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The Center and the City

Writing center theory and literature tends to focus on the specific details of the center: how the writers are treated, how the tutors approach them, even where the chairs are situated behind the tables. Although this type of literature is important and crucial, broader literature that looks at the writing center as a replication of a bigger system is needed in order to critique and question the assumptions of writing centers. One bigger system– the city– acts similarly to writing centers, but is virtually nonexistent in writing center literature. Both are synthesis points of intellectualism and diversity, offering a dynamic platform for the exchange of ideas. Thus, by examining the broad similarities between the city and the writing center, as well as urban theory and the model of a successful city, we can disprove common misconceptions and improve our writing center here at Trinity College.

Centers and Cities as Undefinable

Many definitions exist, both of centers and cities, that are overly-specific and exclusionary. For instance, the writing center is a considered a place of intellectualism, discussion, and inclusion. It can act as a point of synthesis where, theoretically, a diverse array of people convenes and collaborates. It wasn't, however, always considered a place of

inclusion. Writing centers have a contested narrative of identity. Once considered patch up "fix-it shops," they were almost clinical (Waller). Trinity's own center seems to follow the ethos of the majority of modern centers, practicing inclusion and accommodation of students of all writing levels.

However, writing centers play many different roles depending on the individual. Although thought of as inclusive to most white females, it may be a place of exclusion to others of different race or gender identity. Additionally, although it is primarily thought of as an extension of the college, it may also act as a safe place away from the larger campus systems (McNamee). Thus, the writing center is not something that can, or should, be concretely defined in the fear that it might disregard some of the important roles that it plays.

For example, in the Allan K. Smith center, the tutors lack overall diversity of both gender and race. Out of the 29 current writing associates, there is an overwhelming percentage of white females (65.5%). As a result, gender and race variance is quite low, with only 24% identifying as male and only 13.8% identifying as people of color (Trinity College Writing Center). Thus, although we consider our center a diverse hub, and it may well be more diverse than the surrounding campus, it is unfair to define it as concretely diverse or inclusive if it only plays that role to a certain demographic of students.

Similarly, it is a difficult task to define a city due to the extreme level of variants involved. Some geographers believe it is based on region size and density, the GDP, or economic framework per capita. Population-wise, the city is the nucleus, the tiny, dense middle, of a general metropolitan area. This region surrounds the city, including suburbs and

the outer edge, and is referred to as the periphery. However, some consider this a part of the city, while others do not (Elledge).

Others disregard statistics entirely and consider cities through their own personal lens, whether that be through their identity of gender, race, or economic status. This perception is often called the "urban imaginary," an individual's personalized view of the city specific to different experiences and identity. So, even with definitions loosely based off of population and statistics, the concept of the city is "largely subjective" (Elledge).

Thus, the writing center and the city cannot be concretely categorized or defined. They are constantly changing, morphing, and playing different roles in the psyche of those who perceive them. The varying roles of the center, as in the city, must be valued, despite highly-regarded articles such as *The Idea of a Writing Center* and other definitive and exclusive definitions that attempt to categorize the system. All are valid, but no one definition is absolute.

Cities and Centers Observed: The Macro-Micro Approach

There are two major ways to observe and categorize the city: through the eyes of a social scientist, or those of an urban planner. The social scientist observes smaller increments of the city, such as neighborhoods or burrows, and looks at the city "from the viewpoint of 'her people'" (Hester). An urban planner, on the other hand, observes things on a macroscopic level, using a removed mantra of an outsider to observe (Hester). Neither of these approaches are adequate in dealing with the complexities of cities. Thus, when looking at something as

complex as an urban space, one must use both a micro and macro approach, one that is not totally objective but also not biased.

In the Allan K. Smith center, we analyze the space through the required rhetoric class, monthly meetings, and our constant (and sometimes unintentional) observations when we are in the space. In the rhetoric class, broader ideas are discussed, such as perceptions, roles, and overall theory surrounding centers. However, as tutors finish the class, this expansive outlook is never revisited. During meetings and shifts, our focus is on the precise details that are happening in close proximity. However, this miniscule perspective can limit our ability to see imperfect patterns in the system we have grown used to, and can keep us from challenging our center after comparing it to a broader-scaled system.

Similarly, when we observe our writing center, we must look at the larger intent of the center as well as the interactions that are happening on a small, student-tutor scale. In a broader context, we wonder how the writing center is perceived and who it is catered to. When we focus on more specific context, however, we ask ourselves questions about tutors being kind and accepting in specific one-on-one interactions.

This macro-micro approach is most famously (and perhaps unintentionally) mentioned in *The Idea of a Writing Center*, in which author Stephen North rants against his colleagues for their constant misconstrued interpretation of the center. He looks at the writing center on a broad scale (the mantra of the center and how it is perceived) and a smaller scale (how the center's actions can help legitimize the space), all the while using his identity as a professor to help him both find, and flesh out, his argument. Thus, he is unknowingly utilizing a form of urban observation to accurately assess the writing center (North).

The Importance of Collaboration the City and Center

When both urban studies and center literature attempts to pinpoint exactly what makes a space successful, there is always one shared concept: collaboration.

