

Chapter 40. Reclaiming Metalabor

We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable—but then, so did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings.

—Ursula LeGuin

As we read the narratives in this collection, we were struck by how many contributors describe working outside of the parameters of their jobs in order to do their jobs. If, as Arlene Kaplan Daniels (1987) formulated it, invisible work is the uncompensated, gendered, and thus unvalued work of the domestic sphere, always seeking some legitimacy, we would argue that metalabor is how it translates into the work sphere of writing centers. Writing centers—often seen as cozy “home spaces”—are liminal workspaces, and thus not always seen as valid. Rather, they are seen as “womens’ work.” As Daniels (1987) explained, “Where the assumption is prevalent that payment reflects skill, there is still widespread lack of recognition that the skills and education required for typical women’s jobs have for so long been under-rewarded” (p. 408). We thus posit metalabor as a form of invisible work. Metalabor *is* work: it exacts a toll on the worker; it is expected of the worker, but in and of itself it is not *valued*. Take, for instance, a director collecting data and drafting reports: the data collection and reporting serve as a justification for the “work” of the center, yet it is not the actual work of the center (which is tutoring). It is, therefore, additional and burdensome work that administrators demand but do not typically recognize. Put another way, metalabor is invisible work typically performed to legitimize and facilitate paid work. It is a way to make certain kinds of labor be seen as *real* work. Despite such work being time- and labor-intensive, it is often seen as ancillary or a given; thus, it is not often explicitly included in writing center job descriptions.

Metalabor, for instance, is enacted in Lan Wang-Hiles’ story when she tries to support a writing center from afar, despite not working directly in the center itself. This dimension of metalabor can also be seen in the anonymous narrative “My Writing Center Side Hustle”:

Moreover, since I’ve been here, our learning commons has been a one-woman show. As a result, because of my background in writing center administration and research, I’ve supported a few different women who have ventured to coordinate our learning commons. I’ve taught a three-credit writing center tutor education course in the rare semesters that we’ve opted to offer it. I’ve also conducted tutor education at a start-of-semester orientation for new consultants who were paid to attend. I’ve even developed plans for consultant meetings and have run or helped

run them weekly or every other week. I do all of this in addition to my official job.

Here relationality (“support”), gender, and the “unofficial” nature of the work are brought to the forefront of the story. Metalabor is not necessarily invisible to our profession: many writing administrators discuss dimensions of it both in conversation and in research. But for the larger institution, it is largely unseen even as it drives and enables much of the paid work that we are able to do. Harris also describes doing metalabor in her narrative when she lists the assorted tasks of directors:

For a writing center director, there is data to collect; reports to write; tutors to hire, train, oversee, evaluate, and professionalize; instructors to talk to about using the center; the physical room to set up and maintain; clerical staff to hire; technology to purchase and run; a budget to keep within; perhaps social media presence to maintain; staff meetings to plan and lead; the need to be physically present for many hours in the writing center; publicity to keep the institution aware of the writing center; and planning for continuing improvement and perhaps increase of services offered. And—of course—arguments and data to convince administrators higher up the food chain that, if the threat of cutbacks loomed, the center is successful and necessary. Whew! All that is in addition to the labor of other faculty and adjuncts . . .

What Harris explains in the early part of her description—training, hiring, data collection, staff meetings, etc.—conforms to Daniels’ description of invisible work: unseen, necessary, expected (if not valued). But when Harris describes the arguments that she has to make to administrators for the right for the writing center to even exist, she provides an example of the implicit metalabor she must perform to maintain her explicit work.

Administrative legitimacy work, however, is not the only kind of metalabor performed in and for the writing center. Metalabor can also be highly relational, and highly emotional. It can take the form of emotional labor, though the two terms are not interchangeable (Figure 40.1), despite the “drag” Caswell et al. (2016, p. 16) have described of it. Conversely, there is invisible work that isn’t metalabor. Accordingly, we configure emotional labor as a form of metalabor (just as all metalabor is a form of invisible work).

