

How We Write, Series 2, episode 4

UWC 30th Anniversary Celebration Keynote Speaker: Peg Syverson

An Ecological Perspective on Writing Centers

(00:00) INTRO NARRATION: From the University Writing Center at the University of Texas at Austin with host Alice Batt: How We Write.

ALICE BATT: Welcome to How We Write, the podcast of the University Writing Center at the University of Texas at Austin.

(00:30) I'm Alice Batt. 2023 marks an important milestone for our writing center: our 30th anniversary. To celebrate all those years of supporting student writers, we held a big party in January and invited our former directors to talk about the work of writing centers overall, and the work they did at our writing center in particular. Today's episode is one of those talks. Our speaker is Peg Syverson. Peg is an associate professor emerita from the Department of Rhetoric and

(01:00) Writing at UT-Austin. She was the director of the Undergraduate Writing Center, as it was then called, from 2006 to 2014. As director, she established new programs such as "Writing Center After Dark," which brought panels of local published authors to campus to discuss their craft. She managed the transition of the UWC from its cramped, windowless former space to its present bright, spacious, light filled home, overlooking trees, grass, and UT's Blanton Museum of Art.

(01:30) Previously, Peg was director of UT's Computer Writing and Research Lab, now the Digital Writing and Research Lab, which explored ways to use computer technologies in teaching writing and literature. Peg developed the college-level Learning Record, an award-winning model for documenting and analyzing student learning. From 1995 to the present, she's been the founding teacher for Appamada, a contemporary Zen Center in Austin. She currently lives with her goldendoodle Jizo.

(02:00) in Wilmette, Illinois, near her family.

PEG SYVERSON: Wow. This is amazing. So, some of what I'm gonna say will echo what has already been said. But hopefully, it'll make sense to you in this context. I'm thinking about we're here to celebrate the University Writing Center's 30th anniversary,

(02:30) of course, but this year also marks the university's 140th anniversary, which means the University of Texas had to struggle along for 110 years. Those poor students! Those poor professors! We're not going to take us back 140 years, or even 30 years, but to 2006. I'm going to share just a little bit of the past, some of which you've heard already, to set a context for this talk, which is an ecological view of writing centers. I had just begun my new

(03:00) role as the UWC director, and I was still trying to get my bearings. My first writing conference was a shock. I was accustomed to the joyful excitement of my computers and writing conferences, the high energy buzz of new technologies and new research and new collaborations and teaching writing with technology. This conference of Writing Center administrators was marked by a mood of what I can only describe as

(03:30) burdened martyrdom. The conversations were mostly about being underfunded and under-resourced without adequate space and staff. Some were not even paying consultants who were beleaguered volunteers. They fretted about administrations that gave them no respect or support. In general, it was a climate of lament, and I was appalled. I would ask, what are you doing to earn the administration's respect? How are you communicating your value to the University community

(04:00) and showing how the Writing Center helps realize the university's promise to students? Everywhere I was met with blank exhausted stares. Writing Centers, I was told, are viewed as unfortunate aid services for students too deficient to make it on their own, who in the Darwinian view of many administrators should have been culled from the herd much sooner. This view ignores the fairly obvious fact that the one place students can learn college

(04:30) level research, thinking, and writing is in college. That's our whole job. So I came back from that conference with a mission to change the image of the writing center from a regrettable urgent care center for the failing student to a thriving, exciting, university-wide community for writers, and that I believe we accomplished. So what did we do? We already had an outstanding peer-reviewed journal — an academic journal — for writing

(05:00) centers, *Praxis*. We launched a white paper series where our consultants can share what they were learning and gain experience with professional academic writing. We started a series of held discussions called After Hours, as you heard about, bringing in published writers who are local, and having them talk about other topics: travel writing, or food writing, or songwriting, or screenwriting. And these are very popular events with students.

(05:30) We did research on celebrated writers in the Ransom Center archives, and made posters blown up from their heavily edited pages to show students how even famous writers make revisions. We gave hundreds of presentations in classes. We did research on the writing center

itself, showing the demographics sustaining the business, languages spoken, subject areas of assignments, success rates, and so on. And all this good news we regularly reported and distributed in newsletters sent to the provost and the

(06:00) Dean's office. Then, of course, there was the inadvertent symposium. What, you may well ask, is an inadvertent Symposium? The occasion, which like this one was an important milestone, the 20th anniversary of the UWC, then the Undergraduate Writing Center, as you heard. I wanted to see how the Rhetoric and Writing department planned to celebrate it.

(06:30) Crickets. Finally, I inquired about plans. Not only were there no plans, there were no plans for plans. There was still plenty of time, though, so I wasn't worried. I consulted with our highly capable staff. "We could have a little reception," I thought, "with a cheese and fruit platter. Perhaps the department would let us use the conference room. We can maybe find out if there are former consultants in the area and invite them, if you guys know any," I said. To be honest, I don't even remember who had a bright idea

(07:00) to put an announcement online in hopes that a few of our former consultants might see it on some little forum called Facebook. We requested RSVPs so we would know how many cheese platters to order from Central Market. We must have been a few months or so from the date of the reception when I casually asked Alice, "So how many RSVPs do we have so far?"

