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## Wiring The Writing Center

Eric Hobson

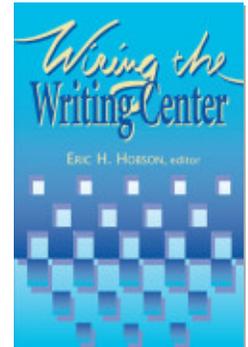
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## *Email “Tutoring” as Collaborative Writing*

David Coogan

**I**N THIS ESSAY, I PRESENT AN EMAIL “TUTORIAL” BETWEEN MYSELF AND A GRADUATE student enrolled in our master’s program in Technical Communication and Information Design (TCID).<sup>1</sup>

The student, Ruth, works full time as a technical writer and pursues her graduate degree in the evenings at the Illinois Institute of Technology. During the last year, we have generated over 200 email messages about her thesis. Sometimes we exchange posts rather quickly; sometimes not so quickly. Long lulls of inactivity are suddenly punctuated by a rapid volley of ideas. Vacations come and go. Semesters end. We write to each other from work, from home, on weekends, in the evenings. As I sit here writing this essay, the “tutorial” is still going. So if I seem fragmented or not quite in control . . .

Not just our two voices here, either. Others interrupt us with commentary, obiter dicta, humor. All writers hear voices, but here [I’ve] made the convention/al choice to amplify those voices that inform us (or contradict us). (Spooner and Yancey, 253)

*Ruth?*: Hi Dave, Joe [Amato, a professor of English at Illinois Institute of Technology] said he spoke to you and told you that I needed your help. It’s true! I need help! I didn’t have any guide-lines, (other than it should be a couple of pages long) so I am at a loss for what to give you.

*Dave*: That’s ok! I just wanted to hear from you, in your own words, what your project is about.

*R*: The other day I gave Joe a couple of pages explaining what I wanted to talk about in my paper and he told me to write 8 paragraphs containing subdivisions of my primary thesis, taking care to ensure that each paragraph flows into the next.

So email is like a letter, a personal letter that allows both cognition and affect: is that it? (Spooner and Yancey 259).

*D*: Well, yeah. That will be the ultimate goal. Eventually, we’ll boil down the sap and make the syrup.

*R*: Your challenge is great. I am mostly sap.

Ruth and I communicate often—at least once a week. Because of her schedule at work and my interest in extended email conferences, we only communicate online. Though we feel like we know each other—at least, we know what to expect from each other online—there is a good chance we might not recognize each other if we passed on the street.

R: What I am trying to do in this paper is highlight the descriptions of hypertext that claim it to be democratic (by blending boundaries) and better than linear text because it is in the structure of memory, and its information is accessed how we access information in our brain.

D: ok, if I were to translate that it might sound like this: “In this project, I will investigate the claim that hypertext is a more democratic method of storing information, and the related claim that hypertext allows writers to externalize thought more intuitively than with print.”

R: Yes.

D: huh!! So you agree with my characterization. That’s good. We’re on the same wavelength, then.

R: I want to explain that what society values is reflected in their rhetoric. In western culture today we value technology and democracy (democracy meaning all people are equal). I feel that some people even think that if all people are equal, then all people are the same. Very Cartesian. (That’s why they make claims about other people’s memory.)

D: hmmm, do I hear a hint of skepticism?

R: Yeah. Those are big claims that hint at optimism about technology. Fine, but why is everything measured in terms of democracy (especially technology)?

A good question—one that I’d like to respond to with an analogy. Not too long ago, General Electric ran a television commercial that depicted the first-ever night football game. The scene—shot in browns and greys, depicting a pre-NFL era—switches back and forth between the players, the fans, and the nervous engineers who are getting ready to throw the switch on their new lighting system. Of course, the lights go on, the game picks up speed, and everyone congratulates each other on the wonders of technology. Then, surprisingly, the lights go out, the players begin running into each other, the fans grow worried, and the engineers sigh—obviously disappointed. Years later, in a scene from a modern stadium, which concludes this commercial, G.E. redeems itself by throwing the switch on a more powerful, intimidating, lighting system. It appears we had nothing to worry about, after all! (“G.E. brings good things to life.”)

If we could film a commercial for writing centers, or rather, the transformation of the writing center, would we choose the same role for technology that this company (understandably) chose? Do we imagine ourselves—directors-cum-engineers—with our hands on the switch, ready to boot those computers? And do we imagine our tutors and students on the field, our colleagues and chairs and deans in the stands, while the experiment dissolves into chaos?

Perhaps there isn't much difference between the wiring of sports arenas and the wiring of writing centers. Great expectations abound in both places. However, in the world of stadium lighting, G.E. delivers: with a flick of a switch, folks are saved from the night. Although I am, admittedly, and perhaps unreasonably, excited about the potential for interactive written communication in the writing center, that excitement has more to do with what Nancy Grimm (1996) refers to as "the re-articulation" of the writing center.

- D: One thing I'm a little confused about, Ruth: Are you planning on focusing this project on an experiment? That is, are you going to DO anything to prove that hypertext is/or is not more democratic?
- R: Good grief no!
- D: (smiling) . . . ok, then! That much we can rule out for your proposal.
- R: Yeah. Is that OK? I am a technical writer by default. I completed a biology degree in college because I wasn't encouraged to pursue literature (and \*everything\* language related) like I wanted to. I learned to \*de-value\* it. Technical writing discourse encourages support of technology in every way. I really like computers and technology, (very cool stuff) but I have found my suppressed sensibilities and wish to question, not condemn. I want to reveal, not prove.

