

THE SECRET ORIGINS OF WRITING CENTERS

In graduate school, a sociology professor gave me some sound advice: When trying to understand an educational reform, go to its origins, for it is there that you'll find the originators' intent, the pure soul of the experiment before it became tainted by compromise, subterfuge, or just plain neglect. Writing center work offers a reform of the usual way of doing business in the teaching of writing. Rather than a classroom teacher acting as expert witness, jury, and judge in evaluation of students' writing, writing centers have long offered themselves as nonevaluative, relatively safe places, as *experiments* in the teaching of writing. As recommended in a 1950 Conference on College Composition and Communication workshop, "The writing laboratory should be what the classroom often is not—natural, realistic, and friendly" ("The Organization and Use of a Writing Laboratory" 18). Contemporary writing centers might not draw such sharp boundaries with their classroom-teaching colleagues, but the spirit of the writing center as an *alternative* place certainly lives on.¹

Thus, my quest for writing center history was launched. If I could only figure out where the first writing center was created—and how and why—perhaps I would get some sense of that initial charge, some inkling of what it felt like at the beginning. I could connect with those early experimentalists and get an idea as to what the problem was for which writing centers were proposed as the solution. And hopefully that knowledge would apply to the contemporary scene where writing centers continue to struggle for recognition and resources, despite the trappings of academic legitimacy in the form of dedicated publications, a professional organization, and growing numbers of tenure-track directorships. For every writing center that seems on solid footing (as solid as one can get in times of budget uncertainty), there is another that is barely hanging on, in danger of being outsourced to a private company (Murphy and Law, "The Disappearing Writing Center"), or run by a contingent, part-time staff member or faculty spouse, asked to do *something* about student writing but given scant resources.

A missing link in this writing center family tree is a knowledge of its own low-lying branches and its roots, its own history. For many contemporary academics, the idea of a writing center appears newly constituted, with a lineage, if known, only as far back as the experimental era

of the early 1970s. Consider, for example, this claim from 1985: “Once a rare phenomenon limited to a few innovative schools, the writing center or writing lab is now a common program in colleges and universities” (Haring-Smith et al. 1), or this more recent one: “If you look back at the history of writing centers, you will discover that few existed before the 1970s” (Bower et al. 1). This historical amnesia is also, perhaps, a function of the growth of writing center work as an academic discipline. Lepenies and Weingart note that disciplinary histories “serve the function of legitimation” (xv), and that “histories of disciplines are being written and rewritten, to extend the present (or what is to become the future) as far as possible into the past, thereby constructing an image of continuity, consistency and determinacy” (xvii). The story of the post-1960s writing center is a hero narrative that contemporary writing center directors are quick to recognize and celebrate (Carino, “Open Admissions”). This version of twenty-five years of writing center history goes something like this: We might all be “writing without teachers,” in the words of Peter Elbow circa 1973, but all writers need writing tutors, paraphrasing Muriel Harris circa 1995 (“Talking in the Middle”).

When most contemporary writers make mention of writing center history, it is usually to invoke a dark past in contrast to an enlightened present. As I noted in the introduction to this book, Stephen North perhaps set the precedent for this rhetorical move in 1984 when he invoked Robert Moore in “The Idea of a Writing Center” (436). Moore, a graduate student at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana in the late 1940s, described the landscape of tutorial support in writing in a 1950 *College English* article titled “The Writing Laboratory and the Writing Clinic.” North particularly took issue with Moore’s comment that “writing clinics and writing laboratories are becoming increasingly popular among American universities and colleges as remedial agencies for removing students’ deficiencies in composition” (388). Such a belief, for North, was evidence of a “limited conception of what such places can do—the fix-it shop image” (436).

Following North’s assertion, the notion of writing *labs* seemed to be a *verboten* topic in the move toward writing centers. Here’s what Jim Addison and Henry Wilson had to say on the topic in 1991:

As long as the writing “lab” remained a mere lab, the metaphorical baggage associated with more familiar labs served as an obstruction to the full development of the potential power and effectiveness of the writing center. After all, a “lab” is most commonly associated with images of dry, objective “research,” rather than

with the promotion and development of living, growing organisms such as developing essays, term papers, and other publications. . . . the overall flavor of the concept of “lab” does not lend itself well to the process view of writing: a lab is often more backward-looking rather than forward-looking, in that the initial focus of a tutoring session is on the “sick” writing project brought into the lab for diagnosis and analysis. (56)

One wonders, of course, if Addison and Wilson had ever actually set foot in a scientific laboratory, but nevertheless, they well captured a prevailing attitude.

Reality, for better or worse, can offer complications to long-held beliefs. When I researched Moore and the writing clinic he directed at Illinois, I found a far more complex picture (see Lerner, “Searching”). Moore’s writing clinic certainly had elements of punishment for language crimes, but it also was a place that offered support for writers that they could find nowhere else on campus. Indeed, its role must have been a comfortable one for all involved, for that writing clinic existed from the late 1940s until the mid 1980s when its longtime director, Albert Tillman, retired or died (I never figured out which).

