William Burns

"Where Are You Located?": Postmodern Geography and the Open-Admissions Writing Center

IN 2008, I WAS ASKED BY MY CHAIR TO BE THE COORDINATOR OF THE Suffolk County Community College Writing Center. Being junior faculty and untenured, I figured that accepting this invitation would increase my value to the department and, hopefully, decrease the likelihood I'd be let go, since nobody else really wanted the position. Taking the position also allowed me to indulge in a fantasy of importance, as if I were the speaker of the house: if the chair and assistant chair were unable to fulfill their duties, I would step in a moment of crisis and provide Churchill-like leadership in our darkest hour. Preparing over the summer, I reviewed much writing center scholarship, research, and pedagogy as possible, and given that my area of interest is in postmodern geography, I was particularly drawn to the spatial metaphors used to describe and theorize writing centers: heretopias (Foucault), liminal spaces (Lefebvre), contact zones (Pratt), literary salons (Owens), public spaces (Owens), Temporary Autonomous Zones (Bey), borderlands (Anzaldúa), and homespaces (hooks)[1]. I immersed myself in the "conversation of mankind," "noise," "good intentions," and "deprivatization." I strategized, plotted, and dreamed. I imagined my writing center (I already was emotionally attached) would transform the perceived view of the SCCC Writing Center as a remedial dungeon to an open, free, empowering cultural space—"the place to be" as *Seinfeld's* Kramer and Frank Costanza called their billiard room.

SCCC is the biggest community college in New York State with over 26,000 students enrolled. The SCCC Writing Center sees 2,000 to 3,000 of these students every semester. SCCC is spread over three different campuses, and our writing center is the only game in town in terms of serving the students at SCCC. Located right in the middle of suburban Long Island on 156 acres, my campus in population and geography is the largest with 7,537 full-time and 7,434 part-time students. The Western campus is closer to New York City with a more diverse urban population (African-American, Hispanic, Eastern European) of 4,423 full-time and 5,277 part-time students while the Eastern campus is located out towards the afflu-

1. To this list I can now add diwaniyas, courtesy of Dilara Hafiz: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dilara-hafiz/diwaniya-kuwaiti_b_2269140.html

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ent Hamptons and North Fork farms and wineries with a much smaller demographic of 1,600 full-time and 2,337 part-time students. Because we are the only writing center serving the college, we often have to negotiate not only different assignments and writing styles but also the varied geographies and identities that these students bring with them. Although we are considered "one college," the different campuses have their own attitudes, their own policies, their own administrations, their own specific needs, and their own resources or lack thereof.

The pedagogical and discursive methods and forms we use at the SCCC Writing Center are tied to this student demographic as well as to the material conditions of the center itself. The space we tutor in often dictates how, why, where, and to what extent we engage students and their writing. Over the course of any given day, I am often asked "Where are you [the writing center] located?" It seems to be a rather simple geographical question and yet when conceptions, perceptions, and lived experiences of space and place become problematized in terms of institutional, pedagogical, personal, and physical positioning, the question becomes much harder to answer.

In this article, I discuss notions of space as they are perceived, conceived, and lived in terms of two of the most crucial aspects of the writing center experience: "Openness" and "Collaboration." How "open" are writing centers? What kinds of spatial positionings are involved in collaboration? How do the material, discursive, and social come together to inform notions of "openness" and "collaboration"? Connecting these two concepts is the idea of location: from where and to where are we moving to, dwelling in, retreating from when we work with students, faculty, administrators, and fellow tutors. Using a postmodern geographical framework and research by spatial compositionists, I will locate the SCCC Writing Center as a crucible for many different spatial, social, and discursive practices and experiences. My hope is that this postmodern geographical lens will help other writing center practitioners and composition instructors better understand and utilize the resources (material, discursive, personal) that writing centers offer, resources that are of particular interest to those of us working at an open-admissions institution. The postmodern writing center has been imagined as a place of multiplicity, fluidity, and ambiguity (Grimm 3), but how "in-between" can or should a writing center be?

Obligatory Theoretical Positioning

Postmodern geography, or how space is constructed through material, social, and discursive relationships, has informed and problematized the supposedly "objective nature" of spatial metaphors (locations, boundaries, maps, margins), as used by the theorists and practitioners of composition. The belief that space, society, and language are mutually informing and transforming has provided compositionists with useful metaphors through which the connections between power, space,

race, gender, ethnicity, class, and sexuality can be compared, equated, or contested.

The concept of "absolute space" (Smith and Katz 68) suggests that the medium through which we understand space, place, and location is a physical experience divorced from any notions of ideology, identity, language, history, or power. Acting as a value- free blank slate, this conception of space allows its "users" to control, own, and manipulate space as if it were just another static, decontextualized commodity. In this way, space becomes the ultimate container, a thing that people can fix, locate, limit, and restrict, made resistant to outside forces by boundaries and borders. Due to its ability to constrain and confine, "absolute space" allows its users to assimilate, gentrify, or remove "foreign" elements, those external forces that threaten the coherency and stability of the space over which a group has declared ownership. Just as our bodies act as containers, so does "absolute space" with its inside/outside dichotomy of movement.