The suppressed sensibility that Ruth talks about in relation to her undergraduate education could very well be applied to our own training in English departments where, until recently, collaboration had to do with tutoring or mentoring, but not so much co-writing. I have come to see this "tutorial" with Ruth as a form of co-writing that, in many ways, transcends the idea of the tutorial. This is not about deciding who holds the pen. Obviously, we both hold keyboards. Likewise, this is not about who sits where, or body language, or intonation. In so many ways, this is not a writing tutorial. But it does seem like a writing center activity.

- R: Dave, Sorry I have been out of touch. I had to leave early on Friday. My father-in-law was hospitalized (he is seriously ill with MS).
- D: I'm sorry to hear that, Ruth.
- R: Anyway, I'm having a problem incorporating a contemporary angle to my critical investigation.
- D: Huh? What do you mean by a contemporary angle? Why wouldn't a study on hypertext and information storage, itself, be contemporary?
- R: You said you wanted me to "try and identify some contemporary angle on these debates and isolate it, say, in the form of a question." I thought you wanted me to create a statement so that I could filter those debates through something . . . ? But maybe I didn't understand you?
- D: Wow. you caught me red handed with my own words! I don't even remember that.
- R: You gave me the example: "Is the main use of hypertext going to be for information storage and online access or will it become a new form of writing to rival the printed book?"

This is an important exchange, primarily, because that which appeared insignificant to me has become very significant to Ruth. The interpretive process of reading and writing has entered into her process of drafting the proposal. Would my question have been funneled into her drafting if I had I uttered it face to face? Possibly. But how important is it that I am NOT present to diffuse, amplify, or spin my question? How important is it that Ruth has to imagine “me,” or invoke “me,” as she responds to this question?

R: I do know that I want to investigate the claim that hypertext is a more democratic method of storing and retrieving information, and that technology is part of that democratizing force (to use some of your words). So . . . it seems like I am naturally interested in the storage and retrieval aspect of hypertext, but what is my angle? I am truly frustrated. I don't want to specifically bring technical writing into it, however, I wouldn't mind addressing writing (and or language) issues. But this might be too big already?

It is no longer feasible (or even sensible) to separate “writer” and “audience” in the way it once seemed so natural to do. I also feel that the categories Lisa and I tried to describe/taxonomize (addressed and invoked audiences) are stretched to the bursting point. But it's those “invoked” audiences, whether online or off, but especially online, that are intriguing us here. Let's hear more!  
(Andrea Lunsford, 7 Sept. 1997)

D: hmm. I guess I have a few questions, then. First: what language issues or writing issues are you imagining?

R: Well, I was still thinking about having a filter through which to discuss the claim that hypertext is democratic. I was thinking about how writing will change because of the medium. How will fiction and non-fiction evolve because of the way the text is accessed. For example, Goethe was the first to write confessional literature. Will hypertext also create such styles?

D: A very good question, indeed! Now we're getting somewhere. And this is what I was hoping you might do: limit your question, say, to fiction writing. Then limit it again to the question of reading, or access.

R: Exactly, that's what I'm working on now.

D: I mean, it is quite reasonable to ask if the genre will create new styles. Do you think the medium is the message, then? —as Marshall McLuhan once said?

R: I think for awhile this will be the case—with multi-media, TV (and MTV!) It's like we are drawing on cave walls all over again.

D: Or do you think certain kinds of writers will have to do very particular kinds of things WITH a new medium before a new style can emerge?

One thing we do agree about is that email offers new ways of representing intellectual life. This is one way.  
(Spooner and Yancey 254)

R: I think as sensibilities change and writers (the real ones) figure out

other ways to express themselves (as artists) they will come up with those styles. I mean, that's what the humanities are all about . . . new ways to interpret and express signs.

What Ruth says of hypertext we might also say of email tutoring. To paraphrase: as sensibilities change, tutors might find other ways to express themselves with students online. We have a chance, with email, to blend the boundaries between "writing" and "tutoring"—to do something different with students in the writing center. In so doing, we might begin to make a different claim about peer tutors. Instead of imagining them as people who demystify the university, who make it hospitable to write for professors, who make the expert/novice "caste" system seem natural or inevitable, we might go on to imagine peer "tutors" as readers or interpreters—people who work with undergraduates to create new knowledge in writing. In this way, we might re-articulate the idea of the writing center, creating, instead, something closer to a knowledge center, or what I think of as an interpretive framework for writing that contradicts the idea(!?) of unfettered "service."

It's not like no precedent has been established. It's not like networks haven't already been set up to challenge the relationship between publishers and writers and teachers and students. On the listserv for the Alliance for Computers and Writing (ACW-L), for example, Russell Hunt describes the way networks can transform peer-review groups in a writing class:

If we can put our students in a position of writing for audiences . . . audiences who aren't helping them with their writing but are acting as dialogic partners through it—that is, who are literally, actually, and visibly being informed, confused, amused, impressed, persuaded—we can then begin to give them experience of audiences at greater distances. But if they haven't had the immediate experience, I think it's harder to imagine the, shall we say, virtual one. I think a potential web page audience "out there" isn't as close (or as powerful) as a colleague at the next computer; but it's certainly better than none at all. (5 Sept 1997)

