

**Writing Zones 12.5—The University-Community Writing Center as a “Borderland”
Resource**

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Knowledge Crossing Borders: Opportunities & Challenges in Regional, Transnational, and
Global Collaboratives

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Introduction: Who are you? Who is we?

After a recent yoga class, which is where I have all of my important disciplinary insights, I chatted with a colleague. He is an adjunct at a small, competitive, private institution not too far from my own mid-sized public university, and he has been entrusted to run their writing center. (This is an indicator of the value placed by that institution on the writing center—that it is run by a part-time faculty member, certainly with growing hands-on but limited theoretical expertise in the area.) We discussed the fact that there is no one “correct” model for “delivering” writing instruction at the university, but how there may be quite a few wrong-headed models. He was concerned with the imprisoning of writing instruction to a “freshman seminar;” with faculty across the curriculum’s interest in having students “write well” but their disinterest in teaching writing; with students’ often-rigid ideas of what constitutes “good writing” or even “learning;” and with challenges of assessment and evaluation.

Near the end of the conversation, I noted that Comp/Rhet specialists find themselves in a difficult bind: we both want to claim expertise in a subject area (writing, rhetoric, composition) and we also want most of our colleagues to claim enough expertise to teach this “subject.” Perhaps the problem lies in how we define what it is we teach in Composition—and I am well aware that I am far from the first compositionist to suggest this as a central dilemma in the field: who are we? That is, identity and subjectivity are central tensions in this field.

Writing centers, my yoga-attending colleague and I agreed, in some ways help out with this dilemma. Writing centers’ mantra is this well-known axiom (well-known in the tiny circle of writing center experts, that is): “Better writers, not better writing.” This maxim is a statement about *who*, from which the *what* and *how* of writing ostensibly follow. Certainly some general corollaries follow, including: the writer should remain in control of her text; mentors should be non-directive (ask questions, listen, and engage in dialogue); rapport is critical to a successful writing center session; start with higher-order concerns first; all writers, not just “remedial” writers, need help with their writing. This is a list of practices, in which writing center directors train their mentors, myself included. These practices can help address the concerns I began with: writing center sessions are dialogical conversations not the evaluative responses faculty must give; writing mentors are encouraged to start with what writers do well and what their concerns are, rather than outside prescriptions of what good writing is; writing centers

can support faculty who aren't confident in their own abilities and breathing space to teach writing, in any area of the university.

However, these practice are indeed practices, procedures, and can be enacted with a whole variety of relational (who) orientations, orientations toward the O/other, (which is also an orientation toward the self). Practices are implicit parts of, but do not explicitly theorize, the relational work that occurs in writing center sessions. This paper is meant to step back from that more common notion of writing center work to a broader notion of what happens in a writing center, particularly a community-university collaborative like Writing Zones 12.5. My aim is to conceptualize writing centers as a productive "third space," to offer some examples from my own program, and to offer a heuristic for thinking about other potential third spaces in other local academic contexts.

Theoretical perspectives I: Writing mentors as *mestiza dulas*?

In *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, (Anzaldua)Gloria Anzaldua's theo-spiritual-historo-cultural self-portrait, Anzaldua portrays herself as a subject with complexity of experience, a colonized subject who can and does resist and interrogate her own positioning by others, and through that positioning find authentic strengths and liberation.

*I am fully formed carved by the hands of the ancients,
drenched with the stench of today's headlines. But my own hands whittle
the final work me (195)*

Here Anzaldua represents herself as formed by both "the ancients" and "today's headlines," but not overdetermined by either influence. Ultimately, it is her "own hands" which take an active role in the formation of a self.

In this framework, strength comes from a strategic—or perhaps tactical—adoption of *mestiza* identity—a complex and often flexible/permeable identity, which contributes to a living a life aware of oppression but not dictated nor destroyed by it. The *mestiza* is an agent, oriented toward knowledgably and locally responding to and struggling against oppressive lived experiences, discourses and literacies. She is not a passive subject, caught in the crossfire of conflicting discourses which position her as a problem: at best, marginal and thus insignificant, or an enigma, unknowable and confusing, and possibly threatening and dangerous. A *mestiza* consciousness finds in one's own Otherness the seeds of positive outsidership.

