mix the autobiographical with the theoretical as a way of examining and critiquing our institutions (52). Although these scholars offer very different perspectives on the merits of incorporating narrative into academic writing, they agree that it is certainly a valuable method of relaying insight that cannot be achieved through empirical research.

“Yes,” nods The Writing Center. “When you take into consideration that writing centers are often crossroads for people of all backgrounds, I think that narrative would be an especially useful way to gain a better understanding of our practices and the decisions that inform them.”

“So,” says the salesman with a smile, “What can I do to get you into this car today?”

**Review of Methodology**

The purpose of this study is to build an argument for the value and viability of narrative inquiry as a means of researching themes of community and exclusion in the writing center. Because this project relies on narrative inquiry as well as autoethnography as its methodologies, I am both the population and sample for this study. F. Michael Connelly and D. Jean Clandinin coined the term “narrative inquiry” in 1990 and define the study of narrative as “the study of the ways humans experience the world” (2). They explain further that “narrative is both phenomenon and method. [It] names the structured quality of experience to be studied, and it names the patterns of inquiry
for its study” (2). The most fitting definition of autoethnography that I have found is from Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner: “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (739). My experiences, informed by literature on both writing center communities as well as narrative inquiry and autoethnography, serve as the foundation for this project. As is probably evident, this will be a qualitative study; it will, according to Frederick Erickson’s definition, “combine close analysis of fine details of behavior and meaning in everyday social interaction with analysis of the wider societal context—the field of broader social influences” (120). The conclusions at which I will arrive, if any, will be drawn inductively in response to the observations detailed in my narratives as well as the literature that supports my argument that narrative inquiry is not only an appropriate but effective method of exploring the concepts of community and exclusion in writing centers. My use of “if any” as a qualifier serves as a reminder that as a research method, narrative inquiry is perhaps most effective when it inspires both reader and writer to extend the dialogue and explore more deeply the topics presented within the narrative; while a richer understanding of the interplay of community and exclusion within the context of writing centers may certainly (and hopefully will) develop, to say that I will arrive at any definitive conclusions concerning, for example, the policies a writing center director should adopt in his or her writing center is not the purpose of my study. The purpose of my study is to build an argument for narrative inquiry within the realm of writing center studies, and if it should inspire writing center directors, tutors, students who use writing centers, or the faculty whose students use writing centers to look within themselves and engage in conversations about their roles within these communities, I will consider this study to have been successful.

Research Method and Appropriate Methods
To reiterate, my specific research questions are as follows: What autoethnographic narratives do I want to share with the writing center community? What is it about these narratives that convey the sort of information and provoke the sort of questions that I want to examine in writing center studies? What do these narratives suggest about the writing center culture and my place within it? In addition, I will examine the following “subquestions”: How am I qualified to share my stories? Why have I chosen to focus on writing centers? Why have I chosen narrative inquiry as my method of research? What has been said thus far about narrative inquiry as a form of research, specifically pertaining to writing centers? What makes writing centers a particularly effective topic for narrative inquiry? Why is it more valuable to read about writing center practices from the perspective of narrative inquiry than it is to perform an empirical study?

As Robert Nash reminds us in *Liberating Scholarly Writing: The Power of Personal Narrative*, “the best SPN [scholarly personal narrative] interview is the scholar’s self-interrogation” (18); I can think of no better way to demonstrate that my methods will thoroughly answer my research questions than to address each question individually, in interview-format if you will. To begin, what autoethnographic narratives do I want to share with the writing center community? The narratives I intend to share in this project will be my own. In order to demonstrate my own understanding of what constitutes an effective narrative, I will offer my own experiences and reflections (the latter of which I will discuss in more detail concerning my next question) as the primary focus of this project. The narratives I will share specifically pertain to the ideas of community and exclusion in the writing center. The first narrative juxtaposes the sense of community within my undergraduate writing center with the sense of exclusion that simultaneously existed within tutor-student, tutor-faculty, and faculty-student interactions. It focuses on an incident where an adjunct faculty member complained to me about his ESL
students, and while I was quick to point fingers at him for creating an exclusive environment, I came to realize that the community our writing center had created was not exactly inclusive either. My purpose in revealing how these two contradictory themes, community and exclusion, were both present in my undergraduate writing center is to urge those who are involved with writing centers to consider both the comfortable and uncomfortable aspects of their work: the positive and the negative, the bright side and the dark side, the beautiful aspects of our writing centers that fuel our devotion to this field and create long-lasting memories of our time spent there as well as the ugly parts—the implicit hegemony and even racism in what we consider to be academically-acceptable writing, our reluctance to help ELL students. It’s a story that encourages the reader to hold the mirror up to her own biases and tutoring/directing practices and ask herself, “Is there anything that I’m doing that might make someone feel unwelcome in this space?” Nash also claims that “the ultimate intellectual responsibility of the SPN scholar is to find a way to use the personal insights gained in order to draw larger conclusions for readers” (18). I hope that the issues I’ve raised in my first narrative will spark larger conversations about community, exclusion, and language in the writing center; the subchapters that I will include after each narrative will draw some of these larger conclusions through reflection and analysis.