From my research into Moore, I knew that writing laboratories and clinics existed in the 1940s and 1950s, but I wondered if the origins might have been earlier still. Peter Carino let the writing center world in on the secret in 1995 when he published “Early Writing Centers: Toward a History.” According to Carino, instructional efforts that looked like writing centers have existed since Philo Buck gave a talk on “Laboratory Methods in the Teaching of English” at the 1904 American Education Association conference (105). From Carino’s work, as well as Elizabeth Boquet’s (“Our Little Secret”), I knew that the idea of a writing laboratory was not born in the late 1970s/early 1980s when a flurry of books on the topic appeared.² After all, when required English composition classes proliferated in the late 1800s (Brereton), someone back then must have advocated for the one-to-one teaching of writing that is the essence of a writing laboratory or center. Still, I needed a starting place, my own eureka moment for tracking down the experimental soul of the contemporary writing center, if not of the entire enterprise of teaching writing in higher education. In this chapter, I present that quest.

Helen Parkhurst and the Dalton Laboratory Plan

One of my starting points to find the first writing center comes from Christina Murphy, Joe Law, and Steve Sherwood in their *Writing Centers:*

An Annotated Bibliography. In their entry for Helen Parkhurst's book *Education on the Dalton Plan*, published in 1922, they write, "Describes a method of instruction based upon classroom and laboratory. . . . The laboratories for each class would provide student-centered, self-paced learning that appealed to students' interests and supported students' autonomy. The central text and philosophy from which much writing center theory and practice derive" (13). That last line is worth repeating: "The central text and philosophy from which much writing center theory and practice derive." Wow. Here, it seems, is the answer to the question of where writing centers come from, at least according to Murphy, Law, and Sherwood. Thus, I had my initial questions to investigate: Who was Helen Parkhurst, and did she create the first writing laboratory?

Helen Parkhurst was born in 1887 and died in 1973, and went from teaching in a one-room schoolhouse in rural Wisconsin in 1904 to devising a plan for classroom organization and teaching that was adopted worldwide by the mid 1920s (Lager i). Parkhurst's methods were first tried in a public high school in Dalton, Massachusetts, hence the name Dalton Laboratory Plan. So what about this claim for "central text and philosophy"? After all, the application of the Dalton Laboratory Plan was largely in K-12 settings, was not about teaching writing per se, and was essentially forgotten by the time any significant publication about writing centers began to appear. Well, my reading of Parkhurst's book, as well as materials about her, certainly reveals a kindred spirit. The "laboratory" component of the plan is the clearest relationship to writing center practice, where students and teachers are free to explore writing and reading and to make meaning from texts. As described by Parkhurst, "The important thing is not to make young children study the thing they don't like, for the moment school is not as interesting as play it is an injury" (1-2).

Parkhurst took particular care in choosing the word *laboratory* to describe her plan. She was aware of the connotation to drab science activities, but it was in the experimental sense that Parkhurst intended:

I admit that the word laboratory may seem to some people inappropriate, because hitherto it has been associated exclusively with scientific experiments. But to me the word is most significant, and I cling to it advisedly in the hope that it may gradually shift the educational point of view away from the atmosphere of prejudice and moribund theories which the word "school" calls up in our minds. Let us think of school rather as a sociological laboratory where the pupils themselves are the experimenters, not the victims of an intricate and crystallized system in whose evolution they

have neither part nor lot. Think of it as a place where community conditions prevail as they prevail in life itself. (16)

In practice, the Dalton Plan sort of looked like a writing center. In a series of subject-specific *laboratories*, students received predetermined contracts or “job-sheets” that they worked through individually, seeking out the help of the teacher as needed, and taking as long as was required. Ideally, students conducted their work around common tables strewn with reference books and other materials, much like the work surfaces of contemporary writing centers.

Is Helen Parkhurst, then, the original promulgator of the writing center concept? And if so, why have is she relatively unknown? One problem is simply the progress of time. Parkhurst’s Dalton Laboratory Plan peaked in popularity around 1925, according to Parkhurst biographer Diana Lager (i). Arthur Applebee, in his history of teaching English, dismisses the Dalton Plan as one of many contract plans at the time, and one whose focus on individual work too easily translated into isolated students filling out worksheets and taking pencil-and-paper exams (93). Perhaps the greatest blow to the Dalton Plan was the simple fact that individual instruction for all has always been just too darn time consuming and, ultimately, expensive. H. W. James of Alabama College described the issue in 1926 in his “experiment with the [Dalton] plan carried on in a class in education made up of college Juniors” (303): “The plan requires a great deal more time on the part of the instructor. After trying out the method, the writer cannot believe that adequate individual conferences can be held with the same number of teaching hours. The instructor in this case spent more than fifty hours in conference as compared with the twelve hours of recitation which would have been required under the recitation method” (305).