This notion of space went unchallenged until postmodern geographers questioned the ideological and economic ramifications of believing in "absolute space." For postmodern geographers, space is socially produced through the intersections of language, power, and identity—a fluid, fragmentary relational process that rejects any attempt to objectify or fix space. Probably most influential in theorizing space and place is cultural geographer Edward Soja and his notion of Third Space. For Soja, First Space is the space of literal physical perceptions, of materiality, and of the body. First Space represents a spatial, social, and historical awareness that can be empirically measured and tends to privilege objectivity. First Space epistemologies concentrate on accurate descriptions of surface appearances, material conditions, and mapable geographies (74-8). Second Space is the space of imagination and conceptual thinking, of the mind, metaphor, and belief. Second Space reflects spatial, social, and historical knowledge produced and reproduced through thought, imagination, and discourse. Representations of Second Space are reflective, subjective, introspective, and individualized (78-81). These are the imagined geographies and cognitive maps of thinkers and artists who are concerned with images and ideas.

Third Space is the space of lived experiences that brings together First and Second Space awareness retaining the reciprocal and contradictory relationships between these different spatial knowledge. Third Space is the simultaneous deconstruction, revision, and reconstruction of the binaries of First and Second Space, lived literal and metaphoric spaces and experiences informing each other equally without one awareness or space being subordinate to the other. Third Space is an "in between space," a place not as rigidly structured by institutional, social, and spatial conventions. It takes on a fluid, ambiguous, both/and atmosphere, "outside but alongside" conventional views of space and place, taking advantage of the tensions and gaps between institutional and everyday experiences. Obviously, the idea of the

writing center fits quite well into this model of Third Space: a location that is neither a classroom nor a personal space, people who are not exactly faculty nor exactly peers, existing outside but at the same time within the institutional hierarchy of a college or university. As Derek Owens comments, "No strangers to the paradoxical, writing centers are sites of in-betweeness, gray zones, occupying central and marginal positions within the academic landscape" ("Two Centers" 158).

As an example of how these theoretical notions can be applied to the physicality of a writing center, I will use my own writing center as a model.

First Space: "The Cave"

The physical space of the SCCC Writing Center is one room on the first floor of the Islip Arts Building on the Ammerman Campus in Selden, NY. Because the Islip Arts Building contains the English, Communications, Foreign Language, and Theater Departments, we are certainly not on the margins of the campus but almost in the center. The Writing Center is a large room containing 13 computers, four round tables, 25 chairs, three filing cabinets, and two desks. Book shelves filled with handbooks, anthologies, MLA, and APA resources line one of the walls. The walls are concrete, painted a washed out clinical blue with a hard tile floor and fluorescent lights, giving it the appearance of a "lab,"—one of my most hated monikers used to describe the Writing Center by students, faculty, and administrators (but that's second space). Students sign in at our check-in desk and move to either a computer or to a table to be tutored.

Tutors usually sit next to the student at a table or at a computer. A counter gives tutors a small space to call their own at the Writing Center, and they will often wait behind the counter, reading or talking until they have to tutor. I have encouraged tutors to move beyond this barrier between tutors and students even when they aren't tutoring, but the majority of the tutors seem to prefer to be segregated from students when not working with them, almost as if they are trying to reinforce the social boundaries with a physical one. Behind the counter is a microwave, tutor mailboxes, and a small fridge as well as a computer meant only for tutor use. Interestingly, when I come into the center, whatever tutor is using the computer will immediately stop what he or she is doing on the computer and quickly move away from it as if he or she is conceding the space to me even though I didn't ask for it. The physical layout of the center does not encourage "hanging out" as the majority of the space is filled with tables, computers, and the counter. Designed as a work space, the center's primary use is just that.

Some of the tutors and students have commented that the Writing Center is "cave-like" because of the concrete walls. There have been attempts to beautify the Writing Center with art prints, pictures, and decorations; however, the material conditions of concrete and

the inability to hang anything easily make it a frustrating interior design project. Most of the creativity is directed at the bulletin board behind the counter as tutors will often pin up humorous pictures and writing cribbed from the internet. The bulletin board also displays utilitarian items such as schedules, phone numbers, a calendar, and signs asking people to clean up after their shift. The physical layout of the Writing Center is not inviting; it resembles any number of other rooms across campus. It reflects what the college imagines a writing center to be: a place of work and contemplation, a place where students get help and leave in an orderly fashion, guided by the arrangement of tables in the middle of the room and computers around the perimeter. Come in, check in, have your paper fixed, get out. Much has been written about the importance of décor and design in establishing an atmosphere and "branding" of a writing center for its constituents. Stephen Newton argues quite succinctly and persuasively that "we need to be moving beyond the institutional office style government issue sterility that characterizes so many workplaces because the more we embrace the antiseptic, regimented image, the more we are also endorsing a world of things that we probably don't want to be expressing to our students" (2).

While I heartily agree with Newton's view of the connection between material spaces and the effect they have on the lived experiences of tutors and students, I am also reminded of the physical constraints and obstacles that make creating a totally accommodating open space so formidable and often impossible. Writing centers are not "absolute" spaces, but rather, spaces that are constructed by physical, material realities that cannot be changed and revised as easily as we want them to be. Even the physical layout of a writing center reflects social, economic, political, and institutional ideologies that are hard to overcome. In a perfect world, tutoring could happen "anywhere," from the trunk of a car in the faculty parking lot to the digital "nowheres" of virtual tutoring. Material conditions have real consequences on tutoring, writing, coordinating, and positioning in an institutional hierarchy.