What Hunt emphasizes in this passage is the social construction of meaning online. The dialogic partner is not "out there," beyond the footlights, in the darkened audience, passively receiving the text. This person is "actually and visibly" reacting to the text. In "Evolving past the Essay-a-saurus: Introducing nimbler forms into writing classes," Beth Baldwin makes a similar point about networked writing. Her challenge, which seems applicable to centers as well as classrooms, is to lay our theory money on the table—to enact, physically, methodologically, what we claim too easily in theory:

In general, the academy now holds to theories of the social construction of knowledge. We promote the Bahktinian notion of the "dialogue" of texts. Yet, the kind of writing we ask students to engage in is monological. It's often an individual voice making some kind of claim. It's written to an imaginary audience, generally speaking (no matter what kind of pretending we ask students to engage in), it's written for the purpose

of assessment (again, generally speaking), and the content (generally speaking) provokes no genuine response. In other words, where's the dialogue? (25 January 1996)

And again:

What amazes me is how so many of us seem to be trying to use the new technology to do the same old thing with students, albeit in new ways, rather than in using the technology to totally transform our teaching. In other words, why are so many of us still slavishly committed to the monological essay as a model for teaching rhetoric through writing? Now that we can have real audiences who offer real responses, why not use the interactive capabilities to teach rhetoric through conversation? (25 January 1996)

These passages, like Hunt's passage, are at once familiar and strange when placed in the context of writing centers. On the one hand, writing centers know—and have known for some time—about the power of “real audiences” offering “real responses.” Before networked classrooms made this type of student-to-student communication obvious and exciting, writing centers were quietly encouraging students to talk about their writing in an informal setting. In fact, as I have already argued (1995), the decentralized writing classroom often resembles the traditional writing center. In both environments, students help students with little or no awareness of some Teacher or Director in charge.

Yet in another way, this transformation of the classroom seems utterly strange to writing centers, not just because they have grown accustomed to face-to-face conferencing, but because writing centers have never known the kind of power that Baldwin and Hunt know—that any classroom teacher knows. One of the reasons that writing centers remain “slavishly committed” to the monological essay is because other professors continue to assign it. Let me just admit then that I still assign monological essays in my classes, however often I supplement them with collaborative, networked writing. The point is not to deny the essay in the writing center. The point is to seek out alternatives to essay writing that invigorate the very idea of composition.

How can we, in writing centers, create such opportunities for tutors and students to forge new intellectual partnerships online? It's not a rhetorical question. The situation at hand—my correspondence with Ruth—is, unfortunately, too convenient to be much use as a model. Ruth is not an undergraduate and I am not a peer tutor. Ruth is already committed to working on her writing. She did not respond to an anonymous advertisement for online tutoring in the center. She was referred by her thesis advisor, Joe Amato, who explained to me on email (8 Sept 1997) why he referred her:

on the one hand, I sent Ruth to you b/c she was, as Odin and Elias, engaged in a long-ish piece of writing (tres long in her experience) and b/c I see the writing center as an institutional aid in such activities . . . but on the other, I realized when I sent Ruth to you that she would need more sentence-level assistance than I could

manage alone . . . and it so happens that you are somebody who understands the issues at stake in writing and computers, and can lend some structural and content input, as well . . . that is to say: both your understanding of the writing process, in tutorial terms, and your interest in writing \*about\* computers and writing seem to me to speak directly to Ruth's needs, which are as much to do with feedback, and with feedback of a sort that might help her in her writing process, based on your talents as a tutor and as a scholar-writer yourself.

Ruth, as well, projects a larger role upon the writing center, or upon me, than we might otherwise expect. Or rather, considering the circumstances—a graduate student working with the director of the writing center—her projection of a collaborative partnership seems entirely appropriate. I become, in this sense, an unofficial thesis advisor, not "just" a writing tutor. The point is that Ruth and Joe re-articulate the writing center just as much as I do. To be sure, there are elements of the conference that seem typical of most conferences. We peddle up hill when it comes to syntax. But this sentence-level work is not removed from her thematic work, as Joe anticipated. In Figure 1, for example, I interject my comments in between the sentences of Ruth's draft. In this way, I create a dialogue with the draft that imitates our regular dialogue over email.

Figure 1  
Open-ended commentary on Ruth's proposal

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> The aim of this study is to examine claims made by hypertext theorists that compare hypertext to human cognitive structures, including the claim that hypertext structures are inherently democratic compared to traditional linear texts and are accessible via technology. These

—> not sure I follow "and are accessible via technology."

> claims are important to investigate because they rely on scientific knowledge to determine the way the mind works, yet acknowledge an individualistic approach to the acquisition of that knowledge.

—> An interesting tension. Are you saying that the claims want to have their cake and eat it too? — that they want to posit a universal "Mind" but also want to posit individual minds?

> Specifically, I will examine those claims that compare the associations that form a hypertext document to human cognitive structures, structures which have definitions from computer programming.

—> So is the “science” that you spoke of earlier really just the discipline of computer programming? or were you really referring to another science like psychology?

> Because these claims raise epistemological issues, the second part of my analysis will also question institutional practices that relate to knowledge (Paulson, 178).

—> What does epistemology have to do with institutional practices? I mean, it seems like it does. But you state it here as if it were a matter of fact. Why do you assume so?

> Some of the claims include statements about the methods that people use to acquire knowledge. For example, linear type was believed to produce linear thought. This particular aspect is interesting because it demonstrates a continued belief in the Aristotelian concept that form follows function and that technology promotes democracy.

