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WLN

Tuning the Violin: A Bibliometric Look (and Relook) at *WLN*

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INTRODUCTION 1.0

While in the quantitative portion of a graduate research methods course, I came across a claim that scientific journals' scholarliness could be measured by the number of citations in their articles (Ucar et al. 1855). Having worked alongside economic researchers for five years, I had begun to quantify . . . everything. Though most of the bibliometric work I found was related to the sciences, I was particularly interested in the idea that a good indicator of evolving scholarship is that the number of references per article should double after about thirty years (Milojević 6).

This sort of bibliometric work is not unheard of within the writing center field. In 2014, Neal Lerner studied the citation practices of authors published in *Writing Center Journal* (*WCJ*) between 1980 and 2009. He felt this data set could demonstrate the knowledge domain of a field or journal and also allow scholars' intellectual work to join larger conversations (72). Lerner did, in fact, find that "the average number of citations per article in 2009 (21.3) was nearly double the average in 1980 (11.6)" (78). Perhaps this is to be expected, given the limited research available in 1980. But his research goes one step further, raising the concern that writing center scholars have not done enough to cite a diverse array of resources and to cite outside of our (small, sometimes exclusive) discipline (70). Equipped with all the enthusiasm and naivety of a graduate student hoping to finish the essay *before* spring break, I focused on the first part of this analysis: I wanted to know if *WLN*, too, had doubled the number of citations per article over about a thirty-year period.

METHODS 1.0

Armed with the idea that intellectual worth could be measured simply by counting up citations,[1] I set off to do the same with *WLN*'s archive. I limited the remarkable volume of *WLN* to a sample that included the first issue of each year. I counted up the number of

works cited in each article, then found the average citations per article for each issue. Because the number of works cited varied widely between articles and issues overall, I condensed the data to five-year periods to better reveal trends. "Tutor's Column" articles were excluded from my sample. Though these columns do the important work of featuring new (typically undergraduate) voices, at the time I felt that contributions from directors and administrators were a better example of professional writing in the field—or at least more comparable to the articles Lerner had included.

RESULTS 1.0

Across each year of *WLN*, the average number of works cited per article generally trends upward. Because so many early issues cite no other materials at all (which makes sense, given it was the field's first periodic resource), it may be problematic to look for the same doubling of citations within a thirty-year period in the way Lerner did with *WCJ*. In the most recent five-year period available for *WLN* (Volumes 36-42), the average number of works cited per article was 7.61, while the period thirty years prior (Volumes 8-14) was only 0.9 works cited per article. True, the number of citations has much more than doubled—but this data isn't telling the whole story. It felt discouraging, at first, to see that *WLN's* citation practices looked meager in comparison to *WCJ*'s. Under the first set of *WCJ* editors (North and Brannon, 1980-1984), articles cited an average of 11.6 works—still above the average number that *WLN* authors have finally risen to today (Lerner 79). Perhaps I was looking at this all wrong; instead, I needed to consider what these citation practices should mean to *WLN*'s readers and contributors, as well as what these data could indicate in terms of how both *WLN* and *WCJ* may differ in their creation of knowledge. To better understand these differences, I knew I needed to step back and look at *WLN*'s unique history and context.

INTRODUCTION 2.0

For over forty years, *WLN* has served as a space to exchange ideas and resources within the writing center community. Over time, the journal itself has embraced more standardized formatting and subscription options, in part to reflect the field's goals of professionalization (Phelan and Weber). The name change to *WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship* in Volume 40 is also a reflection of the increasingly scholarly work published. But to really understand the trends in *WLN*'s archives, I went back to the source—fortunately, Muriel Harris has always been (and continues to be) a gracious resource.

Writing Lab Newsletter was born from a sheet of paper that Harris

passed around at a conference session on writing centers. In its earliest editions, *WLN* is simply a compilation of materials that were provided to Harris, who then sent them out to her small list of subscribers. Sent them out, of course, by mail—with no listservs or email addresses to turn to. "Imagine, if you can," Harris wrote to me, "taking a job where there's almost nothing to read about the job you have taken." This job was helping to found the now-widely-recognized Writing Lab at Purdue University. Years later, Harris wrote that first-time writing center directors often felt "we were playing a violin while constructing it" (136). I love this origin story because it shows that *WLN* has always tried to be exactly what writing center professionals needed at different points in its history. It began as a simple newsletter, reaching readers hungry for contact with anyone in the same challenging position. But Harris also acknowledged that "after 40 years, the publication had long since stopped being just a 'newsletter.'" It is now peer-reviewed, featuring award-winning scholarship, and the new name reflects that—while still including a nod to the original lifeline Harris created.