That is, yes, colonial discourse situates Anzaldua—a Latina who grew up on the border of Texas, a woman, a lesbian—as Other, impenetrable, abnormal, the foil against which “normal” can be comfortably seen and lived. Her *mestiza* consciousness, while recognizing this positioning by others, suggests that such alienation from problematic discourses is not “bad.” In fact, it can lead to liberation for the colonized subject (from oppression) and for the dominant culture (from false dualisms and all that that leads to—hierarchies, injustice, violence, etc.). A *mestiza* consciousness rejects the binaries, not by saying they don’t exist, but by scooping them up into the clay which molds into self.

Anzaldua uses the metaphor of birthing, the self in the womb. Could we doing writer center work stretch the metaphor to its end and say that it might be possible to be, perhaps not midwife, but dula (birth coach) to some student writers’ *mestiza* identities, particularly vis-à-vis schooling in relation to their other identities?

Theoretical perspectives II: Literacy and discourse in third spaces

So, how does a *mestiza* consciousness get fostered? Or, where—in the real, concrete world, and metaphorically? “Third space” is a term derived from post-colonial theory. It refers to in-between “spaces” that are not empty voids, but gaps, interstices that can be productive. Third space entertains a similar perspective to a *mestiza* consciousness, but I wanted to call this metaphor into use here because it suggests locations, rather than persons or subjects. And I like it as alternative to borderlands, perhaps because, while I myself tend toward outlaw affinities, some people might find “third space” a less encumbered term than “borderlands.” It suggests a bridge to cross from one side to another.

Writing centers can be thought of as borderlands or third spaces, places where our mentors might serve as dulas, birth coaches, to a *mestiza* consciousness. Debra Pane (Pane) argues that third spaces are productive in a variety of non-traditional educational settings:

People in any community are assumed to have access to and draw from multiple funds or resources to make sense of the world. Being “in-between” (Moje et al., 2004, p. 1) various funds of knowledge and Discourses can be both fruitful and limiting for development of identities and literate, social, and cultural practices.... Third spaces are the in-between, or hybrid, spaces where the seemingly oppositional first and second spaces work together to generate new third space knowledges, Discourses, and literacy forms.

In other words, what might look like diametrically opposed literacies and Discourses—think, five paragraph essay versus hip-hop lyrics; think lab report versus text messages or Facebook posts; think research project versus church sermons—might be productively brought together to generate new knowledge and literacy forms, hybrid D/discourses (Gee). This type of synergy or even syncretism rarely happens in “first” or “second” spaces—e.g., school versus community, or in Pane’s research, the official spaces of the prison versus “the outs.” But in third spaces, Discourses can be brought together. If such Discourse merger, or even clash, becomes conscious—a conscious strategy for those enacting the merger—then it may have the effect of shifting the user of that strategy toward a *mestiza* consciousness.

Shannon Carter uses the term “rhetorical dexterity” to talk about students who utilize their knowledge of literacy or rhetoric in one context to transfer over and communicate effectively in other contexts (Carter). A *mestiza* consciousness, one that does not accept that certain discourse/literate practices are “Other” and problematic, is more likely to effect rhetorical dexterity. *Mestiza* consciousness says *my outsider status is a benefit, a bonus*, and uses all knowledges available to respond to local conditions, be they an essay on immorality in characters in the *Scarlet Letter*, due the next day, or the eulogy delivered last year at a friend’s funereal, a young person lost too early due to drugs. In a very practical way, a *mestiza* consciousness does not keep these lived experiences in separate boxes. I would argue that writing centers as third spaces can foster *mestiza* consciousness.

Pane further elaborates these four valuable orientations to knowledge and literacy which she proposes occur in third spaces:

1. Generat[e] **new interpretations of both everyday and academic knowledges** as it is “produced in and through language as people come together” (Moje et al., 2004, p. 43).
2. Explore **literacy learning as a bridge, or scaffold, and navigational tool** to move students through their zones of proximal development from marginalized (e.g., everyday) to privileged (e.g., dominant) content academic knowledges and Discourses (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejada, 2003).

3. “**Challenge, destabilize, and expand literacy practices** that are typically valued in school” (Moje et al., 2004, p. 44).
4. **Stud[y] the complexity of spaces populated by groups of unequal power** (Wilson, 2003). It has been used to understand the dissonance between the first space of official...discourse and the second spaces of [marginalized subjects] intense, unvoiced thoughts ... (emphases added)

These orientations are rarely tolerated in official first spaces, nor are they necessary in everyday second spaces.