—> I like this effort to explain the relationship between linear thought and linear type (or print literacy). But I’m not sure how it relates to the Aristotelian concept that form follows function. Couldn’t we say that hypertext claims ALSO rely on this concept? Also, I feel like the gesture toward democracy comes too quickly. Perhaps you could elaborate that one in a separate sentence?

> This exploration aims at a more thorough understanding of those claims that emphasize hypertext’s ability to facilitate knowledge acquisition more naturally than traditional linear texts. These definitions include a postmodern concept that hypertext has the potential to blend institutional boundaries as well as distinctions between author and reader and thereby envisions a distilled Marxist voice.

—> these are great sentences . . . all but that last part about a distilled marxist voice. How did you get there? what does that have to do with postmodernism?

> The final aspect of my analysis proposes that hypertext is an expression the way abstract art is (Hocks, 153) Further investigations of hypertext would have to examine how writing itself will be effected in the newest writing space.

—> are you saying that further analysis would have to consider hypertext as abstract art?

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There seems to be nothing unusual about this exchange. All I've done is draw attention to that which appears nonsensical in Ruth's draft, to help her clarify her meaning. If it had taken place in a writing center, the scene would be easy to imagine: the two of us hunched over her text, me asking questions after each sentence, her taking notes or responding in some way, or just absorbing my comments. But it didn't happen that way. There was no phatic interplay. What we see is what we get. (What I see in Ruth's writing is what I see in Ruth):

- D: these are great sentences . . . all but that last part about a distilled marxist voice. How did you get there? what does that have to do with postmodernism?
- R: This aspect of my writing/exploring drove Joe NUTS! I like how you just say "wtf Ruth." For some reason I have a concept in my brain about what I want to say and something pops into my head to use as a description/marker that will remind me to explain it when I strain it out in a real explanation. Sometimes it remotely makes sense . . . other times not. I'm very grateful that you follow everything I'm shagging your way! Your comments really help me identify what I want to say even if they seem obvious to you to say.

This problem—in many ways, the old problem of distinguishing the author from the person—becomes especially problematic online. Andrew Feenberg (1989) refers to this problem as the "management of identity," or the textualization of a person's character. In an online environment, individuals have the impression—real or perceived—that they can control their presentation of self in ways that are not possible face to face.

The lure of increased control in online environments has interesting implications. Feenberg uses Irving Goffman's work on the sociology of interaction to explain the management of identity in more detail. He takes Goffman's (1950) double definition of the self as "image" and "sacred object" to show how CMC alters their relationships to one another. In face-to-face communication, the self-as-image is constantly modified according to the dynamics of group interaction. A self emits a line of behavior, receives feedback from the group, and either modifies the line or maintains it in consonance with the "sacred" qualities of self. However, by writing oneself instead of speaking oneself, one gains time—perhaps too much time—to then consider and reconsider one's image. "By increasing the individuals' control of image, while diminishing the risk of embarrassment," he says, "computer talk alters the sociological ratio of the two dimensions of selfhood and opens up a new social space" (25).

- R: Dave I swear to God I'm trying to talk myself out of an all out allegiance to Marxism and fully \*embrace\* (wow, I really hate that word I can't believe I used it . . . I don't like the word \*afford\* either. I think J.E.K Jr. used them both 100 times when Dan Rather interviewed him at the democratic convention) Jameson because I'm so irritated with that smug academic G.P. Landow.

- D: ooo! Good, good. I've been wondering what this was all about. I, too, found Landow a bit smug when I read that book. But I think . . . well, when you work at Brown and you're working with expensive equipment, smart students, and a strong literary/elitist framework for education, it's EASY to be smug.
- R: He's pretty quick to criticize because he doesn't want anyone noticing his (and his superfriends') agenda. Landow has this totally pompous introduction to the last chapter of his book "Hypertext and the Convergence . . ." Anyway, I'm looking for specific applications because the theorist's general use of application encourages my own generalizations and I am looking for something more literal, less diluted. I realize this is all so abstract and reflexive (I'm in my own little hell here). Let me see if I can sort some of this out and make this activity of tooth extraction more organized.
- D: Ruth—I actually think that your little hell makes a lot of sense.
- R: And it's because you always understand that allows me to sleep at night!
- D: You feel Landow's somehow not being quite honest, or rather, he's too quick to generalize his theory in order to create a discipline out of it to be with his superfriends? to align himself with theory, etc.)
- R: Well, let's just say we are pretty clear that he lectures a lot at "Ivy League Campuses"—barf—He has this way of describing stuff using really prissy words and conservative phrases when he's pretending not to be critical—it \*feels\* like reading Jane Austen or Henry James. It's hard to describe but he describes a university in the "Deep South" or "a younger academic, concerned with . . ."
- D: So noted. It seems to me like we can't separate his personality/persona as an author from his theories, as much as he may want us to.
- R: Also, interestingly, his first observation was that: "a distinguished historical scholar worried aloud (see doesn't that sound like a novel?) in a conversation with me that the medium might serve primarily to indoctrinate students into post-structuralism and Marxist theory." I think this is an attempt to take emphasis off of the fact that his \*theory\* would send people running for Marxist theory!
- D: Good point. It's a well known strategy. Diffuse the conflict by admitting it AND then ignoring it.
- R: Then, he says that someone worried that: "hypertext would necessarily enforce historical approaches and prevent the theorizing of literature." i think hypertext needs more theorizing to make sure no stone is left un-turned to keep these guys in check. i just think the 2 examples he chose were so inverted.
- D: This being the case, let's imagine a scenario: what would happen if you were to test Landow's claims against the actual reading practices of students or (I don't know, co-workers?). Would they be liberated by hypertext? Would they revel in the free associations? Why do you feel they would or would not? What would Landow say? Does his theory work outside of Brown University?
- R: Hmm. Can you explain a little more?