The contributor who shares the story of a tutor’s death—“Tragedy in the Writing Center”—captures the affective dimensions of metalabor and its invisibility: how it isn’t compensated, and yet how crucial it is for writing centers when he states, “Job ads for writing center directors do not ask for someone who can look out for the emotional wellbeing of our tutors, yet it’s perhaps, in some key ways, the most important part of our work” (Belkin, this collection). This sentiment is echoed in the stories of Dunsky, Chadderdon et al., Lundberg, and others demonstrating that writing center

work is relational and more involved in care work than some educational spaces might realize or even allow for. The stories of jobs gone sideways demonstrate our professional ethics as they bump up against workplace expectations.

In short, metalabor permeates the stories shared in this collection: the work of advocating for fair wages; advocating for intentional training and ethical practices; resisting ever more uncompensated task creep on our duties; of making lateral career moves in the hopes of landing a position that will allow for some form of advancement; and of ensuring the well-being of tutors and administrators is nurtured despite the many circumstances acting against thriving. All of this is well beyond keeping tutoring running and helping students to produce writing. It is work for and about work—work for work’s sake.

Perhaps ironically, we see metalabor—this uncompensated, invisible, and unpaid work that facilitates our visible and paid work—as the primary means of moving forward. More metalabor must be done to legitimize writing center work. But rather than continuing to do this labor invisibly in our individual institutions, we need to make this labor more visible and more communal. Metalabor—and invisible work conceived more broadly—are products of both capitalism and patriarchy. We thus appeal to our field’s values of equity and fairness, freedom and democracy, and most especially of community and solidarity. Here we draw on the values inherent in what Wright (2019) explicitly identifies as central to a moral critique of capitalism. If we wish to make our labor legitimate, we must organize and coordinate in new, more visible ways. In other words, we must make others recognize our metalabor *as* labor that ought to be compensated and supported as such.

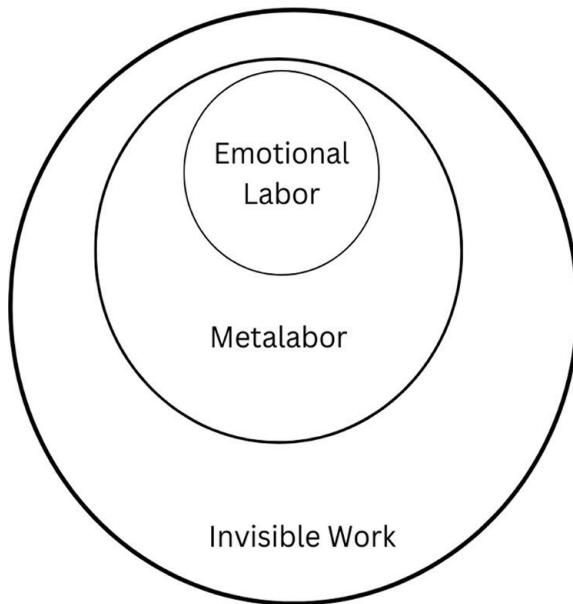


Figure 40.1. Relationship between invisible work, metalabor, and emotional labor

We acknowledge here that so much of the metalabor and so many of the drivers of the unsustainable labor conditions we see in Act II's stories are inextricably imbricated in the expanding neoliberalization of the university. To work against this labor creep is thus to work against capitalism itself.

Imagining Anti-Capitalist Futures in Our Neoliberal Moment

Many, if not all, of the themes present in the stories in Act II about contemporary writing centers have existed since the beginning of writing centers: ambiguous positioning in the institution, precarity, advocacy, joy, and excitement in the work of individual and collective mentorship about the teaching and learning of writing, negotiating identity in the workplace, dealing with trauma, and care work. Anecdotally, however, we see these concerns and consequences of writing center work becoming ever more prevalent in our current moment. Perhaps this is due in part to the COVID-19 pandemic and the financial fallout that institutions are facing from it, but we have also observed decades of defunding alongside other financial pressures. These issues also come up in conversations at conferences, in listservs, and more. There is a pattern. We intuit that the stories included in this project also reflect an acceleration in the challenges around our labor. For us, the underlying theme is that these are all responses to encroaching neoliberal and capitalistic practices in the institution. And, as some of the contributors share, very few safe harbors remain in our profession, even among tenured individuals.