The Dalton Laboratory Plan, then, succumbed to the dilemma that has long haunted one-to-one work: the difficulty, if not impossibility, of conducting experimental teaching within a system that is set up in discrete blocks of time and predetermined units of labor. H. W. James recommended that “to hold adequate conferences would require at least twice the present number of teachers” (306), and it is a rare school system, college, or university that will make such an investment. The alternative has always been what James presciently described: “The writer believes that it would be wise to have a regular conference of the whole class once a week. This group conference would enable the instructor to call for individual conferences with students who are behind in their contracts or who need special help” (306). Thus, the Dalton Plan was best reserved

for remediation, for “removing students’ deficiencies in composition” (388) in Robert Moore’s words. Better yet, create an entity such as a writing center where those deficient students might be consigned. That’s the promise-and-punishment nature of one-to-one work: it was clear to Helen Parkhurst and others that whole-class teaching and curricular units designed as assembly-line production resulted in very little meaningful learning. However, experimental solutions such as the Dalton Plan could easily be co-opted as a way to slough off the least prepared students, the ones that took the most amount of teaching, of effort, of TIME! Whole-class solutions could proceed quietly once those *other* students were whisked out of the room. Parkhurst biographer Sylvester Moorehead perhaps best summed up the ways that schools maintain the status quo and resist experimental methods, whether in the form of the Dalton Plan or individual conferencing: “Miss Parkhurst’s over-all emphasis, placing the learner before and ahead of all else in the school, will always be quite modern and generally ahead of much practice” (257).

Precursors to Dalton

My search for writing center origins didn’t stop with Parkhurst. It just seemed too much of a stretch to attribute her plan for school reorganization as the “central text and philosophy from which much writing center theory and practice derive” (Murphy, Law, and Sherwood 13). After all, English teaching is barely mentioned in *Education on the Dalton Plan*, with the exception of one testimonial from an “English mistress,” who offered that the “Dalton Plan offers the advantages of individual work. It leads to an understanding of the child and an appreciation of his difficulties” (quoted in Parkhurst 164). However, Parkhurst’s book did offer a few more clues. When I looked more closely, I naturally had questions. Who influenced Helen Parkhurst? And is it in her origins that I could find the germ cell of all writing centers?

These questions first led to two men: Edgar James Swift and Frederic Burk. According to Parkhurst, Swift, a professor of psychology and pedagogy at Washington University in St. Louis, first offered her the idea of the classroom as a “laboratory” in his 1908 book *Mind in the Making* (10). Parkhurst cites two particular passages from Swift in her own book, “which seemed to contain the key to my special problems” (10). In the first, Swift criticizes the “didactic method” of teaching, which “still dominates our schools though the conditions that made it serviceable have long since passed. Mental expansion of the teachers themselves is the first step towards removing this medieval debris. *They will then investigate their pupils, the schoolroom will become an educational laboratory* and

activity will not be limited to the manual training department” (quoted in Parkhurst 11).

Swift shows himself to be a true experimentalist in the second passage, which begins, “Thus far educational experiments have been too detached and fragmentary” (Parkhurst 11). After presenting these passages, Parkhurst notes that “it was Edgar Swift’s book . . . that made me take the firm resolution to become a free lance in education as soon as I could, with leisure enough to experiment in the search for a new and better way” (12). The Dalton Laboratory Plan in the realm of experimentation, then, is certainly aligned with the spirit of writing centers that I was seeking. However, Parkhurst eventually agreed to drop the “laboratory” appellation from the name, responding to complaints that “it brought to mind chemistry and vivisection” (quoted in Lager 36), mirroring the moves I described in my introduction when writing centers cast off the appellation of writing laboratories.

In her book, Parkhurst also acknowledged Frederic Burk as an influence. Burk was the superintendent of the San Francisco State Normal School, a think tank for educational reform at the start of the twentieth century, and Parkhurst first met Burk in San Francisco in 1915 when she demonstrated the Montessori method at the educational pavilion of the Panama-Pacific International Exposition; she had studied with Maria Montessori in Italy the previous year (Lager 21). After seeing Parkhurst’s demonstration classroom, Burk felt that “she was the most skillful teacher he had ever observed” (Lager 22). It was not a surprise that Parkhurst and Burk would be so closely aligned. Burk strongly advocated for “individual” methods of teaching as a contrast to the “lock-step” approach that had dominated American schooling. In 1913, Burk and colleagues published *Monograph C*, a book set up to look like a legal document, with the subtitle “In Re Everychild, a minor, vs. Lockstep Schooling, A suit in Equity.” While not exactly litigious, *Monograph C* was a series of chapters that students could use for self instruction in all subjects, thereby putting students in control of how slowly or quickly to proceed and how much instruction they needed. The result of this method, according to Burk, writing in 1924, was “electrifying. . . . The lack of interest and disciplinary difficulties disappeared as mist before a rising sun” (“Breaking” 123–24).