The purpose of conversation is relationship. (Baldwin, 25 Jan 1996)

- D: Well, what I means is this: if you want to expose Landow somehow, why not put your money where your mouth is? That is, if you think his theories only work for him and his gang, how would folks outside the gang react? A bald example: how would a student from Malcom X college, on the west side of Chicago, experience hypertext as a writing medium? how would he or she experience it as a reading medium? and would this experience differ from a sophomore's experience in Professor Landow's class at Brown on hypertext and literature? One more note: What I'm saying is that I like the energy of your critique. It has more drive to it, now that you've taken off the gloves. But let's think through some creative way to funnel that drive into a sound research design. (So that it goes beyond Landow bashing...)
- R: Oh, I know. You gotta understand that I was on the last chapter of my last Landow book... obviously the guy is super smart and ivy league institutions are outstanding. I realize that some of my comments were pimpy and immature, they were strictly off-line. As Mary Ann Eiler puts it when referring to Edward Tufte (and normally, we were agreeing with Tufte) \*after awhile\* we are aware that we are not breathing the rare air that they are. Besides, they don't have to write to everyone if they don't want to.
- D: True enough. And you've got your own air to breathe, which relates to my point about the hypothetical experiment. what would happen if folks who don't breathe Landow's air (non-ivy air!) were asked to do so?

What interests me about this exchange is the transformation of Ruth's textual-ity, if I can say it that way. Gone are the measured, interiorized sentences of Figure 1. In their place, I don't think I find "pimpy and immature" sentences, but I definitely find something with a sharper, critical edge: a distinct opposition between herself and Landow that is based, in part, on the idea of class: "we" are not in the Ivy League. "We" cannot afford the same interpretation of hypertext in this context. What seems noteworthy, then, is this emphasis on "we"—the fact that I corroborate her rebellion.

It is tempting to think of our email exchange as a "grass roots" critique. But what we've said of Landow we might also say of ourselves. There is, in other words, a privileged side to our email exchange. Spooner and Yancey:

Truth is, we lead our social lives primarily in conversational modes. This is where the grass roots social construction of knowledge and meaning happens. (Baldwin, 25 January 1996)

The material conditions of the late 20th century have enabled a group of generally well-educated, relatively affluent people to communicate in a new medium. Many of these people believe that this form of communication is new, is different, and that it enacts new relationships between authors and readers. There is, in other words, an ideology already at work here, and it entails social action... One could argue that computer literacy lives within an even more elite socio-economic hierarchy than does print literacy. But this is often quite forgotten by the users. (268, 270)

At this point in the conference, Ruth and I have been working for about six months. Clearly, her financial security and my workplace productivity do not depend upon her finishing this thesis in a timely manner. As well, I am not obliged (officially) to work with Ruth at this level, yet I have chosen to do so, answering email in the evenings and on weekends, checking up on her after long periods of silence. Email, I would contend, does not create this social space. Rather, it is Ruth and I that create it. The issue, then, is not whether it is possible to work with students online. It's not a matter of "if" but of "why." Why would peer tutors and students prefer to work with each other online? What position would they have to be in—as writers, as students, as thinkers, as technologists—to engage each other on an intellectual level with email? This depends upon what position we want to be in. It depends, that is, on the idea of the writing center.

Although writing centers, by many accounts, have "made it" in the academy, the work is still misconstrued, or easily aligned with notions of functional literacy, minimum competency, and basic (pre-college) skills. "What is it that writing centers do?" asks Muriel Harris (1990), in her best imitation of the academic community.

Are we running only remedial centers, places to salvage some of the "boneheads" that have been permitted to enroll (for however brief a tenure) in our institutions? Are we band-aid clinics offering clean-up service for papers about to be handed in? Such questions persist with the tenacity of barnacles. We seem forever to be countering these and other equally limited notions. But why do we perennially have to keep explaining ourselves? And why do we keep doing it from a somewhat defensive posture? (17)

These questions sting anyone who has ever worked in or supported a writing center not just because they can be insulting but because they seem perennial. What seems, however, like a simple misunderstanding or miscommunication, is in fact more profound. As Lisa Ede frames the problem, "as long as thinking and writing are regarded as inherently individual, solitary activities, writing centers can never be viewed as anything more than pedagogical fix-it shops to help those who, for whatever reason, are unable to think and write on their own" (7). Ede does not defend the "fix-it shop" ideal. Rather, she argues that we can, and should, begin viewing writing as a social process. Only when we reconceive the nature of writing will we be able to reconceive the idea of the writing center as something more than a fix-it shop.

While working in a different context—the networked writing classroom—Baldwin nevertheless makes a similar point about the problem with traditional writing in the university:

Essay writing is a particularly solitary activity (even when we do great peer review) and the point is to make your point. There really isn't any dialogue, not on the level

of ideas and not on the level of genuine responsiveness. We expect responsibility, but do not provide response-ability. (*Conversations*)

To be a responsible writer, she seems to say, one needs to cut short others' reactions, anticipate their objections, and in other ways isolate oneself from that which could become contentious. To be an effective email correspondent, however—in the center or in the classroom—one needs to share authority and cultivate responsiveness.