While we appreciated the enthusiasm, passion, and utopian aspirations demonstrated in so many of the stories in Act II, we also worry that these same impulses have long been used against writing center workers. Passion can often act as an enabler for self-exploitation, and it can provide an alibi for the neoliberal forces driving so much of modern-day writing center work. After all, how can something directors and tutors truly believe will help students be a bad thing? We volunteer extra labor because we see a need in the community, and we worry what happens if we withhold it. As Daniels (1987) herself observed, however:

The work of community service volunteers is useful, but that it is not paid tells others—and the volunteers themselves—that it is not needed, not really important work despite all the lip service about the value of altruistic endeavor. Calling something altruistic is a way of saying it is not work. Since it is not remunerated, and though it may be recognized as a personal benefit—as well as one for society—it is not work (405).

In the course of assembling this book, we have come to believe that as long as practitioners continue to exploit themselves and their tutors for what they feel they can provide to students, their conditions will remain the same. Worse, those students will continue to be exploited as well: uncompensated writing center

support will enable them to retain/persist, to be “returns on investment,” and they become still more data in service to neoliberal austerity measures. At the same time, we recognize that it is hard to leave writing center work, especially after years of investment and direction. We also know that many stay in order to protect tutors and staff from still worse possibilities. There are no easy answers here, though we offer specific guidance on unlearning internalized capitalism and on engaging in labor organizing.

Capitalism is extractive and predatory. It leans on the already precarious; it benefits from workers being on the back foot; it encourages extractive behaviors over sustainable ones. We see instances of this predatory behavior in many other industries like temporary or gig worker economies arising out of tech companies claiming to create (but not regulate) communities of buyers and providers, or in other poorly regulated industries like the ones that have developed in response to climate disaster. Here, we see a shady fast-moving industry hire precarious—often undocumented—labor to perform incredibly hazardous work, such as cleaning up physical and chemical hazards after fire, flooding, hurricanes, and other natural disasters made worse by our rapidly warming world (Stillman, 2021). Prisoners also do this kind of work, particularly fire fighting, as the “pyrocene” and climate change contribute to more damaging and massive fires (Lowe, 2021). An ever-increasing globalized economy, combined with outsourcing, lack of regulation, rampant privatization, and climate change has exacerbated many labor problems since a neoliberal economic model became common in the 1970s and 1980s.

Academia does not escape the predatory effects of capitalism. We might not want to relate education work to disaster capitalism, climate change, and the effects of neoliberal economic policies like outsourcing, temp work, and deskilling, in a world where we are sicker, poorer, and less mentally well than in previous generations. But this is *exactly* the equation we should be making. And, as with other industries that have become eroded and less regulated over time, academia has faced all kinds of crises that were enabled by short-term thinking, adjunctification, restructuring, extractive policies, and other kinds of neoliberalization. Even in academic spaces where there *is* regulation such as around medical school or other industry staffing and curricula requirements, the uneven distribution of resources punishes less regulated and protected areas of the university. Writing programs and other humanities programs bear the brunt of the managed university’s resource calculus.

One result of neoliberalism is deskilling. As many of the stories in this project illustrate, institutions frequently place less value on the work that we do—especially around hiring for expertise—than our field/profession does. Consequently, writing center directors and administrators have varying degrees of preparation, training, and, ultimately, job security: tenure-line faculty with doctorates in writing studies; tenure-line faculty with doctorates in other disciplines; non-tenure line faculty with doctorates; staff with doctorates; faculty with master’s degrees or master of fine arts; staff with master’s degrees or master of fine arts; even faculty

or staff with bachelor's degrees. Because writing centers are configured differently within various institutions, they have varying levels of authority, autonomy, and support. In many institutions (as seen in "Into and Out of the Writing Center," this volume), writing centers have been folded into larger learning commons without any consideration for the disciplinary expertise or history of our profession and are supervised by individuals with no training or knowledge of the field. This new organizational model exacerbates the deskilling of writing center labor.

Within the current economic model in higher education, writing centers and other support services are perhaps one of the hardest hit by austerity: not necessarily revenue generating or credit-offering; not necessarily shiny or novel; not necessarily full of stably-employed professional workers. And as several stories in Act II explain (e.g., Harris, Tirabassi, Whiddon, Elliott), though writing centers are a part of the institutions in which they are enmeshed, these spaces have also been collectivist, disruptive, and, as we argue, anti-capitalist. Created out of volunteerism that cuts across hierarchies (graduate students, adjuncts, faculty, non-faculty volunteers) and often with the express interest of student well-being and professionalization in mind, early writing centers filled a space in the university ecosystem that no one else wanted to or could fill and it often did so with student well-being and success in mind.