While Swift and Burk seemed to be direct influences on Parkhurst, one person who Parkhurst does not acknowledge is Preston W. Search. Parkhurst biographer Sylvester Moorehead notes the oddity of this omission (53); not only did Frederic Burk attribute many of his ideas to Search’s influence, but Edgar James Swift also cited Search in *his* book (253). Could

it be, then, that Preston Search was the originator of all things writing center, the experimental mad genius who first made the connection between writing and laboratories?³

Certainly, Search receives high marks for innovation. Preston Search was the superintendent of schools in Pueblo, Colorado, in 1888 when he first instituted his ideas on school reform. In an 1894 article, Search described the practices in his school as follows:

The work is now conducted largely by what may be called *laboratory methods*. The entire time of the pupil is spent in active advance work. Every room is a true studio or workshop, in which the pupils work as individuals. The province of the teacher is not to line up the pupils and to consume time by entertainment, lecturing, and development of subjects; but to pass from desk to desk as the inspiring director and pupil's assistant, with but one intent and that the development of the self-reliant and independent worker. (emphasis added, "Individual Teaching" 157–58)

Search's classrooms do bear a striking resemblance to writing centers and contemporary writing classrooms. Consider, for example, his description of science teaching: "workshops are true laboratories wherein the pupils work purely as individuals. . . . As in other departments, there is no attempt to have pupils carry an accumulation of facts from the laboratory, but they are trained to become students of investigation, thought, originality, and power" ("Individual Teaching" 162). One easily sees the "central text and philosophy" of Parkhurst here though Search is not acknowledged in *Education on the Dalton Plan*.⁴ As I looked for the experimental soul of writing centers, Search's assertion of the laboratory as an educational ideal seemed so far ahead of its time. Still, simply a focus on the term *laboratory* began to produce a growing number of possibilities for the first writing center to ever have existed. Peter Carino's supposition that Philo Buck was the first to connect teaching writing and laboratory methods in 1904 seemed largely incorrect. Before I knew it, I was plunged into Search's time, the 1890s, and his ideas for educational reform suddenly did not seem so far-fetched or out of step with his contemporaries.

Laboratory Methods in the 1890s

Once I found *laboratory* as my mantra and delved deeper into the educational literature of the 1890s, all sorts of candidates began to appear as the progenitors of contemporary writing centers. One particular candidate was John Kennedy, the principal of the Batavia, New York, school system. Kennedy's Batavia Plan, first developed in 1898, was as simple as adding

an additional teacher to a classroom crowded with fifty-three children. That second teacher's role, however, was, in Kennedy's words, "to find the weak spots in the room and make them the strong spots" (*The Batavia System* 31). In this two-teacher classroom, one teacher would conduct recitation as usual while the other would work individually with students. The result, according to Kennedy, was a transformation of the recitation teacher from nagging disciplinarian to supportive guide. According to Kennedy, "Before she knew it, the other teacher was transformed into a ministering angel . . . There came over her features an unwonted serenity; her voice took on an unaccustomed note of sweetness; we actually found her beaming on the children that she had been hitherto nagging and scolding. The room flowed on, and the very woman that had been an [*sic*] the verge of hysterics with forty-nine was throwing the broad mantle of a mother's love over seventy-eight" ("The Need of Individual Instruction" 297). When Kennedy offered his plan at the 1900 meeting of the National Educational Association, one respondent declared, "I believe the time has come to abandon the idea that has grown up around the recitation—the teacher on the platform wise, the pupil down below docile" (Kennedy, "The Need of Individual Instruction" 302).

I have a photograph of a Batavia classroom from Kennedy's book, *The Batavia System of Individual Instruction*, and it shows on the left side one teacher at the front of the room conferencing with one student while several others sit at their desks reading or writing. On the other side of the room, the other teacher stands, hands folded in front of her, all students' eyes directed her way. The separation between activity and docility is palpable.

While Kennedy's approach was truly experimental and physically resembled a writing center in some ways (and a writing tutorial program in other ways), he never does mention the word *laboratory*, and as far as I can tell, his approach never made it into higher education. I needed to look elsewhere. Another candidate, cited in Edgar James Swift's book, is Gilbert Morrison, a physics teacher at Central High School in Kansas City, Missouri, in 1883. In Morrison's obituary, a colleague wrote that Morrison "was one of the first to develop the laboratory method of instruction fully, and to advocate its claims at teachers' institutes and conventions" ("Gilbert Burnet Morrison" 365). Another early advocate was Charles Scott of St. Paul, Minnesota, who addressed the National Educational Association in 1894 and claimed that "the laboratory method of teaching is gaining a firm hold in our educational system" (193). Scott went on to describe the reciprocal nature of teaching via laboratory methods, for both teacher and student stood to benefit:

The teachers themselves are learning at the same time another lesson, no less important; that the school is a laboratory for *them* as well as for their pupils; that only as they study the children can they hope for the best success in teaching. The demand from our colleges and universities for laboratory work and laboratory methods, for students with the power which comes from doing and the knowledge which is based on personal investigation, is leavening our high schools. (193)

Scott unfortunately does not come out and name those colleges and universities demanding and enacting laboratory work, so I was still at a loss for the first writing center. Perhaps a clue could be found with C. C. Thach of Auburn, who told his National Educational Association audience in 1898 that “what is needed, then, in our entire school work in teaching composition is less psychology and more practice; more of the method of the gymnasium, of the studio, and of the laboratory; i.e., the method of learning to do a thing by doing it” (97).