R: Hi Dave, I was just thinking about writing you . . . I need some feedback soon. I'm starting to feel anxious and alone while I write, but I wanted a chance to mold my paper into something so that I would make a commitment to an idea. Even so, I still spend too much time editing the rough draft.

What Ruth confronts here, ironically, is the very limit that hypertext supposedly destroys: the inevitable closure of paperbound writing. Walter Ong (1982) relates this sense of closure to the technology of writing, itself. "More than any other single invention, writing has transformed consciousness" (78). Writing, he says later, allows the self to distance itself from itself, allowing for greater introspection and reflection. Although this claim can be controversial, especially when it is applied wholesale to entire civilizations, or even to the activity of writing, which Ong tends to do, it is nonetheless a provocative claim: Who hasn't felt the anxiety that Ruth describes above? Who hasn't helped writers try to become more responsible? Yet at the same time, isn't it fair to say, as Baldwin says, that responsibility is at odds with response-ability?

D: ok, Ruth. Now that you've finished the proposal, let's get to work on the actual study!

R: oh, thank the Lord you are gonna see this through with me! I love the word "let's" (it does mean let \*us\* doesn't it?).

D: oh yeah. "Let's" does mean let US see it thru! I'm glad we finished up before Thanksgiving break, too. The skies are clearing up.

R: yes, but more important to me, I'll feel a sense of security knowing that you'll be working with me. Thanks so much!

D: hey, think of me as the reader inside your computer :-)

Clearly, Ruth and I have invoked each other as audience in this session. But exactly what have we invoked? What is the relationship between our mutual e-space and Ruth's private writing space? When she talks about "a sense of security," on the one hand, and feeling "anxious" on the other hand, what are we to conclude about the aims of writing? The problem, in many ways, is methodological. Is it our purpose to establish online the conditions for, what Belenky et al. (1986) have called "connected knowing"? Or is our purpose to relieve those tensions that one feels when one is alone, writing. Is email conferencing, itself, a form of intellectual life to rival solitary writing? or is it a handmaiden to traditional writing?

- R: Hi Dave, This post [Figure 2] contains the first portion of my paper. It's hard to know what the paper says anymore, or if I'm contradicting myself in places. I'm sure you'll once again feel like you've been dropped into my notes in places . . . I feel like I need feedback from this portion to finish where I'm going with the rest because I need help with the organization (big time). I'll continue writing while I wait to hear from you.

Figure 2  
Draft of Ruth's thesis

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Reading and writing certainly involve cognition. However, the recent response to hypertext has prompted scholars to posit theories that have positioned reader's Gnostic mechanisms at the forefront of this new textual space. Hypertext theorists are claiming that since the hypertext reader (some say reader/writer because the reader chooses their own texts to become writer) links texts together choosing from multiple pathways, it has the potential to blend boundaries and is therefore a democratic activity. When there is an active participation of the reader in the making of meaning, political domination seems less possible (*The Experience of Reading*, 3).

Hypertext theorists, such as Brown University's George P. Landow, advance that hypertext units (sometimes called nodes or lexias) make up individual blocks of texts to perfectly represent what philosopher/theorist, Jacques Derrida meant by the de-centering of text. Since hypertext is non-sequential writing it (de)composes the original texts and the reader/writer is responsible for creating their own textual experience. As a result, Landow claims that hypertext goes beyond philosophy and language's sensory explanations to fully represent a political ideal. He claims that this form of writing exceeds language sensitivities to work the same as human thought processes. Hence, hypertext has more in common with natural brain determinism than with writing. "It is customary to think of literature as an expression of the mind, the psyche, or the imagination, but not as a record of metabolic intelligence." (*Open Form and the Feminine Imagination*, 194-195)

Claims suggest that movement from one textual unit to the next is how hypertext demonstrates democracy. Therefore, for hypertext, democracy lies in its movement. "Speaking and writing are physical activities, things our bodies do to express themselves and things which are physically recorded, as visible signs on the page." (*Open Form and the Feminine Imagination*, 195) But *Dictee*, in addition to being a book of feminine power, is a book about the body. Instead of thinking of *Dictee* in terms of its moral/intellectual content, she draws our attention to the

actual moment of speech—to the lungs, throat, mouth, tongue, teeth, and lips. After presenting a diagram of these organs that shows how they produce physical sound, she describes the concrete act of words being spoken. (*Open Form and the Feminine Imagination*, 195)

To deconstruct even further . . . [snip]

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D: Ruth—Well, obviously you've been doing quite a bit of reading! How this reading relates to your evolving sense of purpose, though, is unclear to me. The feeling I got was that you were rapidly condensing another person's work, skipping over the logical connections (what led you to that quote), in order to hurry up and finish the paragraph. Then, you start the next paragraph with little reference back to the ideas of the previous paragraphs. In short, I felt like I was reading a series of hypertextual lumps or snippets that \*could\* relate, but didn't really relate or work as a narrative.

So, you asked me to help you organize. And I'm thinking that the kind of linear organization I have in mind might be inappropriate for the work you are doing. Do you want to present this narrative as a hypertext instead?