Second Space: Welcome! But Don't Do Anything

The discursive and conceptual space of the SCCC Writing Center expresses a conflicting message to those who dwell in it: you are welcome here but obey our rules. The language and discourses used in sessions with students utilize the usual composition/academic/tutoring jargon: thesis, high order/low order concerns, editing, "flow,"[2] citations (the beloved MLA and the despised APA)—a nice mixture of professionalism and congeniality. The signage around the Writing Center constructs second space around divergent viewpoints. The welcoming side of the Writing Center is reflected in the art prints and photos (Van Gogh, Tarkay,

2. What is flow? It is one of the most used metaphors for writing, indicating movement through space but does anything really "move" in textual space? Is it really more about presence (the thesis/purpose/argument) in paragraphs and our ability as writers and readers to locate and connect ideas than about movement?

Klimt[3]) that hang on the walls, the humorous pictures and poems pinned to the bulletin board, the *Danger: Zombie Crossing* sign, and the quotes from famous writers about writing. These visual and discursive elements suggest a space that is intellectual but self-deprecating, mixing high art with pop culture, literary pretension with nerdish fan boy obsessions—a place where we take things seriously, but not too seriously. This is also reflected in the conversations that take place between tutors and students when tutoring isn't going on: discussions of movies, graphic novels, cartoons, novels, TV shows, music, and video games. Though students will talk about their classes or professors, they seem much more excited, invested, and relieved to talk about these cultural phenomena. The tutors often obsess about these aspects of life as much as the students and conversations can get quite enthusiastic (loud).

Students are drawn into our conversations, and we encourage our clients to engage the tutors in these types of conversations (though tutors still stay behind the counter when they are talking to students). Thus, on the one hand, we promote these types of dialogues; conversely, the other message we impart to our constituents in the second space of the SCCC Writing Center is do what we tell you. Outnumbering the art prints and funny pictures, other signs articulate policies and procedures in bold block letters:

- **ATTENTION ALL STUDENTS: YOU MUST BE CURRENTLY ENROLLED AT SCCC TO USE THE WRITING CENTER.**
- **YOU MUST HAVE A STUDENT ID TO USE THE WRITING CENTER.**
- **YOU CAN NOT TAKE TESTS IN THE WRITING CENTER.**
- **10 PAGE PRINTING LIMIT**
- **NO FOOD OR DRINK AROUND THE COMPUTERS**
- **IF YOU DON'T HAVE AN ID YOU MUST WAIT IN THE HALLWAY.**

These signs represent the official discourse of the Writing Center, a discourse that runs counter to the openness and whimsicality of the artistic and pop culture décor that invites students in, that makes them feel relaxed and comfortable with opening themselves up to discuss their writing and personal experiences. And yet, as all writing center coordinators know, rules and policies are not always a choice but can be imposed from "above." These official discourses create a second space that seeks to include and exclude through membership in the institution.[4] Second spaces, though perceived as a space of imagination and cre-

3. What is it about writing centers and Klimt?

4. In terms of lore, legend, and official histories for the SCCC Writing Center, there really is none. A few anecdotes from the old guard of tutors, but nothing written down or immortalized in second space. The full name of the SCCC Writing Center is the Rose Tehan Memorial Writing Center but Rose Tehan remains a mystery to me. All I could find out about Rose was that she was an English professor who started the Writing Center at Suffolk in the early 1990's and that she died of cancer. In terms of establishing roots and heritage in the second space of the SCCC Writing Center all we have is a small black and white picture of Rose, smiling but also a bit sad, hung on the wall next to the check in desk. Though this lack of historical background might seem limiting it can also be seen as freeing as well. While we have no sustained collective traditions or inspirational foundations, we don't have the burden of the past or any oppressive models to live up to either. It's always the same; it's always different every day at the Writing Center.

ativity, are also spaces through which people can be acclimated or even indoctrinated into certain ideologies and behaviors. These discourses have influence over the physical as well; I have witnessed students who reflexively reach for their wallet to show me their IDs even though we aren't in the Writing Center.

Third Space: People and Place not just Paper

The lived experiences of the SCCC Writing Center create several different third spaces depending on the tutor, the student, and how, where, and why they interact. Eight full-time tutors, called Professional Assistants, work 12 hours a week, supplemented by three student tutors. Each of these tutors have individual interests, approaches, experiences, and styles that then intertwine with students who have individual interests, approaches, experiences, and styles. Through these negotiations, the SCCC Writing Center creates third space. Three male and eight female tutors work here, ranging in age from 60 something to 18. Some of the tutors have been at the Writing Center for over 20 years and some for under a year. Each of the tutors locates himself or herself in different, often overlapping ways: socially, politically, institutionally, pedagogically, and physically (where they sit, tutor, and interact with students). Sometimes this positioning is in agreement with other tutors, students, institutional roles, and my own practices as coordinator; sometimes it isn't. Though these conflicts are mostly interpersonal drama or difference in methodologies, I have noticed that the physical and geographical can also create tensions, such as when I see tutors sitting with their back to the door rather than facing the incoming students as they check in. Due to their lack of experience and their ambiguous location in the institutional hierarchy, it is the student tutors who have the most trouble finding both a physical and pedagogical position in the Writing Center, as they struggle to locate themselves in a new environment and different roles that blur the lines between peer and authority figure.