Perhaps, in light of this journal's history, it is neither fair nor productive to compare *WLN* and *WCJ*. As the pioneering publication in our field, *WLN* sought first and foremost to serve as a knowledge hub and a point of connection. *WCJ*, which began a few years later, was then able to step in as a peer-reviewed journal in the field. As a writing center scholar with ten years of experience—from an undergraduate writing tutor to a director of a workplace writing center—I can say that I have used both publications to great advantage. One thing that stands out about *WLN* is the way its format is still designed to best serve writing center directors, who often find themselves struggling for resources (in time, funding, or training). *WLN*'s short issues, and the limited word count of each article (3000, including works cited) may be a reason for fewer cited sources. But Harris elaborated in her email: "the format of *WLN* is in response to readers' preference for shorter, more tightly focused articles." Not only this, but shorter issues mean reduced printing and mailing costs, which keep the cost of a subscription low. Expanded issues, Harris suspects, "would not be beneficial to directors of writing centers who have very tight budgets," and they would likely not be read cover-to-cover the way that shorter issues are. Even now as a peer-reviewed journal, *WLN* is still meeting writing center directors where they are, providing them with affordable, frequent touch points throughout the academic year. The "Tutors' Column" also gives directors an opportunity to encourage their own staff—frequently undergraduates—to develop and contribute their own voices. Shorter issues make these columns stand out in ways that they otherwise may not in a heftier compilation.

So while citation practices can be valuable at times, it was short-sighted for me to simply count and compare. We need to look at what these practices mean for the ways we generate, share, value, and credit knowledge and knowledge-makers. In his 2014 article, Lerner brings up Terry Riley's "The Unpromising Future of Writing Centers," which presents a grim prediction of the field's fixation on "permanence and respect" (Riley qtd. in Lerner 69). I had the privilege of taking a course on British Romanticism with Dr. Riley in 2009. I wasn't initially excited by the syllabus, but I found myself listening, spellbound, along with the whole class, when Dr. Riley would read his most adored poems aloud. When I think of him, it is the version that stood in a classroom of Bakeless Hall, when ivy still clung to the building, reading T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." My dismissal of poetry melted as he delightedly paused to draw our attention to the yellow-fog cat he loved, voice catching and eyes tear-sparkled when he asked, earnestly, "Do I dare to eat a peach?" I didn't know, at the time, that he had once led the same writing center where I was then a tutor. A few years later, when I stumbled across "The Unpromising Future of Writing Centers," which he'd published almost thirty years prior, I remember feeling somewhat betrayed. *Unpromising?* This seemingly magic space where I loved to work and which I hoped to make into a career—*Unpromising?*

I've spent a lot of time reckoning with that article since. When Lerner brought it up, it was to echo Riley's concern that our discipline may become so focused on conventional scholarship and that we would become too insular, losing our sense of interdisciplinarity and inclusiveness. He feared the loss of the exact "energy" that had drawn me to writing center work as an undergraduate: an energy "derive[d] from what we have left of happy amateurism, and from our sense of being in transition, our extroversion of purpose, and our interdisciplinarity" (31). Riley, here, is speaking more specifically to interdisciplinarity, but I would argue that a similar energy can be forged through collaboration even within a discipline. In his *WCJ* study, Lerner focused on how frequently authors have cited particular articles and how frequently authors have collaborated as opposed to contributing solo-authored works. Ultimately, he concludes that *WCJ*'s citation practices have mimicked the exclusivity that Riley found "unpromising," particularly in the ways they mostly cite other *WCJ* articles and tend to write, ostensibly, alone.

It's easy to see some diminishing features of "happy amateurism" (Riley 31) as you move through *WLN* chronologically. Fewer issues now include direct appeals for help, amusing cartoons, or, yes, snack

recipes for tutor training meetings. If not the most *professional* features, they still served the important role of connecting scholars around the world. If directors had felt they were creating their own violins, now at least there were performances to observe, techniques to learn, music to love. I wonder if Riley's fears would have been at all assuaged by the WCenter listserv, which now constantly buzzes with ideas, appeals, and humor. With WCenter serving as a channel for freely exchanged ideas, *WLN* is free to focus on tightly-written, scholarly articles that are rigorously peer-reviewed.