In older urban discourse, cities are often ranked in an "urban hierarchy," inadvertently pitting cities of similar size against each other to vie for tourism, funds, population, and notoriety. Those at the top are usually larger, mega-cities, with large populations, strong service sectors, and large spheres of influence. Although the ranking is thought to increase competitiveness and thus push smaller, "insignificant" cities to attempt greatness, the list merely discounts cities of smaller size, despite their value as cultural, inclusive hubs (Newman).

However, recent literature has attempted to encourage an "atmosphere of synergy rather than competition" (Newman). By partnering between city governments and departments, urban spaces can share programs, pool funding for larger scale projects, and share a greater diversity of thought (Hodkinson). According to urban scholars, a successful urban space must be a place of creativity, full of "innovative knowledge workers, entrepreneurs, and companies" that collaborate together (Hodkinson).

There is a similar parallel concerning the writing center. Collaboration, first and foremost, has been a buzz-word to define the core values of writing centers for decades. Collaboration has been proved to "help students understand writing as a public, communal act, develop a sense of audience…[and] practice analyzing writing" (Knauff). In addition, collaboration encourages students to become comfortable in discussing and expressing their thoughts in a concise manner (Knauff). Ideas are exchanged and shared, broadening the minds

of the student body. This emphasis on collaboration is important on campuses where academics are extremely competitive, sometimes even polarizing.

So, although both urban spaces and writing centers are in a surrounding atmosphere of competitiveness, it is valuable to think about collaboration inside centers and between cities as a crucial aspect to success.

The Importance of Recognizing Inclusivity and Exclusion in Cities and Centers

The city and the center must recognize the presence of opposing systems such as inclusivity and exclusivity. Although sometimes hidden in plain sight, the indicators of exclusion in the center are obvious once finding those similar systems in the city.

Urban diversity and inclusion are broad concepts. There can be diversity of class, gender, culture, religion, and race. This is where inclusion comes into play: ideally, "…everyone should have the opportunity to contribute to and benefit…" from the city (Lei). Similarly, "overall inclusion" means that historically excluded populations (such as lower-income or people of color) are given opportunities to contribute to society as much as historically favored populations. Urban scholars generally believe that "…being more inclusive can make cities stronger and more stable and can give all residents a chance to improve their quality of life" (Lei). Those ranked at the top for both economic, racial, and overall inclusion tend to be smaller in size- similar to the scale of the writing center compared to overall campus communities (Lei).

In the writing center context, we look at inclusion and diversity similarly as crucial elements to success. Diversity of all kinds provides deeper conversations and helps to build a

safe space on campus, and many writing center scholars even believe that this "safe space" can double as a hub for social justice through inclusion and discussion (McNamee).

However, it is important to make the distinction, again, between inclusion and diversity. Some centers may have both, while some may only have one or the other. A center can have a diverse student body but lack inclusion, which leads to a multiplicity of issues- mistrust, hierarchy, and even "new racism" (University of Puget Sound), as author Nancy Grimm calls it. This term refers to a negative attitude that extends beyond race to matters of "language, disability, school preparation, and other markers of difference" (University of Puget Sound).

Although it may seem that the "21st century ethos" (Waller) of writing centers prioritizes inclusion, it is quite obvious that it is still an issue. Author Anne Geller, of *Everyday Writing Center: A Community of Practice,* tells of Krista, a black tutor in a majority white center. Krista is constantly asked if she is there to schedule an appointment, and students seem to question her advice more-so than the other tutors, even mentioning racialized stereotypes (Geller). This is only one form of exclusion visible mentioned. Among others were assumptions about class, culture, and intellectual background (Geller).

Cities, similarly and wrongly, are outwardly considered places of diversity, the inclusive counterpart of the exclusive suburb. However, cities are also major hubs of exclusion, and some were even created to be exclusionary, despite their modern diverse nature. The exclusivity ranges from government-made slums in Brazil that target lower classes to towns built for the sole purpose of segregation in South Africa. Anti-blackness, among other exclusion, has even formed and shaped some of major cities today, and not only in urban social systems but in physical manifestations (White).

It would be remiss to discuss the parallels of urban racism without mentioning most notorious example of New York City in the early 70s, and the urban planner Robert Moses. Despite being thought of as a dutiful public servant and restructuring most of New York with the construction of major highways and public works projects, Moses (known as the "Anti-Utopian) was first and foremost catering to the wealthy and middle-class white population (Campanella). Aside from cutting off minority neighborhoods from major resources entirely, he built bridges just low enough so that bus access was impossible from lower-income neighborhoods to those of higher-income. In addition, he attempted to discourage non-whites from public parks with "simian-themed" playgrounds and statues (Misra). These physical manifestations of racism and exclusion are what has shaped the fragmented cities we know today, both sneakily barring those of lower-income and certain races from parks, main streets, and other seemingly communal and shared spaces (Misra).