What I was learning from studying the 1890s was that the idea of the writing laboratory is by no means new. Indeed, my time spent flipping through the pages of early copies of *English Journal* or digging in university archives shows me that very little is new when it comes to teaching writing. Instead, reforms of practices come in response to widespread crises, and those reforms themselves get shaped by competing forces, whether the status quo, the availability of resources, or the guiding philosophies of the reformers and the resisters. The fact that these reform efforts often barely resemble the original intent and that the crises keep occurring—changing only in intensity, not necessarily in nature—masks the lessons learned from the past. Instead, we think see *new* challenges, ones demanding *new* solutions. It seems unreasonable to imagine that anyone has been through this situation before.

Well, my study of the 1890s (and other *crisis* eras) has revealed that a great deal of what we see as contemporary challenges and reforms has been experienced before. A key force behind these moments has been drastic increases in higher education enrollments. The four points at which enrollments have increased by the greatest percentage in relation to the preceding era are 1879, 1929, 1949, and 1969 (U.S. Department of Education). At each of these points, colleges and universities were not only faced with far larger numbers of students than they had previously seen, but the students themselves were far more diverse—whether in terms of preparation, race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status—than students of the past. The methods of teaching that had worked—or at least that

were not met with much resistance—were simply inadequate. It is also important to note that it is in this same era that Harvard first required English composition classes in response to the problem of poorly prepared upperclassmen (Applebee; Connors, “Rhetoric”; Rose “The Language of Exclusion”), and mandatory English composition began to proliferate nationwide. However, in these composition classrooms, lecture and recitation, or the teaching practices that Albert Kitzhaber has described as “a mass of principles to be committed to memory” (*Rhetoric* 219), were seen to be wholly inadequate. What was needed was a new approach, an experimental approach to teaching students to write. What were needed were laboratory methods.

The context for these experiments, the 1890s—the “Gay ’90s”—saw an overall cultural trend toward experimentation and risk taking. In 1893, one quarter of the country’s population stared in awe at the technological marvels displayed at Chicago’s Columbian Exposition, and science innovation was seizing the public consciousness (Brands). For many educators, experimentation seemed as promising to schooling as it was to Thomas Edison in his New Jersey laboratory. Historian H. W. Brands labels this era the “reckless decade” and traces the dizzying efforts at everything from electrification to homesteading to urban reform in his book by that name. For educators, the word *laboratory* was a natural extension of these trends, and in 1896, John Dewey established his Laboratory School at the University of Chicago (Cremin 135). In an 1894 series in *The Dial* on composition teaching practices nationwide, several prominent educators described their classrooms as writing laboratories. Particularly noteworthy descriptions were offered by Fred Newton Scott at the University of Michigan and John Franklin Genung at Amherst. Scott, for example, offered the following:

As Professor Genung has well said, the teaching of composition is properly *laboratory work*. If that is true, why should it not be placed on the same footing as other laboratory work as regards manning and equipment? I confess that I now and then cast envious eyes upon our laboratory of chemistry, with its ten instructors and its annual expenditure of ten thousand dollars, and try to imagine what might be done in a rhetorical laboratory with an equal force and a fraction of the expenditure. (122)

Aha! There, it seems, is the first writing/rhetorical laboratory, shaped in the strong vision of none other an experimentalist than Fred Newton Scott. As an added bonus, Scott’s description captures well the century-long lament from writing centers as underresourced and underappreciated.

Well, I haven't found evidence that an actual writing laboratory existed at Michigan during Scott's time. However, his envy for the resources of science classrooms and acknowledgement of the threats to enacting the concept of the laboratory in composition and across the disciplines would prove to be important themes as the twentieth century unfolded and laboratory methods ran up against the challenges of a growing student population.

The Burden of the Laboratory Methods into the 1900s

What had seemed like a worthwhile experiment in teaching writing in the 1890s—the laboratory method—evolved into a source of tremendous frustration on the part of an overworked and underpaid teaching staff by the 1930s. While rising enrollments were a force for pedagogical change, they also presented tremendous challenges to the status quo: From the turn of the century to 1930, the American population grew by 75 percent, but enrollments in higher education increased by 400 percent (Levine 68), and the students banging on the universities' doors were the children of the immigrants who had come to America in the 1890s. In the mid-1920s, the federal General Social Survey of a sample of first-generation Americans found that only three of every twenty-two immigrants' children of college age in fact attended college; however, by the late 1930s, twelve of thirty-one had some college education (Levine). In America's public schools, the population boom was even more pronounced, and plans for "individual teaching" proliferated, with one author listing fifteen different schemes, including the St. Louis Plan, the Seattle Plan, the North Denver Plan, and the Winnetka Technique (Stephens 22–46).