At the same time, writing centers' long-term thinking about our mission and purpose has *always* been at odds with the short-term thinking that is the logic of the managed university. Of course, writing centers and other support services perform a functional service to the well-being of students. However, as austerity measures and neoliberal logics within institutions lead to reduced support for other resources—like advising, mental health services, faculty staffing, and so on. Writing centers are also impacted by austerity, playing a catchall support role; this model of student support is perhaps why so many people are drawn to them: the work is meaningful. It helps. It's expansive, as many contributors in Act II detail like Green (this volume) or Garner (this volume). At the same time, writing centers may very well be changing and even disappearing as academic commons and other models subsume their lines and resources in an ever-more managed university model.

As one anonymous contributor in this project observed, "I have always believed that writing centers are a keen solution to one of the problems of academia and the managed higher education neo-liberal spaces: the tendency to conglomerate students in some sort of misguided industrial model and 'stack 'em deep' to 'educate 'em cheap'" ("I've Got a Secret"). Harris echoes this feeling in her story when she writes: "As an administrator near the top of the university hierarchy once told me (when I sought information about how the writing center had fared in the most recent outside review), the institution valued our writing lab because it produced 'more bang for the buck.'" The value of a writing center then lies in its meaningful work for the managed institution and its low-cost model. What's more, much of the emotional labor performed by writing center workers can be seen as a means

of reducing the alienation of students in a neoliberal schooling environment, thus enabling the institution to extract as much capital and labor as it can from those subjects. In short, unchecked capitalism hurts us and makes us feel like we have no options but to follow a path of destruction. Yet, we *do* have options. And we are in an unprecedented moment where labor rights are on the minds of workers around the country and around the world. We believe it is time to act.

While many in our field talk about how neoliberal capitalism has impacted their work implicitly through discussing active shooter situations (Clinnin, 2021), climate-change-fueled natural disasters (Schlachte, 2020), racism (Green, 2018; Faison & Condon, 2022; Carter-Tod, 2020; Haltiwanger Morrison & Evans Garriott, 2023; Morrison & Nanton, 2019), demands and emotional labor (Caswell et al., 2016; Wooten et al., 2020; Morris & Concannon, 2022), and some have discussed specifically how neoliberalism has shaped our work (Greenfield, 2019; Monty, 2019; Fels et al., 2021; Giaimo, 2023), there have historically been few field-wide, profession-wide, critiques of our labor and fewer pieces still on how to respond to these issues. At the same time, with the recent publication of a special issue of the *Writing Center Journal* on contingency (Herb et al., 2023), this project, and others, these studies are coming out more frequently and with an eye trained on labor issues, specifically, not just work issues.

Here we use Wright's (2019) framework in *How to be an Anti-Capitalist for the 21st Century* to facilitate and coordinate this action. Wright (2019) argues that combining elements from several anti-capitalist approaches (including: *smashing*, *dismantling*, *taming*, *resisting*, and *escaping* capitalism) becomes an overall strategy of *eroding* capitalism. Eroding capitalism is not "simply a fantasy" (p. 28) but is rooted in collective action. Given our purposes and contexts in university writing centers, we focus on it here especially:

One way to challenge capitalism is to build more democratic, egalitarian, participatory economic relations in the spaces and cracks within this complex system where this is possible. The idea of eroding capitalism imagines that these alternatives have the potential, in the long run, of becoming sufficiently prominent in the lives of individuals and communities that capitalism could eventually be displaced from this dominant role in the system as a whole. (p. 26)

The process of eroding capitalism is gradual. Wright (2019) compared it to the transition from feudalism to capitalism, wherein practices and structures associated with the new order emerged and eventually displaced previous dominant structures. Often, these transitions occurred at watershed moments much like the ones we face today in a post-COVID-19 world wracked by the outcomes of neoliberal capitalism.