Writing Zones as a community-university third space

The overview of how Writing Zones works is contained in the appendix to this paper, and I will not take the space to review it here. Rather, I will present some examples of how WZ functions as a third space. The following examples came from discussing this idea with mentors:

1. Mentors work with high school materials (novels, other school texts/papers, out-of-school texts) which are often known better by the high schoolers than the mentors themselves; high schoolers work with mentor materials (one mentor described how she “whipped out a syllabus” in one session). Mentors described this interaction as a two-way feedback loop where new interpretations of these spontaneously shared texts are generated. In such a two-way interaction, it is difficult to maintain us-them relations. Therefore, the positioning of student writer as Other (especially if that writer is marginalized due to class, ethnicity, race or first language) and those who represent the world of school (teachers, administrators, text book writers, test-makers, etc.) as “normal” is disrupted.
2. Students often bring in a range of writing—not just essays for English classes—including creative non-fiction, novels, poetry, hip-hop lyrics, and other arts-related writing which they rarely, if ever, get validation for in their coursework. The students we see are sometimes proficient creators of out-of-school (everyday, marginalized) literacies (see highly developed Facebook pages), yet still need supports to connect these skills to in-school success. Writing Zones mentors approach these ungraded/ungradable pieces as valuable on their own, and mentors are trained to see these out-of-school literacies as resources and strengths to draw on for marginalized students to “cross borders” of schooling. Success in one venue of literacy can be used, with the right scaffolding and support, for success in other (dominant, privileged) venues. This scaffolding is particularly

useful for students who are culturally, economically or linguistically marginalized from higher education. Because of the in-between role that mentors occupy in the third space of the Writing Zone, there is no institutional obstacle to viewing community language and background as a strength. By contrast, unfortunately, a deficit (“problem” or Other) perspective is often built into the dominant school Discourses (e.g., those students are ELLs; those students are lower-level; those students lower *our* test scores; those students need to be coerced into preparing for college).

3. Mentors are trained to focus on student strengths as manifested in a particular piece. Mentors talked about always finding what is powerful or effective in a piece that a student might bring in, or even a set of discussed ideas which are yet to be put on paper. Sometimes these strengths are not those that are typically valued in school settings, which can serve to destabilize rigid conceptions about literacy, certainly for the writer, often for the mentor. And if the student writer maintains what she and the mentor have identified as a strength, even if those moves are “outside the box,” literacy practices in the school setting may even be destabilized. For example, if students mention mentor feedback to teachers, teachers may question taken-for-granted assumptions about writing or literacy.
4. Mentors help to “translate” between teachers and students, working to help bridge gaps between student understandings and teacher demands. Because of the one-on-one and non-evaluative nature of the writing center setting, mentors have the time and the relational space to understand obstacles to student learning. Sometimes the gaps in understanding have to do with assumptions held by the student writers about what they “have to do” to get good grades. Some silences that students manifest in a classroom context are due to withheld feelings or unspoken feelings of being invisible or misunderstood. Some of these are due to cultural conflicts and many are due to power differentials. At their best, mentors are trained to listen for silences, ask questions about what is going unsaid, and just listen. Then they can help students to be active agents in the situation, whether they are encouraging students to ask questions even if it is uncomfortable in a particular classroom, addressing the fact that teachers assume students have a space at home to do homework, or helping students make flexible decisions about lexis, grammar and content to both meet the constraints of assignments and perhaps also push against them.

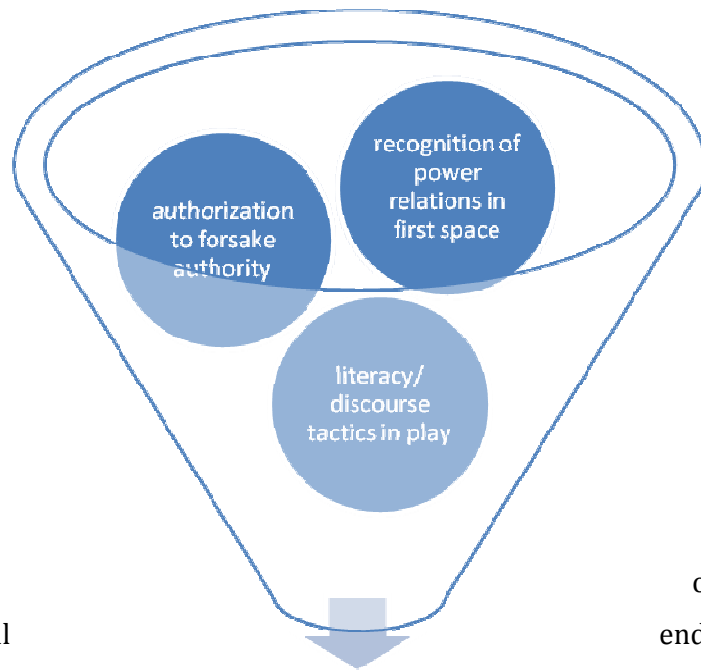
Conclusion: Literacy dulas in third spaces—Authorized to recognize and forsake authority