"Lemme check... Looks like 120. And some of these folks are asking if they can give a talk,

(07:30) in which case they can get some travel funding."

"Travel funding? How far are they coming from?" I asked.

"Oh, well, for example, someone's coming from Puerto Rico."

Still stunned stupid, I said, "Well, surely they can give a talk. We'll put on a symposium." Then reality sank in: the sheer numbers. And I said—brilliantly, I thought—"But people have to

(08:00) submit proposals. We'll have our graduate students review and select them. That'll be good experience for them. So we should request proposals."

"Okay," Alice said. "People are asking 'What is the symposium theme?'"

"Symposium theme?" I said, thinking fast, "The future of writing centers." I supposed we might end up about five or six presenters. But meanwhile, we ran into a much bigger problem: space.

(08:30) Where were we going to put 120 people plus our own staff when University venues are reserved a year in advance? Also, I had never organized an event this large. So I was furiously thinking not only about where, but about a whole new level of issues: meals, beverages, AV equipment, scheduling, local entertainment, lodging! More time passed, and I eventually checked in again with Alice. “So how many RSVPs do we have now?”

“Looks like 148,” she said helpfully.

(09:00) “What?” The event was now just one month away. I quickly made an appointment with Dean Musick. I went in and I said, “I think I made a terrible mistake.” I was really nervous. “And I’m so, so sorry but I really need your help.” So I told him the whole crazy story and waited to be lambasted for my stupidity and insubordination.

I did not expect his response.

(09:30) “Do you need tote bags?”

I stared at him blankly. “*Tote bags?*”

“Or pencils? Shirts for the event?”

I cast about in my mind for some appropriate response, but I could only stupidly repeat, “*Pencils?*”

He offered funding, the name of the top photographer the university had used (“*A photographer???*”), his event manager, and the support of the dean's office. I could feel things spinning wildly beyond

(10:00) a couple of cheese platters in a conference room. “Send me a copy of the program,” he said. “You know, you can do the opening night reception in the Ransom Center lobby, and guests could enjoy the exhibit.”

“*The program?*” I said. Apparently my end of our conversation was going to consist of picking out the keywords he used and turning them into baffled questions. That was my whole rhetorical strategy. So in the end, we accepted all 49

(10:30) proposals for talks and besides our own consultants, 125 people attended from as far away as Canada and, yes, Puerto Rico. Elisabeth Piedmont-Martin offered to host a dinner at her home Saturday night. (That was courageous.) I did design a program for the now three-day symposium, and tote bags and tee shirts and pencils, and we managed to get them printed locally. Due to the Dean's magic, we were incredibly able to reserve some space in the Texas Union

(11:00) for the presentations. Our terrific staff rallied magnificently to manage the arrangements and welcome the guests and, of course, hand out tote bags, t-shirts, and programs. We arranged for Lester Faigley to give the keynote address, and on opening night we did host an elegant cocktail party in the beautiful Harry Ransom Center lobby, with lavish catered appetizers, while Brian Birzer circulated taking photos that made us look like movie stars at a Hollywood opening.

(11:30) The next day, we found several hundred of ourselves in a giant ballroom with a huge projection screen, state-of-the-art sound engineering, and a full partition between our earnest presenters with their rapt audience and the annual all-day competition for German clogging—in wooden shoes. You can't make this stuff up. But that is how you might end up hosting an inadvertent symposium. So it's impossible to overestimate

(12:00) the enormous importance of Dean Musick's support and enthusiasm for the Writing Center. He was the first administrator to actually visit the writing center, and it clearly stunned him. He remarked that it must be the most densely populated area on Earth outside of New Delhi. We'd been seeing 1000s of visits a year with 85 consultants and five staff members crammed into a space of about 1500 square feet. So when the opportunity arose

(12:30) to relocate the writing center to the PCL, he was delighted and found resources for funding this spectacular new facility. I did tell him "This is a naming opportunity." And so we have now this beautiful, bright... if you take the tour afterwards, if you haven't seen it, you definitely should. I said to him "Here's this spacious, bright, beautifully appointed, spectacular facility, with tall windows looking out on the trees and lawns"—and as I always

(13:00) say— "looking like a Danish airport." The staff have actual offices. There are quiet rooms for students who have difficulty focusing and there's a break room—with my name on it!-- where consultants can relax and share informal lore, learning, and experience. In fact, a recent article titled "Conversation as a Core Business Process," by Juanita Brown and David Isaacs, mentions a study by the Institute for Research on Learning in Palo Alto

(13:30) about how learning takes place in an organization. The study concludes the most powerful organizational learning and collected knowledge-sharing rose from informal relationships and personal networks via working conversations and communities of practice. This apparently continues to be news in the business audience, but writing centers have known it for decades. It's one of our primary training methods actually.