This negotiation of spaces, discourses, and identities manifests itself in ways students "use" and "dwell" in the Writing Center. SCCC is a commuter school, and so the Writing Center has become not just a work space but a lay-over as well, a stable place for students who live decentralized, fragmented lives with many different kinds of work, family, and educational obligations. Because the majority of SCCC students transfer to four-year institutions, the college itself is often treated by students as a way station, a temporary place for students to raise their grades or save up money before going to a "real" school. The college actually embraces and markets this perception of SCCC, composing our own "public myth" of mobility, to borrow terminology from Ann Larson (28). SCCC's recruitment and promotional materials emphasize that the college is a conduit to where you want to go rather than a destination itself. A commercial airing on local TV stations uses the visual rhetoric of former students holding up sweatshirts from schools they transferred to (Cornell, UNC, NYU) and student tes-

timonials about how SCCC prepared them for success at these universities. Here, the myth of absolute mobility, of free, unrestricted travel and access unencumbered by material, political, or economic boundaries or barriers, is "evidence of a liberal mythology that serves as the basis of the development of recruitment strategies as well as for construction of institutional identity" (Larson 30). SCCC is the educational, social, and economic highway that fast tracks students upward and outward beyond community college and the cultural and geographical strictures of Long Island.

While most students come to the Writing Center to use the computers or to be tutored, according to our student evaluations and observations, a significant group of students come to the Writing Center to get a break from their busy schedules, to alleviate stress, to express their anxieties about college and life in general. This is a particular strategy used almost exclusively by first- year and returning students, a population that seems to worry most about acclimation and positioning in the instructional hierarchy. The student population of SCCC is drawn largely from white lower middle-class and working-class families on Long Island, a suburb about an hour away from New York City. There is a significantly growing ESL and non-traditional demographic, with an increasing amount of veterans coming back to school and older, unemployed career people trying to gain skills that will allow them to return to the workforce.

For these types of students, teachers seem remote (regardless of the efforts that instructors use to seem approachable and accessible) and their friends and family don't understand, so the Writing Center, as the in-between teacher and friend place, is the de facto decompression spot on campus. I look at the Writing Center as being a public and private space, a third space that encompasses both loud and quiet, intimate and social, professional and personal, general and specialized all at the same time. As a third space it deconstructs, revises, and reconstructs these binaries in a way that informs and is informed by the material, the discursive, and the social as mutually constructive:

> We embrace chaos. We depend upon random improvisation. I resist aligning myself in any kind of rigid way with the dogma of any one group or point of view, but we clearly are expressing something, or something is expressing itself through us . . . Many times this happens through the collaboration of aligned sensibilities, with a kind of collective writing center consciousness emerging, the lineaments of its contours taking shape in front of our eyes. (Newton 3)

I have tried to mold our collective philosophy in this direction: when we tutor, it is not just the paper we are dealing with but also people and place as well. From this perspective, crucial writing center notions of "openness" and "collaboration" move beyond just what hours the center is accessible and how much time and work tutors should invest in their sessions. How

open are we? How balanced is our collaboration? Are we actually occupying the same space as our constituents when we tutor? Can we be open physically but closed discursively?

These mutually competing and informing notions of space, pedagogy, and identity have tremendous repercussions on writing center methodologies and the way writing is understood, taught, and practiced. Because texts are also physical spaces, they, their writers, and those who read and facilitate that writing are implicated in a variety of spatial relationships. The intersections of textual and "actual" space that occur at writing centers are particularly useful in analyzing the effects of openness and collaboration on the process of tutoring writing.

Open Access: "The Container"

As a writing center coordinator, I sometimes get these kinds of calls from an instructor: "I sent my students to your writing lab and they still can't write. Their ideas were all over the place. They jumped from point to point with no connections. Didn't you tell them what to do? What are you doing over there?" This kind of call is infuriating but also provides a key insight that informs concepts of writing and writing instruction: writing is a spatial practice that is imagined as ordered and controlled arrangement and movement through a bound space. It is our job as writing instructors and tutors to reign in any rogue elements or trespassers, to eliminate moments of chaos and uncertainty, to provide straight, direct pathways and bridges, to gentrify language and discourse, and to create a renewal project that reflects an ordered, antiseptic academic environment. Textual spaces and writing are equated with geography, building, and travel and so the principles of sound construction of one medium should be transferable to another. Interestingly, though writing instructors often praise the concept of openness which indicates a certain freedom or willingness to experiment, the actual practice of leaving a space or a text "open" is fraught with anxiety and apprehension because of the perceived loss of control and certainty. Thusly, writing, often imagined as an open and freeing experience, is bound by spatial, discursive, and social practices and ideologies, none more so than the container metaphor.

Because a text has a bounded space where elements can be located, added, taken out, and moved around, some writers and instructors imagine texts to be containers, a vessel capable of holding, carrying, and transporting based on a view of space that is absolute and empty (Bowden 365). Texts, as contained objects, become accessible or inaccessible through the conscious manipulation of space by the writer.[5] Writers "put" meaning in a text, capturing readers, forcing them to follow through this absolute space, and not letting them out until

5. In order to not present containerization as the most evil thing in the world since the Kardashians, please see Philip Eubanks' "Understanding Metaphors for Writing: In Defense of the Conduit Metaphor" *College Composition and Communication* 53.1 (2001): 92-118.

the paper acknowledges its own boundaries through its conclusion.