As for my second narrative . . . it’s on its way.

I think the question that naturally follows pertains to the issue of my authority in telling these stories: how am I qualified to share my stories? Nash opens Chapter One of Liberating Scholarly Writing by referencing Tonya Stremlau in her assertion that critical narrative “enables a writer to both establish and question the authority of her experience” (qtd. in Nash 1). I like this description; I can establish the authority of my experience due to the fact that I have been an insider in the writing center community by working as a tutor at both my undergraduate and
graduate institutions. I know firsthand the allegiance that both tutors and directors—even students who become “regulars” through an extended series of appointments—can have toward their writing centers. To add to my credibility, I am enrolled in a program in which I have taken a class on writing center theory and practice as well as had the opportunity to present at IWCA; while I am only getting my feet wet, I feel that my academic experience I have had pertaining to writing centers has served to enhance my lived experience as a tutor. The foundation I have built in terms of my familiarity with writing centers makes me confident in establishing my authoring—questioning it, in keeping with Stremlau’s description of critical narrative, is equally as important. Introspection is essential to critical narrative. If I cannot hold a mirror to my own practices and behavior as a tutor, then what am I learning? How can I grow and improve as a teacher? Just as importantly, what will my readers carry away from my narrative? Nash states that “one of the reasons for going inside of yourself in an SPN is so that, at least some of the time, you can get your readers to go outside of themselves in order to see their external worlds in a different way” (60). By questioning my authority and admitting that I do not have all the answers, I hope to inspire my readers to initiate conversations about their roles within their writing centers.

The next two questions require us to take a step back and view my subject matter from a larger perspective: what is it about these narratives that convey the sort of information and provoke the sort of questions that I want to examine in writing center studies, and, while we’re at it, why have I chosen to focus on writing centers? As I have mentioned, my narratives examine the ideas of community and exclusion in the writing center. Perhaps the most obvious aspect of narratives that could convey these themes is their reliance on the insider perspective; my experience in the writing center enables me to build my perspective for the community theme.
I’ve always thought that writing center tutors occupy an interesting role in the academy in that they exist on the border between instructor and student; while they, usually students themselves, can readily empathize with the students who visit their centers, they are members of an often exclusive community that affords them special privileges and a sense of power. I know what it’s like to have my name and photograph posted on the writing center bulletin board. I know how it feels to be privy to English department drama and faculty quirks (exhilarating, I’d have to say). I knew I could use the refrigerator and the microwave in the kitchen at any time. I even had special access to the writing center on the weekends (when the English building was usually locked) so that I could work on my own papers. However, my understanding of what it is to be excluded in the context of the writing center is not as clear. I got a sense of it before working at the writing center at both my undergraduate and graduate institutions; it was nothing I could put my finger on, but I could sense that the tutors were an exclusive group from the photographs and memos hanging on the wall or the “EMPLOYEES ONLY” sign hanging on the door of the break room. I would feel awkward about stopping in to use a stapler; on one occasion I felt brave enough to ask to use the microwave, but after getting weird looks from some of the tutors while I stood waiting for my soup to heat up, I decided to stick to sandwiches for dinner. Even now that I am not currently employed as a tutor and especially since the writing center at my graduate institution has moved to a new location (Jackie Grutsch McKinney offers a revealing analysis of how space can affect the community dynamics of a writing center in “Leaving Home Sweet Home: Towards Critical Readings of Writing Center Spaces”), I no longer feel part of the writing center community. I have come full circle: outsider to insider back to outsider. I realize that I am still much more “insider” than I am “outsider”; there are those who may always feel excluded from the writing center, whether they are ELL students who feel anxious at the thought of
making an appointment, or even faculty who do not have a good reputation among the tutors (the focus of my first narrative). I know that my experience as well as my more academic knowledge have somewhat secured me a spot within the writing center community—it is the theme of exclusion in particular that I would like to examine in my narratives, since I cannot relate to that as well.