In sum, mentors see themselves as on a productive borderline of authority. As neither teachers nor students, they don't have a preset identity in the school setting. There are few institutional discourses which mandate their behavior. As a final concrete example, in our current bilingual setting, students literally translate for each other in Writing Zones group or paired sessions. If teachers are not fluent in the predominant second language, as is the case for many teachers with whom we work, teachers are often conflicted about allowing first languages into school settings, because it seems chaotic, and they cannot control what students are talking about. Mentors have permission—exactly because they do not have authority (in fact they are authorized to forsake authority)—to allow potential chaos.

Even the supposed mantras or rules of writing center practice (writer remains in control of her text; be non-directive and dialogical; help is not remediation; don't evaluate; start with writer's strengths and concerns; focus on higher-order concerns first; good writing is context-dependant) get broken, bent, twisted in the actual, local, hands-on of a session. Tactics happen irregularly and spontaneously, in response to conditions on the ground. Mentors can make tactical decisions—*well, in this case, I'll be directive, because this writer needs it. In this moment, I'm going to enthusiastically respond to this writer's self-doubt with an evaluative comment (this is great!). In this case, I'm going to scaffold this writer's understanding of what the teacher wants rather than starting with the writer's stated literacy concerns, to help him get a better grade, because that's what he says his overall goal is, and he's missing some key points of feedback from the teacher.*

Recall Pane's assertion that "people in any community are assumed to have access to and draw from multiple funds or resources to make sense of the world." Mentors, then, are accessing their multiple resources when they step into the role of mentor. They themselves are inhabiting, in some ways, a *mestiza* consciousness, an awareness that the power differentials inherent in school settings (teacher-student being primary) create dominant and marginal Discourses and identities. However, these binaries do not have to be accepted passively. Mentors are situated in the interstices, because they are neither-nor. From that place, they can dula. They can coach the birth of *mestiza* consciousness in the students with whom they work. Mentors help student writers locally, knowledgably respond to their lived experiences (material, discursive) through literacy.

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space, I would argue. I will
with an invitation to
readers to



where
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end this paper

mestiza consciousness?

consider what some other potential third spaces in their own local contexts might be.

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Appendix: Information about Writing Zones 12.5

What is Writing Zones 12.5?

Central aim: *access to higher education* through the venue of writing, specifically, the collaborative writing processes used in writing centers.

Mission: to help bridge the gap between high school and college writing, as well as, more broadly, between high school students and university communities by: (1) helping all students in target schools become more skilled and enthusiastic writers; (2) providing students of diverse economic and cultural backgrounds, especially, with responsive local college tutor-mentors, in order to support their aspirations toward higher education; (3) providing hands-on professional experience and opportunities to contribute and give back to local communities for university students involved in the program.

How does Writing Zones work?

- Places skilled graduate and undergraduate WCU students in writing centers in local high schools.
- Trained university mentors staff WZ
- Students encouraged to bring in both school-based and other writing.
- More skilled university “peers” able to guide student writers to improve not just particular piece, but the writers’ metacognitions about writing and themselves as writers.

Is Writing Zones unique?

Only university-secondary partnership program in the U.S. which is explicitly attempting to use writing centers as a gateway to provide resources and mentoring to encourage students who may believe they are “not quite university material” to consider, reach and succeed in higher education.

Writing centers & college access

The research base on college access indicates that writing centers have a natural overlap with the needs of first generation college students and students of color, in term of college access:

- Writing centers are effective *academic preparation*.
- Writing centers are spaces to talk about college with local college students. (*Counseling*)
- Writing centers encourage students to bring their *strengths and identities* into a school setting.
- Writing centers can be a space for an alternate set of *peer values* to come forward.
- Writing centers provide *one-on-one attention* toward specific academic tasks as well as the development of holistic competence and confidence.