With this evolving context in mind, I became interested in challenging "unpromising," by investigating whether *WLN* contributors, too, had become more insular or more inclusive. I returned to the *WLN* archives, but this time I wanted to look at how collaborative authors have been. In the past, I've heard professors hint at the prestige of solo-authoring. But our work extols the collaborative nature of writing and revision; if we are to stay true to ourselves as a discipline, our own scholarship should reflect that.

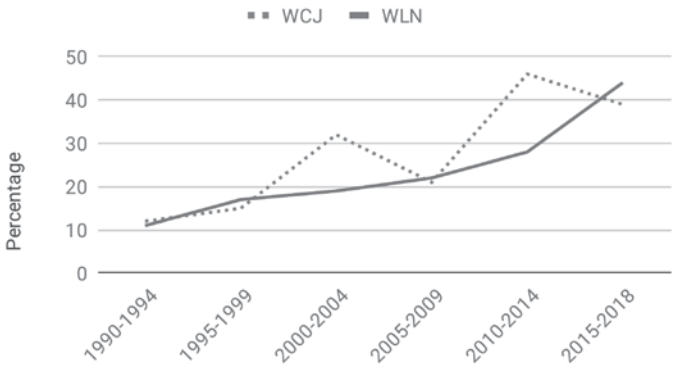
METHODS 2.0

Lerner calculated the percentages for *WCJ's* single-authored and multiple-authored articles and grouped them into five-year increments between 1990 and 2009. To replicate his study, I first followed his methods and extended his calculations for the years 2010-2018. I then performed a similar procedure for *WLN*, using every volume from 1990-2018. I again excluded the *WLN* "Tutor's Column" articles from my sample, simply to keep my data consistent; I also excluded any notes from the editor, book reviews, informal articles such as lists, and a recipe.

RESULTS 2.0

Resulting data reveal that multiple-authored articles have become more common over time in both publications.

Figure 1: A Comparison of Multiple-Authored Works by Percentage in Archives



Across periods of time, a greater proportion of collaborative articles has appeared in either *WCJ* or *WLN*. But I do see a promising trend for *WLN:* articles have become increasingly and consistently more collaborative, with an even sharper collaborative turn in the last five years. There could be a number of reasons for this trend, but I think the spirit of outreach that initially spurred the journal's creation has continued. Many of these collaborative works have emerged from friendships and partnerships forged at regional and international conferences, as well as through connections made online.

Though I excluded the "Tutors' Column," it's important to acknowledge this feature of *WLN* as inherently interdisciplinary. So many writing center tutors come from diverse disciplines, yet *WLN* still gives them a space to share their knowledge. I think this must have pleased Riley, who neared the end of his article with suggestions to "Let last year's tutors handle the training. Allow that students may know what they need better than we do" (32). The field needs research diving into the interdisciplinarity of *WLN*'s citation practices, and/or what the inclusion of student voices means.

CONCLUSION

I don't mean to frame the journals' rates of collaborative articles as any kind of competition. I merely point it out as a way we can truly distinguish *WLN* and continue to capture the collaborative energy that propels the pulse of writing centers. One violin (especially the first!) is impressive; two and then three can create harmonies that were previously unimaginable. We've long combated the cliché of the solitary writer. We teach our students about the "conversation of mankind," and we encourage them to listen as well as they speak (Bruffee). Lerner, too, points out that solo contributions stand in contrast to the collaborative nature of our work (73). Our authorship can demonstrate this. We need to continue to proactively reach out to others in the field and collaborate.

Two major events have happened since I first drafted this article. First, Dr. Riley, whose love for poetry I found so endearing and whose article spurred me toward this research, passed away in the fall of 2019. The second is that, as I write this line in the spring of 2020, I am quarantined during the COVID-19 pandemic—and through the WCenter listserv and my own experience, I have witnessed a nearly overnight shift of writing centers to all-online operations. I am not leaning into cold, hard data to reassure myself, the way I did when I began investigating citations. I am coping by watching videos of Spanish police officers playing violin in the street, trying to provide a point of connection to so many people isolated in their homes.

Now, more than ever, it's time to collaborate, to reach from our own little corners out to others'. We can solve problems the same way that we encourage our tutors to reach out to one another when they encounter difficult moments. We have an opportunity to move toward a future where our scholarship truly reflects our practice: diverse, collaborative, meaning-making, seeking, resilient. That's the energy that drew me to the work, and that's what keeps me here.

NOTE

1. Though Lerner, I see now, is quick to point out that he is *not* critiquing "the quality of scholarship that has appeared in *WCJ*" (69).

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