My reason for focusing on writing centers for this project is because, like the tutor’s role in the academy, writing centers also exist on a border. In a way, they serve as customs between the students and the university; students typically take their papers to the writing center to make sure they’re passable before turning them in to their professors. In a less intimidating metaphor, they can also serve as a safe haven for students who would feel more intimidated consulting their professors than meeting with a peer tutor. Many writing center directors strive to cultivate this latter image by furnishing their spaces with couches, coffee pots, and artwork, “operating under the tacitly accepted notion that writing centers should be welcoming, cozy, comfortable, friendly spots where talk about writing can happen . . . [W]riting centers should be like home” (McKinney 7). While writing center directors and tutors are well-intentioned in creating these home-like communities, McKinney draws our attention to the problems in doing so: “If a writing center is a home, whose home is it? Mine? Yours? For whom is it comfortable?” (16). These questions resonate with me in that they are similar to how I see the writing center community; if a writing center is a community, there must be insiders, and if there are insiders, then there are outsiders. This simple logic has spurred my interest in analyzing the interactions that go on within our writing centers, both spoken and unspoken, like the “EMPLOYEES ONLY” sign on the break room door. I wholeheartedly believe that writing centers strive to be inclusive, but they are often inadvertently exclusive. In what forms does this exclusion manifest? What practices
cause this exclusion? I feel that, as someone who has straddled the line between insider and outsider in the writing center, my narratives are a valuable resource in investigating these questions.

What do these narratives suggest about the writing center culture and my place within it? As a disclaimer, it is not my intention to malign the work that is done in writing centers, specifically within the centers that I will be spotlighting in my narratives. I hope to represent writing centers as places where positive things happen—where ideas finally “click,” where students stop first with news of a good grade on a difficult assignment, where tutors form long-lasting friendships with one another, and where directors form close mentor-mentee relationships with their tutors. These are the things that fuel our passion for writing centers and reassure us that the work we are doing is good. However, we would be remiss to fix our focus on the positive and not examine our own implications in the problems that exist within the academy. There are students who cannot pass freshman composition; are we reaching out to these students? Should we be? Will reaching out to these students cultivate a reputation that marks our service as remedial and drive away more experienced writers? Should we be worried about that? There are instructors who view their ELL students as deficient; do we find ourselves “cleaning up” or “fixing” ELL work? What message does this practice convey about our attitudes toward ELL writing? Are we actually helping ELL students by doing this? Nancy Grimm mentions in Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times that “often, writing centers inadvertently distance themselves from the academic work of the university by representing writing centers as places where students can find refuge, comfort, and support. These representations gloss over the identity struggles that students experience in literacy learning and ignore the gatekeeping function of literacy” (10). I want my narratives to discourage that
glossing over—to acknowledge the positive, but to examine our problems so that we can extend our reach to more students, or in other words, widen our community.

I would also like to keep the following idea in mind throughout my narratives: tutors are usually students themselves; likewise, directors have lives outside of the writing center. We come to this practice with our own experiences, biases, outside commitments and responsibilities, etc. From my experience as a tutor, I know that long shifts spent helping other students with their papers can be frustrating when my own workload is piling up. We can wholeheartedly want to help the students who visit our writing centers, but we are only human; there is only so much of ourselves that we can give. I think that this is important to consider when examining where we fall short in terms of helping students. It levels the playing field by holding everyone accountable. I would like my readers to ask themselves, “Where do I draw the line between ‘them’ and ‘me?’ When do I have to put my needs first? When is a job just a job?” I think that we can all remember a time when we had to exclude someone—had to cancel an appointment with a student, had to turn down a request for help—and that is why I think that narrative is such an effective medium for prompting this sort of introspection. I will share my stories in the hopes that they will bring to mind some of your own.