R: well, yeah. that pretty much sums up my structure (or lack of). if you recall, I told you that some of what I write represents to me a marker of some thought that remains undeveloped, yet important to my next attempt to exhume (remember the first scrawling of my proposal—I'm sure you didn't know what the hell I was talking about).

D: Fair enough. But what body do you want to dig up in this text? What is inside that grave that you so frantically scratch at? What do you hope to find down below?

R: well, to put it as plainly as I can, in addition to my issues with claims of human cognitive structures . . . I disagree that hypertext changes our view of what text does . . . that it will redefine text outside of the computer culture. Landow suggests that writing itself will move away from previous expressions and supports his argument with people who view text as accessing data.

D: I don't get it. What does this last sentence mean? (What are the "previous expressions? And what does "text as accessing data" mean?)

R: I'm arguing that he disregards the thought process for inspirational writing and takes offense (or defense) to a particular thought process (including Marxism . . . ), yet makes claims that the hypertext method is more democratic.

D: So then: are you claiming that "inspirational writing" is more democratic? Or are you saying that we shouldn't even bother with this kind of one-upmanship. Power is power, so to speak. Or democracy is democracy. It has nothing to do with particular forms of writing. Is that it?

R: The irony of what I've presented to you so far, is that I wrote to you hypertextually.

D: See, I don't know about that. Or rather—I'd grant that you may have intended to do so. But I don't see anything in Landow or Bolter or any of those essays I gave you that says hypertext has to be incoherent. In fact, my main beef with Landow and company is that they are ultimately afraid of courting real incoherence.

- R: I'm \*totally attracted\* to what you say here!!!
- D: Good! Then you probably wouldn't find it difficult to write it THAT WAY in your paper. Since I am, it seems, a sympathetic audience, maybe you could write your argument with me in mind? Maybe that would get you into the direct style that I find so persuasive in your email?
- R: Can you explain what you mean?
- D: I'm trying to say that your writing seems to avoid creating a central focus. In some ways, this could be construed as liberating—perhaps more for you than for the reader. The centering affect of democracy, though, depends upon a certain confidence or shoulder rolling swagger that is ultimately, exclusive. You have to decide what will be suppressed, what will be featured, and so on. You can't talk about everything. You have to choose.
- R: But I'm trying to steer clear of scientific descriptions of “new ways of thinking” when discussing writing, because writing should include exchanging ideas . . . even if those ideas are presented by an \*author\*. associations can be powerful, but supporting a method doesn't have to be undermining authorship.
- D: Again, this depends on what you feel you have at stake. I mean, why do it? What kind of authority would you be undermining? Your own? or some other authors?
- R: Dave, I'm sorry to subject you to my incessant free writing, but I would rather not do this if my outcome is obvious (implement SGML, the values of relevant searching)—no matter how well written or supported it is. But, I also might discover that I'm not qualified to support anything beyond that, but we can address that when/if that happens.
- D: Well, I understand your dilemma. Honest, I do. But I don't think the situation is as stark as you make it out to be. Situating your study within a technical writing context, for example, would not mean kissing the theory good bye. You could, for example, put Landow to the test by revealing how institutions limit the ways hypertext is used. (If they didn't, wouldn't we expect immediate transformations in the workplace? a surge of democracy?)
- R: I know I need to do this, I'm currently searching for a comfortable method. In addition, I realize that I COULD NOT do this without you, and I can't express how fortunate I feel working with you.
- D: Nice. But believe me—I wouldn't stick with it if I didn't think you could pull it off! Now try again to imagine your readers, Ruth. Think not so much about the theoretical issues and more about the story you want to tell. And give some thought to the idea of TESTING some theory with a real-live situation.
- R: OK. Let me try this:

Hypertext theorists depend on mythical cultural beliefs about computers and generalizations of critical theory to support their claims that hypertext embodies democracy. These theorists rely on {stereotypic} associations between computers and the human mind as well as a desire to define and validate the writing process. Brown University's George P. Landow describes a writing process that is inherently natural and critically accessible by illustrating how he converges technology to critical theory.

This investigation examines why associations to critical theories are contradictory because critical theory traditionally places literature, while hypertext theories situate the literature to critical theory. By taking a closer look at these assumptions, we can gain a broader understanding of why such claims of democracy exist.