Given this climate, one would think that higher education would easily embrace the benefits of laboratory instruction in English composition, seeing the individual attention ideal for the *new* kind of students with a wide variety of preparation. The rub was that individual attention was extremely labor intensive. As I pointed out earlier in this chapter, full implementation of the Dalton Plan was limited by the conferencing demands on a single teacher, and other laboratory methods had similar drawbacks. One of the keenest investigators of this dilemma was Edwin Hopkins of the University of Kansas (Popken). In a series of reports first commissioned by the Modern Language Association and the National Council of Teachers of English in 1909, Hopkins and his committee labored to detail and quantify the burden under which high school and college English teachers suffered. In their first report issued in 1913, the committee noted, "English composition is as much a laboratory subject as is any subject of scientific or industrial training, without however

requiring expensive material equipment; and with a proper number of pupils, the chief demand on the teacher's time is that of supervising laboratory practice, oral or written" (Modern Language Association 8). The key here was the "proper number of pupils." Hopkins and his committee had crunched the numbers and found that the workload was untenable for most college English teachers. The result was that "instructors wear out, suffer from indigestion and nervous exhaustion, lose their efficiency, impair their eyesight, become the prey of shattered nerves, break down and find their way to the hospital or cemetery, because of 'killing' work in English composition" (Modern Language Association 7).⁵ Ten years later, Hopkins did not find much had changed as far as teacher workload, noting in his report that as a result "the teaching of English composition has become in many schools so nominal and so barren of results that some observers are beginning to think it entirely useless" (Hopkins 34).

It was a double bind for the professoriate. On the one hand, almost all acknowledged the necessity to teach writing via practice, feedback, and revision. Writers extolled the virtues of "the office hour" (Baldwin) or the teacher-student writing conference, which was the essence of the laboratory method (see Lerner, "Teacher-Student"). But on the other hand, as Hopkins had shown, the time needed for such work was untenable. Higher education was not structurally set up to allow for laboratory methods. In 1912, an anonymous editorial in *English Journal* asked in its title, "Shall 'Laboratory Work' in Composition Be Given Up?" (48). The answer was an emphatic no, according to that writer. Instead, "Why not give laboratory principles an adequate test, somewhere, for a sufficient time, to determine whether or not students can be trained to do certain definite things according to the standard of established present usage?" (48). In his 1925 survey of the "American Arts College," Frederick Kelly found that "individual help given by teachers to students is everywhere, but any regularly devised scheme for making use of individual instruction is rare" (88).

This period was key in the evolution of a stand-alone writing center, for the movement from laboratory teaching as a *method* to laboratory teaching as a *site*, to use Elizabeth Boquet's terms ("Our Little Secret" 466), would mean that some students could get the full experience of laboratory methods in the classroom while others would get shunted off to entities called "writing laboratories" that were often little more than holding tanks filled with drill pads. In the early twentieth century, higher education embarked on a new experiment in teaching writing, one that would ensure that those beleaguered faculty had adequate time for conferencing and that students least prepared for writing in college

would have their needs met as well. The solution: test 'em, sort 'em, filter 'em—in other words, remediation.

Remedial Roots

In my search for the experimental soul of writing centers, I wasn't ready to buy into the conventional wisdom that early writing centers would be little more than penal holding tanks for the least prepared. However, I did not anticipate that I would come across the bold thinkers of the 1890s, and I was eager to trace my steps forward from the 1890s to the 1930s and find the very first stand-alone college writing laboratory. What I found, instead, was troubling, perhaps best exemplified by the attitude of Grace Ransom, writing in *English Journal* in 1933: "How can the English teacher find time both to develop creative thought and to establish habits of correct usage in written composition? How can she teach even reasonably correct writing in a school whose pupils come, for the most part, from foreign-speaking homes, and whose parents, many of them, can do little more than sign their names?" (749). Ransom's elitist attitude certainly was not unusual, based on the legacy of regret about student preparation demonstrated by many writers of this era (and *all* eras, for that matter). Couple these attitudes with the lack of prestige composition teaching offered as compared to teaching graduate-level literature seminars (Connors, "Rhetoric" 72), and many in English departments clamored for a way to deal with the constant reminder that the university accepted students who were not qualified to do university-level work.