Often, readers are not encouraged by writers to wander through their writing, but are "guided" by topic sentences and transitions to arrive at their destination through the writer's control of language and structure. Since control of this absolute space is related to writing prowess, any change or revision causes resistance from the writer, an anxiety that revolves around her ability to manage and control space. The boundaries and borders of absolute textual free space are solid and stable, not allowing any unrestricted traffic in or out of the paper.

Obviously, this view of the containerization of absolute space raises many problems for tutors interested in the multiple and contested aspects of discourse and socially-constructed knowledge. The emphasis on control, domination, and restriction over space and, at the same time, on the value and ownership of structuring space according to one's own desires has tremendous ideological ramifications. This belief in absolute space suggests that space is there to be taken, structured hierarchically, and used for institutional, political, and economic benefit, normalizing and naturalizing textual and spatial practices through inhabitation and accumulation.

The idea of free, unrestricted, and unencumbered travel through this absolute textual and physical space also reflects larger notions of access and movement among the members of a society, particularly students at open-admissions colleges. Because these spaces are decontextualized and removed from class, culture, and social forces, the "democratic" belief in equal opportunities for using and moving through space (both textual and institutional) is reinforced here. The postmodern geographical idea of locality offers an important critique of these accounts of open textual and physical space: that social and spatial location is less an individual than a multi-dimensional experience, a collective engagement of mutually implicated identities and practices (Smith and Katz 75). By turning to writing centers as a loci of textual, institutional, and physical spaces and using the lens of "locality," we can move away from seeing space (and by extension writing, texts, and identities) as an empty receptacle of experience and objects and focus on how the social, political, cultural, and personal produce spaces, writing, and texts as sites that construct and are constructed by material conditions, human activities, and power relations.

Due to the different writers who use the writing center (and the varied texts produced by those writers), writing centers are sites where the interaction with difference (race, class, culture, gender, education) seems inevitable. Yet, too often, writing centers are expected by their host institutions/administrations to manage and contain those differences, to bring them under control, to make students sound as mainstream as possible (Grimm 108). Overall, there seems to be an institutional belief that the job of a writing center is to resolve

or fix misunderstandings, mistakes, and "foreign" elements, keeping textual space as uncluttered and absolute as possible despite the diverse positions, locations, and spaces these writers are drawing from. Some writing center tutors are expected by both student and instructor to take on the role of grammar police, patrolling the text for rogue elements that might destabilize the coherence of form and structure. Openness is fine as long as it reflects the institutional or disciplinary conception and practice of what is acceptable and expected in a text, a writer, and a tutor. And so though the doors are open for students at the Writing Center (well, only those with a student I.D. at SCCC), their texts and the discourses they use are often forcibly closed, physically and pedagogically, with tutors acting as border patrol.

The practice of openness is one fraught with doubt at the SCCC Writing Center. Is openness a good thing or a bad thing? Should we be open more hours or fewer hours? Should we enforce the policy of only allowing students with their IDs in or does this fly in the face of an open-admissions school? Should we encourage students to write what they want, to challenge the assignment and instructor demands, and to open up the genre and its boundaries? Or should we smooth out the rough edges, stay within the conventions, and help the student compose a product that fits into the container, a container that is valued and expected by its primary audience?

As a writing center coordinator, I feel that we have to be honest and upfront with students and instructors about our role and the material, discursive, and institutional constraints that we labor under, no matter how this "openness" undermines our power, authority, and place in the college. This social, spatial, and discursive openness fits into Diana Calhoun Bell's notion of "a deprivatized pedagogy," one that "demands that educators make explicit and public their educational and professional practices wherever possible. This requires we rearticulate our theoretical positions, [reexamine] our performances of those positions, and investigate the ways that the two continually interact" (11). To the theoretical and pedagogical positioning, I would only add our spatial positioning on both the micro (individual) and macro (institutional) levels.

Texts, spaces, and identities are negotiations between freedom and restriction. Sometimes we are on the student's side, sometimes the instructor's, and sometimes the administrator's. Just as the Writing Center isn't open at all times and has to have some sort of constraints, so do texts and institutional roles. When tutors struggle with how open and transparent they should be when dealing with students and their struggles with assignments and discourses that seem limiting and confining, I tell them to admit to the students that we don't have all the answers. We don't know. Asking the students what they think about this assignment and how it positions writer, tutor, and instructor moves students and tutors toward a larger conversation about the spatial, discursive, and social aspects of open and closed, of

freedom and control. Often my tutors don't feel comfortable or say "it's not my job" to ask students to critique these notions. However, admitting there are always boundaries and barriers in writing, some that we can overcome and some that we can't, could help demystify practices and purposes of writing and how and why institutions value or don't value certain kinds of writing and composing.

Instructors construct some assignments around the claim that students can write about anything they want in any form they want, but is this as illusionary as absolute space? Does the writer ever have total control over his or her text or his or her writing? Students have a latent awareness of this as they will often claim that they are "not allowed to do that" or ask "Am I allowed to do that?" at all stages of the writing process, even those we consider most open, free, and unrestricted. But, as with some instructors and tutors, students don't always want this type of critical positioning of their writing, their locality, and themselves. Just proofread it. The container can be self-imposed.