This synthesis of space, power, and identity results in concrete symbols that evoke strong emotions (Monnet). Statues and "urban symbolism" can make an entire population feel unwelcome, often referred to as "symbolism of inequality" (Hall). The statue of colonialist Cecil John Rhodes on the campus of the University of Cape Town in South Africa is one such symbol, prompting negative reactions from students for bringing up an unforgivable past of extreme entrenched racism (Hall). Similarly, and more recently questioned, is the confrontation in Richmond over the confederate statues, which, along with the recent rise of visible white supremacy, became a major point of contention in the historically significant city (Benson).

Additionally, it is not only cities that were built to work as systems of exclusion. Trinity college, although branded as a place of exclusion, was built as an exclusive institution that

excluded all those of color and all females. Thus, it also was built to conform and even enforce a system of exclusion. The lack of diverse statues is just a small indication of this past. Such symbols of power are pivotal to inclusion everywhere, including writing centers. The smallest indicators of exclusion can alienate students and assert a hierarchy of who belongs and who doesn't.

The Allan K. Smith center is no exception: it has both inclusive and exclusive symbols. When arriving, the student first sees a sign that expresses inclusive sentiments towards different genders, sexualities, races, religions, and cultures. This acts as a symbol of inclusion, allowing people to feel safe and valued from the moment of entrance. However, the inclusive symbolism is overshadowed by the stately painting on the mantel- an older, white male who looks heteronormative and wealthy, gilded in an expensive golden frame and placed front and center. Both the biggest and only form of wall art, it is the condescending symbol of classic urban, American, and political power- the rich, strait, white male. Although this symbol might seem common and far from radical, it is a sly indicator that the center, as well as this institution, was funded by the very money made from a system of oppression. Thus, the center attempts inclusivity but is unknowingly enforcing a symbolic hierarchy.

Movements to Negate Exclusion in the Center and the City

It is not enough to just see exclusion. Institutions- whether that be the city or the center- must act against it. One of the most influential and notorious movements to end exclusion in urban spaces originated in the 1960's when the book *Right to the City* was published by Henri Lefebvre. A French Marxist urbanist, he wrote the book with the intent of a

"collective reclamation of the urban space by marginalized groups living on the border districts of the city" (Isensee). Unsurprisingly with his Marxist identity, Lefebvre focused on socio-economic exclusion. This was extremely radical considering the fact that the poor were considered one of the most powerless groups of city-dwellers. However, as the concept gained popularity, it was adopted by many social movements seeking to regain ownership of public urban space, as well as other rights that were infringed upon in the city (Isensee).

Modern social theorists, such as David Harvey, broadened the scope of the movement, saying that, "…the right to the city is far more than the individual liberty… [it is] a common …right since the transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization" (Isensee). This collective power includes, as the director of the Right to the City Alliance describes, "…the working class, people of color, immigrants, youth, and all others committed to a truly democratic society" in the fight for "the right to culture, celebration, rest, and public space" (Isensee). Both community organizations and non-profits have adapted the movement to their own specifics needs, whether that be housing, discrimination, or exclusion. One of the most well-known modern examples of the movement includes debates and protests across Rio as gentrification destroyed favelas across the city prior to the Olympics (Isensee).

The key word for Writing Centers in this plethora of literature is the term *community*. The urban geographers, from Lefebvre to Harvey, stress that it is not an individual right, or even achievable alone- it is the right of the entire *community,* and must be solved as such.

This emphasis shows that the writing center, which is a perfect example of a community within a larger system, has a certain amount of power when working together- the type of power to be a space of social justice and activism through collective discussion. This doesn't mean that the center has to rise up and protest, but discussions, meetings, and other forms of solidarity can be just as impactful. In current literature, it can work as both a radical space and simultaneously a safe one (McNamee) by offering opinions but also a retreat from exclusive systems. One tutor even said that dialogue helps to "unpack our own assumptions, as well as the assumptions and stereotypes that are prevalent in our society. The writing center allows us the time and the space to connect and to talk through matters of social justice, to have these conversations that we wouldn't be having otherwise" (Hammond).

This is particularly important for the center at Trinity College, since its intent is to be inclusive and welcoming. On a campus where LGBTQ+ students, black students, Puerto Ricans, women, and other groups often feel marginalized by the overwhelming whiteness and masculinity, the center must claim its space and define it in a way that makes it accessible through group discussions.

Conclusion

The vagueness of comparison between cities and centers is not due to a lack of evidence or parallels. Rather, the uniqueness and diversity of both does not allow us to concretely categorize and theorize such spaces. Thus, the broadness is less of a burden and more of an

opportunity, encouraging centers to find their own specific issues and look towards the city for answers and suggestions.

As for Trinity, it is difficult to speak for the entire center when my identity is one of the majority population (a white female). The center, however, can utilize city models as a way to question the status quo, approach things in a broader way, and dig deeper into the concepts and theories we take for granted.

Some might wonder why there has been no writing center literature on the correlation between cities and centers. Although writing center literature is extremely diverse, it somehow seems to ignore the possibility of referring to other fields of scholarship, such as urban studies. Although the center and the city seem like incompatible ideas, their inner-workings and systems follow many similar patterns, whether that be patterns of resistance, inclusion, exclusion, or theory. Thus, the Writing Center can learn from those systems and attempt to replicate or modify them in order to create a center as vibrant as the cities that surround them.

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