One of the first solid references to stand-alone writing centers comes from a 1928 national survey by Warner Taylor of the University of Wisconsin. Taylor notes the following as one of the "changes of major import" to freshman English: "*The inauguration of English 'clinics.'* Six questionnaires [out of 232 responses] deemed this feature worthy of special mention. By clinic was meant a systematized method of compelling students found delinquent in English after having received credit for the Freshman course to take extra work under supervision to bring them abreast of a normal standard of correctness" (emphasis added, 31). The language here is certainly along the lines of Robert Moore's "remedying deficiencies," and the connection between the English clinic and correctness is awfully reductive. As I looked further, I was afraid that the following 1929 account by E. S. Noyes of Yale University could be the first writing center: "There is practically no composition in the regular Freshman English course at Yale. Each Freshman does, however, early in the fall, write three short themes. . . . On the evidence of these themes, plus the still more important evidence of the ten-minute quiz papers which nor-

mally precede each recitation, Freshmen who are considered deficient in writing are assigned to the Awkward Squad” (678). Awkward Squad! To make matters worse, Noyes reported, “Once in the Squad, a man stays until he is cured” (679).

If that wasn’t troubling enough, another publication of the era contains this tidbit from Professor Baldwin Maxwell of the University of Iowa: “Next year we are planning to introduce what is generally known as *hospital English*, to which upper classmen theoretically may be made to return and take without credit a course in the mechanics of English composition” (Carter 8). This medical theme was taken up earlier by James Hosis in a 1917 federal study of structural reorganization of high schools. In discussing student motivation, Hosis noted, “If each pupil in the school knows that he may at any time be remanded to the English department for special treatment, he will not willingly become a candidate for the ‘hospital’” (139). Correctness, awkward, cured, hospital! What happened to individual instruction for all? When did laboratory methods turn into students as laboratory rats, as the subjects of experimentation, rather than the experimenters themselves? When did the lack of preparation for college-level writing become a disease to be cured by quarantine in the Awkward Squad?

This story is a familiar one: An obsession with correctness has long been present in the teaching of English (Connors, “Mechanical Correctness”), whether that is a way to mark students as culturally deficient or simply a more tangible focus for instruction than the much more difficult task of helping students make meaning over what they’re writing. An instructional focus on English fundamentals is also a way for the institution to shift the responsibility for learning from the teacher to the student. Give them worksheets, the thinking goes, and if their subjects and verbs still don’t agree, it’s not our fault—it’s theirs. As college enrollments burgeoned into the 1930s, more students were more under-prepared than ever before. The reaction could be downright hostile, such as that shown by Burges Johnson and Helene Hartley of Syracuse University, who described composition classes in 1936 as “flooded with hordes who come from high schools overcrowded with students lacking the background of cultured homes and the tradition of good English speech” (i). This statement goes a long way to confirm the original purpose of required English as not so much to improve students’ writing skills and ensure academic success but to act as a filter, in Susan Miller’s words, “to separate the unpredestined from those who belong” (74) and to maintain the value of a degree for a few without undercutting the inflow of tuition money from the many. As David Russell has argued, “By weeding out students who were not ‘college

material,' exclusionary policies in language instruction allowed universities and departments to achieve selective admissions *de facto* though they may have been forbidden it *de jure*" (*Writing* 63–64).

Increasingly rare in this era were true composition laboratories—where small numbers of students received close attention from an instructor, rather than large masses of students filling out worksheets or writing their daily themes as a beleaguered instructor or two circled around the room. Occasional accounts of the “good” laboratory class appeared in the professional literature, such as Paul Mowbray Wheeler’s description of “advanced English composition” at Johns Hopkins, a “laboratory course” in which “the size of the class is rigidly limited. The ideal number is fifteen” (557). Instead, we find from Warner Taylor’s report that on average in 1928 each instructor of first-year composition worked with 93 students (20). On the bright side, the situation had improved slightly from Hopkins’ 1913 report, in which the data showed that instructors on average had 104 students each (Modern Language Association 8). Who knows what they were doing with all that free time!

The writing clinic, laboratory, or center as an outlet valve for this situation seemed inevitable. Certainly, students were not going to receive effective instruction under those conditions, were not going to learn to do anything other than eek out deadly dull daily themes and continue to make the same mechanical errors they had made previously. The creation of stand-alone writing clinics or laboratories for the least prepared (or the “most deficient” in the language of the time) would accomplish several purposes:

- Colleges and universities could offer a physical and tangible sign that they were doing *something* about students’ writing. In an era in which the value of a college degree was by no means an easy or universal sell (Levine), the quality of that degree needed to be ensured.
- Beleaguered composition instructors could have some of their overwhelming burden relieved as under-prepared students would be shunted off to “sub-freshman” English and writing laboratories.
- Drill-and-practice exercises and lecture/recitation on grammar could be similarly shunted off to the writing clinic and stop taking up considerable amounts of class time.