Although it is often a writing center's goal to help marginalized students with their writing, this attempt to turn their texts into absolute, decontextualized spaces actually further alienates writers who already feel that academic culture is silencing them. This containerization of texts affects the tutoring session and practices themselves, resulting in what Derek Owens sees as a "sameness… despite the extensive diversity of our students' ethnic, religious, class, and linguistic backgrounds" ("Two Centers" 153). This view of textual and tutoring stability and control could be constructively problematized by seeing textual and tutoring positionings as not objective spaces but ones in which multiple voices, discourses, and experiences are interweaving through an arbitrary and socially influenced form. By moving away from the idea of a text and tutoring session as a container and seeing them as examples of third space—a combination of material experience, internal reality, and metaphor producing an in-between space that is both real and imagined—perhaps tutors might view textual spaces and their own tutoring sessions as fragmented, imaginative, multi-voiced, constraining, and liberating at the same time. But what happens when students, tutors, instructors, and institutions want containerization, value it, and request it in their collaborations? It is not only through openness that writing centers can naturalize "absolute space," but even the concept and practice of collaboration can reproduce unforeseen spatial consequences.

Collaboration: Peer and Not a Peer

Currently at SCCC, the practice of online, virtual tutoring and an online writing center are being bandied about by the institution. The notion that we are a commuter school makes administration think students want a disembodied, digital collaboration that can be accessed from anywhere at any time. This would seem to make the utopian ideal of an open, equal col-

laboration unhindered by time and space a reality. While online writing instruction and tutoring are certainly worthwhile ventures, my own apprehension comes from not so much the pedagogical aspects but from the spatial consequences of collaboration divorced from material conditions. And yet, do we ever really critique the physical, social, and discursive positioning involved in collaborating, whether in virtual or "real" spaces? Positioning entails where tutors sit or have students sit, where we place the paper (in front of tutor, student, or in between the two) when we work with a student, or what kinds of tables we use (square, round, hyperbolic paraboloid), though the physical aspects of collaboration are quite important. Collaboration has material, discursive, and social dimensions, which all come together and clash to create a third space of tutoring. But, like the concept of "openness," when understandings and practices of collaboration occur in an imagined "absolute" space, are we containing and mapping experiences that should be liberating?

Because of the socially constructed aspect of spatial metaphors, collaborative learning theorists and pedagogues as well as writing center practitioners seem to find spatial metaphors especially valuable in expressing notions of participation, community, consensus, and positioning within the collaborative process itself. Though many of these authors take considerable time and effort to critically analyze how power and ideology influence conceptions of textual production, negotiation, and resistance, the unexamined use of space and spatial metaphors as merely a helpful trope ignores significant questions of how the collaborative learning experience is informed by and constructed through the negotiation of space, identity, and knowledge within these group dynamics. By not seeing the multiple spatial practices, roles, and positions within the collaborative conversation as represented by this unquestioned use of spatial metaphors, collaborative authors and practitioners run the risk of undermining the very goals they mean to achieve.

Collaborative learning assumes that conversation, agreement, and consensus among groups of knowledgeable peers are the foundation on which knowledge rests (Bruffee 636). The goal of collaborative learning is to replace an alienating teacher-dominated method of traditional instruction with one in which students teach each other by finding some consensus, whether it is through their status as students, their shared assignment, or their participation in a discourse community. Collaborative learning is conceived as a space where the social construction of knowledge is recognized and examined outside of context, a way to assimilate differences that students bring to the classroom and how that negotiation between difference and consensus produces a text.

Critiques of collaborative learning say it enforces conformity, lowers standards, and denies the importance of the individual, making all choices equivocal. It fails to acknowledge the role of ideology in knowledge construction, masking unequal power relationships, which

affect the social construction of knowledge. Bruffee's unproblematic use of community and consensus suppresses the conflicts that exist within a social group. This unified and closed conception of collaboration discourages a view of writing and space where the influences of the contradictory and multiple discourses that one encounters in everyday life inform spatial practices and subject positioning. This notion of conversation and consensus seems to be outside of time and space.

According to its critics, the collaborative learning experience should move away from consensus and ask students to not only compose texts but also locate themselves in the spaces opened by that text, to map their subject positions, identities that are often appropriated, conflicted, and contextual. Yet within these liberating uses of spatial metaphors, some problems arise. Postmodern geographers would agree that seeing consensus as a fixed, central, neutral position would be faulty, ignoring the fragmented, multiple aspects of space; however, the notion that collaborative learners could map and position themselves as autonomous free floating subjects within the collaborative process also shows a belief in the transparency of space. "Mapping" progress in the collaborative experience in an effort to objectively "track" the positions, methods, and discursive "movements" made by the participants can be an act of self-colonizing, an imposition of power that fixes a subject within a static space. The power of mapping is closely related to the power of conquest and social dominance (Smith and Katz 77), a metaphor that may appeal to those who feel the dynamics of collaboration are within our secure control. Metaphors of colonization and possession are predicated on the physical and symbolic appropriation of space (Smith and Katz 78), an appropriation that would be just as counterproductive to the collaborative experience as a belief in a total consensus.