Since the last of my research questions involve narrative inquiry in terms of its legitimacy and effectiveness in the context of writing centers, I will attempt to answer them collectively by highlighting some of the elements of narrative inquiry as a method of research that most complement the field of writing center studies; in other words, what can narrative inquiry accomplish for writing centers that other methods of research cannot? To begin, narrative inquiry is a remarkable tool for extricating meaning and larger themes from data (i.e. stories) that may not necessarily have been the researcher’s original intention. This is not to say that, when I sit
down to compose a narrative, I do not have certain themes in mind to shape my story; as David Schaafsma and Ruth Vinz remind us, “to narrate . . . is to do more than ‘give’ an account or ‘tell’ a story. The verb narrate suggests shaping . . .” (3). What makes narration different than merely recounting the details of an event is that “[scholarly personal narrative] writers intentionally organize their essays around themes, issues, constructs, and concepts that carry larger, more universalizable meanings for readings” (Nash 30). My intention could be to write a piece on tutors’ interactions with ELL writers and it could evolve into a piece on how language biases affect ELL students’ academic success. Sometimes just the process of writing is what is necessary to unearth other elements or issues; this is especially useful for writing centers in that they provide a service to a usually diverse community. Writing center directors are interested in how to reach more students, build networks with faculty, aid student retention, etc., usually because they must prove their worth to the university in order to receive funding. Since directors are continually looking for ways to improve their centers, narratives that unearth potential issues or concerns (such as, in my case, the ways in which certain students or groups of students are excluded in the writing center) could provide a new and useful perspective. After all, “research grows out of the telling, questioning, and rendering of narratives. What further questions are the stories provoking?” (Schaafsma and Vinz 3).

Other methods of research can be used to collect data with the intention of improving the services that we offer in our writing centers. We can survey students post-appointment to inquire about their experience: were they made to feel welcome? Did they feel that their questions were answered? On a scale of 1-10, how likely are they to return to the writing center for future assignments? This information can certainly be helpful, and its ability to be neatly packaged into statistics allows it to be more easily conveyed to those who are not as familiar with writing
center operations (i.e. university administration). However, the firsthand accounts of tutors and
directors or even students who choose to share their experiences in narrative form communicate
information that cannot be conveyed in numbers. Nash describes it like this: “Your own life tells
a story (or a series of stories) that, when narrated well, can deliver to your readers those delicious
aha! moments of self and social insight that are all too rare in more conventional forms of
research” (24). Narrative also benefits those who are not familiar with the field of writing centers
(or any field with which it might be dealing, for that matter) in that it uses more casual language;
for this reason, it is more accessible than other forms of scholarly research. Nash states that “it’s
a willingness to be vulnerable in language that the other understands” (44); narrative is less
guarded in that it does not hide behind esoteric language and field-specific terms. It tells a story
through “casual musings [that] . . . carry the promise of creating an intimate tie that binds author
and reader, sender and receiver, if only for the moment” (Nash 55-6). Nash asks, “Why can’t
academic writing do the same thing without compromising its fundamental, intellectual values?”
(55-6). To answer him, it can—but only if we accept narrative as a form of academic writing that
is just as valid as more scholarly writing.

The value of narrative also exists within its reflexivity; “[it] can take many different
forms. While it is personal, it is also social. While it is practical, it is also theoretical. While it is
reflective, it is also public. While it is local, it is also political. While it narrates, it also proposes.
While it is self-revealing, it also evokes self-examination from readers” (Nash 29). The way in
which my story of an adjunct faculty member’s inability to understand the writing of his ELL
students provides a window into a larger conversation: how does our society treat people who do
not speak English as their first language? When narratives form a bridge between what Nash
describes as the personal and the social, the reflective and the public, and the local and the
political, we can see how our accounts of what happens in our writing centers can contribute to a greater cause.

**Data Collection**

My project is interesting in that my “data” will be drawn from my memory; I will not be collecting much, if any, external data, since my project is largely autoethnographic and derived from my own experiences. As I mentioned previously, I have written one critical narrative that I plan to use in my project, and I intend to write one more. Additionally, I have conducted an interview with a person involved in writing center studies that I may use to inform the writing of my second narrative.