That is not to say the existence of writing laboratories and clinics became universal into the 1930s. My guess is that tutorial solutions operated on far less formal bases and that most institutions filtered out the under-prepared through screening tests and several levels of pre-freshman English. By 1928, 40 percent of the 225 institutions surveyed by Taylor

offered basic writing courses, and 90 percent of the institutions surveyed by Fountain in 1939 had some sort of remedial course work. By 1940, a National Council of Teachers of English survey found 67 percent of the 292 institutions surveyed offered basic writing courses (Berlin, *Rhetoric and Reality* 65). In 1930, H. J. Arnold of Wittenberg College recommended several “diagnostic and remedial techniques for college freshmen” (262): for composition, the diagnosis would be based on a student’s mastery of “(a) capitalization, (b) punctuation, (c) grammar, (d) sentence structure, and (e) spelling” (264). Based on this test, the next step would be “to segregate into special groups all students whose scores . . . fall below a critical point” (265). Teaching those classes would be graduate students and adjunct faculty, a situation that would prompt Oscar James Campbell of Columbia University to report in 1939 that “crowds of young men and women have been lured into the teaching of English by the great number of positions annually open at the bottom of the heap, and there they stick, contaminating one another with their discouragement and rebellion” (181–82).

Within that environment, the chances did not seem good for a writing clinic, laboratory, or center to embody the experimental ethos I was searching for. If Helen Parkhurst’s Dalton Laboratory Plan was the “central text and philosophy from which much writing center theory and practice derive” (Murphy, Law, and Sherwood 13), then the attitude towards the under-prepared in the early twentieth century and the creation of writing clinics to contain those students was a counter-script from which many writing center nightmares derive.

It is important to note that encouraging examples of early writing centers were to be found in the 1930s. As I discuss in chapter 4, the University of Minnesota General College Writing Laboratory—founded in 1932—was a model of Deweyan Progressivism that many contemporary writing centers would do well to emulate. In a similar vein, faculty from the Central State Teachers College in Mount Pleasant, Michigan, described their writing laboratory in 1936 as follows:

The student spends certain hours each week in the writing laboratory where he co-operates with other students and with the instructor in a study of the essentials for good expression, engages in actual writing under the guidance of the instructor, and learns to appraise the quality of his work. The desire is to help the student grow in ability to write by providing direction in the fulfillment of his ordinary writing requirements rather than by setting up artificially motivated writing exercises. (Heaton and Koopman 63)

The promise of the writing laboratory could flourish in some instances, but unfortunately common was an Awkward Squad attitude that positioned the writing laboratory as a way to keep underprepared students out of sight and out of mind. My search for the first writing center, then, was not a complete success. Perhaps one of those “English Clinics” referred to by Warner Taylor in 1929 was far more than a place for “removing students’ deficiencies” and was instead an alternative space for students to have the opportunity to engage with their subjects and find meaning in their writing. If so, it was an outlier in the late 1920s, for it would be relatively rare until the early 1950s that a stand-alone writing center represented a worthwhile experiment in the teaching of English, and even then the experience was short-lived as a renewed backlash against remedial students drove laboratory methods underground (Lerner, “Punishment” 62–63). That seems like a familiar cycle, perhaps broken only in our present era when writing centers seem far more commonplace, far more accepted, though far less experimental.

Secret Origins Revisited

As far as I can tell, those are the origins of writing centers and the laboratory approach to teaching writing. I haven’t settled on a single person, a single institution, or a single exemplar writing center that rose out of the primordial muck and mutated into a comfortable place with worn chairs and cheerful signage. But I keep searching for those origins in what often feels like an obsessive task. I’m convinced that the origins of writing centers offer a blueprint for what many teachers of writing now face. Struggles over literacy, access, and opportunity were just as strongly felt and debated at the turn of the twentieth century as they are today.

Perhaps the teaching practices I have described in this chapter will have a ring of familiarity. After all, the pedagogy of laboratory methods was embraced by the process movement of the 1960s and 1970s—though perhaps now called the “workshop” or “conferencing” approach following the work of Donald Graves and Donald Murray at the University of New Hampshire, who popularized the term. Such practices now seem a commonplace, a starting point for any class on teaching methods for writing or a faculty workshop on writing to learn. We want students to learn to use *real* writing for *real* purposes, a striving for authentic activity that embodies the experimental nature of the laboratory (it seems only in school settings would one need an experiment in authenticity!).

The power of this goal sustains me during my more cynical periods, whether those come from my study of the history of teaching writing, from my day-to-day practice, or from frequent threads on professional

listservs that offer a woe-is-me chorus to the narrative of the beleaguered compositionists. Instead, I think of this: The idea of teaching writing via laboratory methods—of teaching and learning as a continuous experiment towards what really works, towards the best of past practices and the search for new practices not yet imagined. This is the ideal of the writing laboratory, of writing centers, and of teaching writing in any course or subject—or, more grandly, of *teaching* any course or subject. It is an ideal worth striving for.

When it comes to the experimental ideal, one would think that laboratory science classes would have long embodied those values. As I show in the next chapter, however, the struggles over laboratory work in science bear striking similarities to the struggles over laboratory methods in English composition. Similar forces—burgeoning enrollments, a lack of student preparation, and the stranglehold of the lecture as a preferred form of instruction—shaped the outcome in every college classroom. Science was not invulnerable to these forces, and the result—historically and currently—strongly shapes the teaching and learning that students encountered.