The collaborative practices of the SCCC Writing Center include peer tutors, who, ideally, share separate but equal knowledge about discourse with the student writer, representing the same marginal power as the student does (Lunsford). Though this relationship is often imagined by tutors and students as consensual, critics of this notion have been quick to point out that the idea of shared consensual knowledge and institutional status is problematic in that institutional hierarchies make peer and tutor contradiction in terms (Trimbur 21). A postmodern geographer might also question the idea that the tutor and peer occupy the same space and subject position as institutionally "marginalized" writers. It is naïve to assume that student status alone will enable students to establish a trusting reciprocal collaboration: perhaps a contested idea of the spatial repercussions of marginal roles could help the collaborative process in the writing center be more constructive. In collaboration, roles and identities are always shifting and the tutor should acknowledge his or her privileged positioning and that that position can blind him or her to other marginalized perspectives. Not

critiquing the ever-changing notion of a "peer" can cause tutors to be oblivious to the differences that exist between them and students. Each participant in collaboration has a particular history and occupies a particular space.

Tutors have authority but often pretend that they don't, and this authority, though marginalized in the bigger institutional hierarchy, does change the place from which the tutor is coming. At the SCCC Writing Center, we have two kinds of tutors: peer tutors and Professional Assistants. When I first took over as coordinator, it bothered me that there was this differentiation between the tutors. They both do basically the same work, so why this hierarchy? Why the demand that PAs be recognized as part-time faculty rather than just a collective "we're all in this together" identity? Though I'm not sure this was their motive, the PAs' insistence in positioning themselves in this way and in having students aware of their elevated location in the institution is much more transparent and honest than my utopian view of a writing center where everyone is equal and is able to identify with all subject positions. The PAs were (inadvertently) deprivatizing the collaborative process and the space of the writing center:

> It is disingenuous to assert that the writing center is capable of .... a chameleon-like transformation [and] is no longer associated with the dominant discourse. For while we can de-emphasize the writing center's institutional authority, it nevertheless is sanctioned and housed by the institution, just as the classroom teacher is. (Griffin qtd. in Calhoun Bell 12)

Writing center collaborations should encourage students to recognize and critique these hierarchical power relationships that exist in an academic institution (especially those that marginalize) and how that power is expressed, "normalized" and contested through discursive and spatial literacy. But do I as coordinator challenge my tutors and tutees to critique the institutional roles and mapping that creates compliant bodies and writers? Unfortunately, not enough, as student, tutor, and institutional resistance and my own precarious positioning in the institution (as untenured junior faculty) often wears me down.

My ideal writing center would be a location of ever changing collaborative perspectives, encouraging dispersal and fragmentation rather than consensus. My ideal tutor would be what Anne Ellen Geller, Michele Eodice, Frankie Condon, Meg Carroll, and Elizabeth Boquet identify as the Trickster, "an icon of spontaneity, shape-shifting, and the creative potential of chaos" (55). Trickster tutors would encourage constructive disruptions in the text and in the tutoring space. Trickster tutors would inspire and challenge trickster writers to embrace dissent and interrogate spaces, discourses, and positions that have become naturalized and normalized. Trickster writers would, in turn, question and critique trickster tutors. Yet, how would this work in terms of the institutional role we play at the college? How would

instructors react? How would students? Would my tutors mutiny? It's hard enough to get students to come to the writing center when we offer comfort, security, and candy but how about ambiguity, contestation, and critique? Again, returning to the third space model, writing centers must acknowledge they are sites of both repression and resistance, negotiating the differences between marginality that is imposed by oppressive structures and the marginality that one chooses as a site of resistance. Tutor and writer could construct that space through contestation and struggle, creating another discursive and social location from which to articulate a sense of writing. But again, writing centers are material and institutional spaces, spaces that often are tasked by departments, instructors, and administrators with acclimation, reproduction, and homogenization as consequences of collaboration, consequences that are not necessarily viewed as negatives by the student, tutor, or instructor.

Collaborative learners need to be more fully engaged with the paradoxes of spatial literacy, the way both space and discourse practices can both dominate and liberate, offering the threat of submission but also the promise of agency at the same time. In a truly empowering scenario for an open-admissions institution, textual production would not be the focus of the tutoring session but the collaborative dynamic itself: not so much on how differences are negotiated into consensual texts but on the spaces constructed and utilized by tutor and tutee and how that positioning affects writing, spatial, and social practices in the institution. Tutors need to be able to distinguish between collaborations that reproduce the status quo and those that challenge prevailing conditions of knowledge and spatial production but, at the same time, recognize that writing centers are always negotiating both of these types of collaborations because of the in-between, third-space positioning of a writing center for student, tutor, and institution. In collaboration, space and subjectivity intertwine: both subjectivity and space can be denied and/or expanded when collaboration critiques, revises, and reinscribes dominant discourses, ideologies, and beliefs in absolute space.

The Studio Approach

In the end, I am still left with the question: can a writing center be a comfortable, open, collaborative place but, at the same time, be a location from which we can resist, critique, and contest institutional placement and hierarchies as evidenced in the types of writing that are privileged in assignments? A constructive example of the linking of these seemingly conflicting objectives could be the studio approach. Grego and Thompson's *Teaching/Writing in Thirdspaces: The Studio Approach* articulates an "institutionally aware" methodology called the writing studio, an approach which seeks to achieve a "third space" location outside the usual educational and disciplinary binaries. Using the concept of an art studio as their model, Grego and Thompson's writing studio is an "alongside" environment where student writers

and tutors compose, discuss, and critique their work in a non-classroom setting in order to examine how their own positioning inside and outside the academy influences what, how, and why they write.