My first narrative was written without the foreknowledge that it would become part of my thesis. The instructions were to “write a narrative in which you explore and critically reflect upon a writing, teaching, or tutoring experience that continues to bother, perplex, fascinate, or challenge you” (Jackson). While I had jotted down a handful of different experiences, the one that stood out the most was the incident I had had with the disgruntled adjunct instructor; it prompted me to examine questions that had been left behind unanswered questions and resurrected other memories from my undergraduate writing center days that it became fodder for what I consider to be a successful critical narrative (more on that in the next section). I intend to follow these same instructions for the other narrative I will include in my thesis; this time, however, I will be focusing on the themes of community and exclusion, so I will write about an experience that allows me to highlight those ideas.

As I have mentioned, I have conducted an interview with my former undergraduate writing center director that I may use to inform the writing of my second narrative or possibly even the subchapter after my first narrative, considering that we discussed some of the details
from that narrative in our interview. I conducted the interview via Skype and used a program called Amolto Call Recorder (Skype-compatible software that allows Skype conversations to be recorded). My interviewee was aware that the software was being used and was informed in advance that the conversation would be recorded. Following the interview, I played back the audio recording and manually transcribed the interview. I then coded the transcription looking for key words such as “community,” “exclusion,” and “faculty” in an attempt to analyze how these ideas interacted with one another. My coding process consisted of printing out the transcribed interview and using different colored markers to highlight these words—I found this to be a fairly effective and interesting process in that I could physically see how much interview time was devoted to each subject as well as how the interview progressed from subject to subject. That said, I do not think that I will be conducting additional interviews for the remainder of this project; soliciting narratives from writing center directors and tutors is something that I have considered, but for the purpose of the interview, I will be drawing on my own experiences.

My rationale for using these techniques is that they are fueled by my real experiences in the writing center. They are autoethnographic in that they “[display] multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis and Bochner 739). The “data” I will be using is what Nash calls “the raw material of [my] day-to-day experiences” (27). Basically, my project is different in that my process is also my product. While the focus of my project is my own narratives, the process of how I arrived at those narratives is equally important and will be analyzed as well.

**Data Analysis**

The subchapters that I will include after each narrative will provide further reflection and analysis on both the content of my story as well as my writing process. I have an extensive
working bibliography that I will use to inform both the more “meta” conversation of my writing process as well as books and articles written by writing center scholars. I will use this literature to gauge, as I mentioned previously, how “successful” my narrative was in terms of how much further conversation it was able to generate. I think that the true success of narrative lies in the conclusions its readers are able to draw from it, but for the purposes of this project, I will be the one reflecting on my narratives and perhaps consider other angles that might lead to different conclusions in my work; for example, what would my first narrative look like had I considered the perspective of the “angry adjunct”? Further analysis and reflection will be the bulk of the conclusion to my project, where I intend to take a step back and look at how narrative inquiry has enabled me to initiate conversations and draw conclusions from my narratives that could not have been otherwise drawn in other methods of research.

Summary

The purpose of this study is to build an argument for the value and viability of narrative inquiry as a means of researching themes of community and exclusion in the writing center. Using narrative inquiry and autoethnography as my methods of research, I will provide two of my own narratives that will serve as the focus of my project. The narratives will focus on my experience in the writing center, particularly that which highlights themes of community and exclusion as they pertain to students, tutors, directors, and faculty. Narrative inquiry is valuable in that it uses personal experience to dig more deeply into larger issues. Since writing centers are places that rely on person-to-person interaction, I am interested in delving into that interaction and the seemingly mundane events that occur on a daily basis to draw some larger conclusions about our biases and tendencies as tutors, directors, students, and faculty. Narrative inquiry provides bits of social insight in casual language that is understandable to the reader; because of this, it is more
accessible than other forms of scholarly research and can reach those who are not as familiar with the writing center field.

The next chapter will consist of my first narrative, “The Angry Adjunct,” followed by a subchapter that will invite additional conversation about the story. The subchapter can be best described as “Villanueva-esque” in that it will incorporate more outside sources from both the fields of narrative inquiry as well as writing center research as to lend more voices to the conversation. The subchapter will ultimately serve to answer the question, “How can my narrative help those in writing centers who have experienced similar situations?”
Works Cited


Appendix

Project was exempted from full or expedited review by the Texas State Institutional Review Board on November 5\textsuperscript{th}, 2012.