Our labor ought to be valued, legitimized, and made visible. Professional standards need to exist for the resourcing, training, and expertise, as well as

compensation and social capital, of our professional workers. The very problem, however, lies in that collectivity: by determining what counts as skilled labor, many writing centers—at least as they are currently configured by their institutions—would be excluded. This paradox highlights many of the inherent class conflicts within our subfield: between research faculty and practitioners; between tenured and contingent administrators; between those with release time sufficient to contribute to professional organizations and journals and those without; between those with funding to participate in conferences and summer institutes and those without; and still more. So, on the one hand, we can't exclude less-trained or less-resourced writing centers. On the other hand, we cannot simply advocate for more standards or uniform accreditation without risking the marginalization of those members of our community. This paradox sums up the state of our field as we see it. And while we wish (and recommend) that our professional organizations take action to address deskilling, resourcing, and erosion of workplace standards, we have to confront our own attitudes about these things, as well. What purpose do our professional organizations serve? What more can they—and we—do? What are our labor values? How do we understand our work?

We believe the field is primed to have deep and complex conversations about writing center labor with several special issues, edited collections, workshops, and other events focused on this topic, as we discuss in Act I. However, we also need to engage in “deliberate, intentional action” to produce social transformation (Wright, 2019, p. 17). Given our purposes and contexts in university writing centers, we focus on action in the sections below, particularly around accreditation, field-wide standards, and through organizing and collective bargaining. However, before we move onto specific actions we encourage readers to engage in self-examination through the unlearning capitalism section and then to re-imagine anti-capitalist futures for writing centers using Wright's framework as a guiding lens (this volume).

Unlearning Internalized Capitalism

While below and in the appendices we offer templates, guides, and heuristics for engaging in Wright's framework of eroding capitalism through actions that include *dismantling*, *taming*, *resisting*, and *escaping* capitalism, we recognize that not all of this work is external or even action-oriented. Some of this work is internal and requires soul-searching and self-scrutiny. It requires asking hard questions and sitting with discomfort. Our actions at work, as we have learned, do not always match up with our personally held beliefs and values. And, because much of our current economy runs on crisis mode—especially in higher education—we can be far more reactive than proactive in how we respond to workplace issues. Therefore, we include this section for folks who are perhaps just getting started on their journey to anti-capitalism. Perhaps you are sick of feeling continuously tired, or you dread going to work, or you feel trapped in your current job, or

you find yourself unable to celebrate successes. You might, like Dan and Genie, be looking around at the current state of your institution and wondering how the workplace culture changed so rapidly. Or, like us, you might have considered leaving the profession altogether. Below, we offer some guidance on unlearning internalized capitalism, which is both self-protective and self-scrutinizing. We ask you to openly engage with your internalized stances toward work and to scrutinize your work behavior and values. Take care of yourself: this is long-term and likely tiring work, but it is necessary before moving towards actionable strategies. It starts with unlearning internalized capitalism (Rich, no date).

Self-Guided Questions

- Interrogate your internalized values or guiding principles about work—is there a little capitalist inside of you urging you to greater productivity and output, to “grind” or enact “hustle culture,” or toward some other harmful practice(s)?
- Do you tie your value and self-worth to your work? If so, how might you uncouple selfhood and your job?
- Are you unable to rest or take breaks from work—even when you are sick, off the clock, on vacation, or otherwise not “supposed” to be working? Have you missed major social or personal events because of work?
- Do you experience deep anticipatory dread before work (popularly called “Sunday scaries”) or before specific meetings or interactions? Is this dread due to typical work stressors, or does it indicate a larger more systemic issue with your job?
- Do you feel like your life would have little to no meaning if you no longer did the job(s) you are currently doing?
- Are you continuously searching for “the next thing” in your career? Do you celebrate “wins” or successes or simply move on to the next project?
- If you did not have to work, what would you do? How would you spend your time?

Actions to Take

- Name your feelings about work and recognize where they are coming from.
- Set boundaries in your work, try to say “no” more often.
- Slow your response time.
- Celebrate your professional successes.
- Take intentional time away from work (use your vacation or other paid time, and, if you do not have these things, disconnect from work after working hours).
- Seek community outside of work (friends, family, spiritual organizations, social justice organizations, etc.).

- Seek meaning outside of work in non-work pursuits (i.e., socialization, exercise, visualization, hobbies, art, music, etc.).
- Take other actions towards bettering your life and your community outside of work/productivity.