The studio approach emerged as a way to address student needs. Small groups of students along with a staff group facilitator met frequently to discuss, analyze, and work on writing/communication assignments. By not dictating a set curriculum, but, rather, encouraging "reflective communication" to generate ideas and refine approaches to content, processes, and attitudes toward their work, the writing studio became a dedicated space conducive to the kind of production and interactions that make self-education possible. Grego and Thompson's studio approach also brings a heightened awareness of institutional positioning and power relations to its participants that helps to define student writing and basic writing students by addressing writing as an interface between local and global interests. The authors pay close attention to the material/physical description and layout for the studio: tools, resources, furniture, technological, and equipment. In this manner, the studio is explained by Grego and Thompson as a "spatialized and spatializing methodology" (20) that offers the potential for institutional change through making power relations and disciplinary expectations explicit, specifically by identifying how and where students and instructors locate themselves and their work within specific spaces and places.

As a conceptual model for the studio, Grego and Thompson utilize Soja's notion of third space, a liminal space in between existing boundaries, a place not as rigidly structured by institutional, social, and spatial conventions. The studio recontextualizes traditional student/teacher power relationships because the studio is not a typical classroom controlled by curriculum, program of study, or subject matter. The studio as third space represents a flexible process rather than a strict pedagogy and is adaptable to particular institutional or programmatic conditions attached to a specific course or as an extracurricular space. The authors imagine the studio as being able to move across and between different disciplinary and institutional areas and boundaries in order to open up and decentralize student writing in a variety of different disciplinary cultures. And yet as we have seen, movement through space is not as easy as we often think as material, discursive, and social barriers and obstacles often hinder our best intentions.

Although the studio would have to be revised and adapted for the more structured aspects of a tutoring session and a writing center, perhaps the studio approach is a place from which to start, a spatial and social metaphor to describe the type of place and work we do at the SCCC Writing Center. Can the studio approach offer both a safe, intimate centralized personal place and a resistant tactical public site of resistance? Insiders but outsiders as well? Where the studio could fit in both the academic and material geographies of SCCC would be

difficult to map, as Mark Sutton perceptively notes: "Because Third Space can be influenced by the spaces around it, studio programs at other schools may need different decisions about how to connect, or not connect, their space to traditional academic structures" (43). I have already started to integrate this kind of thinking and practice into student tutor training, that the Writing Center is not only a room in the Islip Arts building but also exists as a third space of conceptions, perceptions, and lived experiences—freeing and limiting; a myriad of locations, ways of communicating, and roles: people-paper-place.

Conclusions

As we well know, writing centers inhabit real material sites within larger academic institutions but because of the often "invisible" hierarchy within such socially important institutions, an awareness of how location implicates even the most well-meaning part of the institution may be ignored. Although writing centers are often positioned as sites of academic discursive acculturation, many writing center practitioners are using their marginalized institutional roles to construct themselves as outsiders, divorced from the politics and hegemony of the university. Their doors are always open and ready to welcome all students who are disillusioned, victimized, oppressed, and silenced by academia, providing them with a free space in which to fight the power.

When students, instructors, and tutors imagine that a writing center can inhabit a space beyond institutional practices and that all students will find a haven away from the oppression of the institution, again reveals a belief in an absolute space. Writing centers cannot escape the fact that they are institutional creations, funded by the institution in order to play the role that the institution envisions it to be playing. This is not an autonomous, "student-owned" space but rather should be seen as a liminal intersection of different discourses, ideologies, and material conditions that can offer both freedom and limitation. The students and tutors who inhabit the writing center are not moving through an absolute space but instead must negotiate the interplay between identity, place, discourse, and institutional positioning that occurs at the writing center. Are writing centers equipped to deal with all marginalized students in the same way? For some students, the writing center could be an intimidating place, or physically problematic for those with disabilities. Postmodern geographers and spatial compositionists have complicated any notion of a "safe" place, a "transparent" space that denies differences of the politics of space and positioning (Reynolds 12). The materiality of the space of the writing center as a site of institutional academic culture has everything to do with how both students and tutors conceive, perceive, and use the writing center not as an absolute space but one in which multiple and contested subject positions are being constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed every day.

The conceptions of textual and collaborative space in Writing Center research and practice cannot be absolute or deny their material conditions but rather should be challenging this notion of space by analyzing the way space produces and is produced by social, political, cultural, economic, and academic relationships. Writing Center practitioners should view the institutional spaces they inhabit as well as the textual and collaborative spaces they occupy in their roles as tutors as indicators of larger contextual processes that have produced rather than fixed the positions, locations, and reactions to space that inform both their roles and practices.

The SCCC Writing Center is informed by multiple competing forces: disciplinary, institutional, pedagogical, material, personal, and the needs of the students the center is serving. Issues of location and positioning, of access and collaboration, not only affect the work done in the Writing Center or those who utilize and work in the center but the mission of a Writing Center itself. For the SCCC Writing Center, the spatial aspects of writing, tutoring, collaboration, and institutional and individual positioning are now part and parcel of our mission to create "a refuge, an intermediary space less formal than the classroom but more intellectually driven than the cafeteria—a locale shaped by our own imaginations and not corporatized models that are increasingly informing our institutional environments" (Owens "Hideaways and Hangouts" 82). This task would prove difficult at any institution, even more so in spaces that promise "open" access and admissions. Where are we located? I'm still working on that one.

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William Burns *is the Writing Center Coordinator and an Associate Professor of English at Suffolk County Community College in Selden, NY. He teaches classes in writing, literature, journalism, and film.*