- D: SEE, THIS IS WHAT I'M TALKING ABOUT. I JUST . . . WELL, I DON'T THINK THAT THIS IS A VERY EXCITING PROSPECT. TO YOU IT IS. YOU'RE PROMISING TO EXPLAIN IT TO YOURSELF. WHY SHOULD OTHERS CARE ABOUT YOUR PROCESS OF THINKING? WHAT'S WORSE, I THINK, IS THAT THIS SENTENCE BASICALLY PINS YOUR ENTIRE ARGUMENT ON LANDOW-BASHING. NOW I'M NOT ONE TO DISCOURAGE A LITTLE LANDOW BASHING! BUT NOT FOR THE WHOLE ARGUMENT!
- R: ouch, a little blood there.
- D: oops! Sorry about that. I'll unclench my fists now :-\
- R: No way! Don't be, I need it. I think the reason I'm having a hard time limiting my topic is because I don't understand how much freedom I have in supporting it. as I previously stated, I didn't think I wanted to do a paper where I use literature that explicitly gives reasons for supporting a particular position and then reiterating that proof. I thought that hypertext literature was fluid enough to reinterpret a little. But, maybe I'm not understanding what I'm reading. Give me some interpretation boundaries.
- D: Well, it all depends on what you mean—or what Joe means—by fluid boundaries. I understand your reticence. You don't want to simply repeat what you've read. But so long as you remain hostage to your authors' arguments, you WILL be doing just that. Even if you end up discounting what you've read, you'll still be stuck in the theory loop.
- R: I think the reason why I end up with Landow (and I don't want the paper about bashing Landow either) is that his claims are something I can easily grasp—so when I'm off in a place where I'm gasping for air, I always come back to what he's saying.
- D: Not a good reason to use Landow. I mean, if he has become the dock or the harbor, and your other authors have become like little ships making day trips . . . all we get, finally, are a series of day trips that inevitably come back to the harbor. What I'm trying to get you do is all together different: I'm talking about a journey away from the harbor, in search of something new.
- R: Ok, then. On that note, I'll tell you what interests me from what you've suggested so far: the statement you made about hypertext not having to be about incoherence and that Landow was afraid of incoherence. (btw—what defines incoherence?)
- D: Ha! you wish I'd define incoherence for you! Like I know? That's why I suggested it to you. I thought you might be able to help me understand.
- R: I like it. BTW, I'm working with you \*only\* on this until I get a draft ready for public consumption. I've learned more from you about writing in the last year than I have in my entire lifetime. I don't want to be a selfish writer, I want to try and offer something. Everybody blah blahs the way I do (in other words, everybody's a

poet)—I'm all about wanting to say something. OK? Man, I need to chill and take some days off of work!

- D: Yes. And it's nice to hear you say that. It means we both understand what this is all about. I believe you have something to offer. And I want you to offer it. I don't want you to lose that feeling. Keep constructing your desire into ever more direct and honest expressions. It's a moral thing.

Although this exchange, with its intense back-and-forthing, resembles, to me, a viable alternative to f2f conferencing, it is an alternative filled with irony. Yes, in some ways this exchange illustrates what Baldwin means by response-ability. But look closely: this exchange is about responsibility (a moral thing). It would not take place if Ruth were not writing a master's thesis.

What Ruth describes as an unselfish way of writing, or what I describe as honest expressions, are more properly seen as writerly habits from the garret. When I push Ruth, IN ALL CAPS, to remember her readers—drawing a bit of pixel blood—she does not retreat, but thanks me for sticking by her.

- D: Ruth, do you feel as if you've missed something or lost out, in some way, working with me online instead of face-to-face?
- R: No, quite the opposite. I'm reduced to my writing so that everything I put down here I'm held accountable for. Meaning, everything I say to you—you have assumed contributed to my end goal (paper). At first it was frustrating because I'm so used to being able to express myself with myself. But slowly, I was grateful because it taught me an almost feminist voice because you forced me to be straight forward.
- D: What aspects of our interaction via email do you find most useful? least useful?
- R: I find it useful because of my previous answer. I don't think anything is "least useful", but sometimes I can get overwhelmed because I realize that \*every sentence\* is going to be addressed because I give you bits and pieces. It seems like your comments take me on tangents and I never commit to a specific path.
- D: What have you learned so far about writing a proposal for an extended research project?
- R: That it's going to change, but it starts the process of narrowing your focus, which for me is the absolute hardest thing.
- D: If you think you're writing has improved in some way, could you describe, with as much detail as you can, what you think you learned?
- R: I've learned that writing is my written self. Whatever I write, I must first think of my focus and my audience. I have learned that good writing is good ideas and hard work—really hard work. For me, the desire to define myself through words instead of my visual self has always been my goal—yet I never took responsibility for what I put down. I've always considered myself a sophisticated reader, but since I've studied the process of writing, (through this experience) I feel so at ease with the written word—I'm confident of my ability to understand practically anything that can be written. Because I've taken abstract thoughts that

meant practically nothing and written them into something someone else could relate to, I've added profoundly to a mind set to nurture existing abilities and/or desires to know and express. In other words, I feel that I'm at the starting point to begin to write well. I also know that one of \*your\* goals for me is to allow my words to flow as well as my written conversations with you.

It's true. One of my objectives is to juxtapose the conversational rhythms of the conference with the more measured, tones of her academic writing—to mix responsibility with response-ability. Though it is true that this session "reduced" Ruth to her writing, this "reduction," finally, became an expansion—not just for Ruth but for me. Email allowed us to create an alternative writing space that was not, in my view, narrow or reductive, but was—and still is—filled with possibility. This implies, I think, a reciprocal relationship not just between print and electronics, or thesis proposals and email dialogues, but between two writers. What I find so rewarding about email "tutoring" is the chance to write differently, in the company of another. Isn't that something worth pursuing in the "writing" center?

#### NOTES

1. A note on mechanics: Although I have presented this exchange between myself and Ruth as a back-and-forth dialogue, readers should keep in mind that our exchange did not take place in real time: a question asked on Monday might not receive an answer until Friday. In between Monday and Friday, other questions or comments might have been made. To provide each other with some continuity, we made liberal use of the reply key, often appropriating each other's email into the new post. In order to make the session readable, I have excluded email header information, and I have condensed the repetitious material. I have not changed the content or style of any of these posts. However, I have omitted some material, most of it drafts of Ruth's essay and discussions of those drafts that did not, in my opinion, seem all that different from the material I discuss here. My aim was not to be true to "the record" but to represent the record as a tutorial.
2. The text of the email exchanges here as a way to retain the informal flavor of the originals. I left all typos and unorthodox stylistics in.