(14:00) So ultimately, the building of the new UWC was a huge collaborative project. A product of many conversations and relationships, both formal and informal. And it was beautifully

realized in 2015, right after I retired. And now the center is able to say it serves undergraduate and graduate students from across the entire university in this beautiful facility. So that's the past, some of it anyway. The past has the peculiar property of being ever present and continually forgotten. But I

(14:30) promised to talk about the writing center as ecosystem, or more properly, an ecological perspective on writing centers, and that brings us to the present. So, everyone is familiar with ecosystems, and an ecosystems perspective is looking at ways a system functions. So there are many things can be said about ecosystems and an ecological view of systems. Complex, adaptive, living systems have qualities

(15:00) and properties that cannot be explained through analysis of their component parts. Instead, they have emergent properties that arise in the context of processes and relationships, flows, resources, affordances, and environments. But tonight I'm gonna focus on three aspects that are fundamental to the well being of the writing center ecosystem and understanding it: environment, relationality, and flows.

(15:30) As you might have imagined, these aspects are interdependently related. This is true for any ecosystem you might be observing: a frog pond, a stock market, a hospital, a chicken farm, family. Ecosystems contain smaller ecosystems that are nested within larger ecosystems, from a blood cell to a student, a class, the Writing Center, the college, the university, the society in the world. We can zoom in or out. Not only are they apparent at different scales, but the systems are dependent on each other. But they have different levels

(16:00) of organization. The organization of the liberal arts college has its distinctive features. And within the college the Writing Center has a different form of self organization. And each ecosystem is crucially dependent on its environment. This in turn influences the relationships in a system. So the writing center environment, when I started as director, as I mentioned, was densely crowded

(16:30) with consultants and students practically stacked on top of each other. Our consultants were valiant in trying to meet the students' needs in the midst of the noise and constant traffic of students in and out, without windows, under the glare of fluorescent lights. When I first arrived, I asked where the director's office was.

“The director's office?” Scott Blackwood said.

“Or where,” I asked, “the director's desk was?” Scott looked around blankly.

(17:00) “Well, I suppose you could use any desk you’d like. How many hours are you planning to be here?”

“All. Of. Them,” I answered.

So the program coordinator and I shared a tiny office, in which it is impossible to have sensitive conversations with the consultants, for example. We were unable to find quiet spaces for students with difficulties focusing, hearing, or understanding under the noise. But our consultants and the students were gamely doing their best. So what a difference this new environment has made for consultants

(17:30) and students. And most importantly, it has transformed the relationships and the flows that are at the heart of the Writing Center. The whole system is thriving in this particular new environment. It's not just a physical environment. It's also the environment that the structure of the college and the support of the college gives the writing center, right? So the environment includes not just the physical material environment, but also the social architecture and the relationships

(18:00) and flows we're going to talk about here. So generally speaking, a student's academic relationships are charged. With teachers, no matter how friendly, they are judged and graded, their deficits and inadequacies exposed, and ranked against their peers according to standards that are mysterious. And it is even more fraught for students whose primary language is not English. With their peers. they’re in competition not only for grades,

(18:30) but for respect. Their relationship to the larger university tends to be impersonal, confusing, enormous, and controlling. In the writing center, relationships can be supportive, offer guidance without judgment. There is no competition in the one-on-one connection with a consultant. And no shame in revealing one’s shortcomings in writing, no stupid questions. The work is tailored to each student's

(19:00) individual needs. The environment reflects the community and consultants and staff who care about and support one another, learning together without the pressure of grades. For the Writing Center’s strong commitment to research fosters collaborations that build professional relationships and shared practices of inquiry, discovery, design and application. Consultants can dabble in their professional development through proposals and presentations

(19:30) on writing policy, writing white papers, and publishing in writing center journals like *Praxis*. Many of our consultants have continued in careers as writing center directors on the basis of their experience, training, and relationships forged in this way. So finally, I want to say a little bit about flow in ecosystems, and especially in writing centers. It's impossible to think about

writing centers without thinking about flows. There's an ebb and flow of students, consultants, and staff across time and space.

(20:00) Early in the semester, while student traffic is slow, consultants can get orientation and training. They can design research projects or build a concrete proposal. There's a gradual build up as students begin to work on assignments, which builds to a torrent around midterm and especially at the end of the semester, when at any moment, a writing assignment for a large lecture class can unleash a flood. And since the Writing Center serves students from the whole university, floods are common.

(20:30) From history, from psychology, from English, from sociology, from nursing and a whole span of subjects. So consultants must be resourceful and skilled and collaborative in managing flows. And they are also students and have their own personal floods to deal with. But they are not permanent staff. Our consultants are themselves a flow. Every year some valued, experienced consultants graduate, leaving voids filled by brand new consultants,

(21:00) who in turn need to quickly gain the skills and experience needed. Because of the flows and the need for consultants to be trained, the Writing Center needs capacity that sometimes seems extra. It's impossible to add consultants just for the busy times, as retail stores do. Like firefighters, we need to be prepared for unanticipated demand and wildfires. We need space that sometimes—at the beginning of the semester, for example—seems empty.

(21:30) The times of low tides are time for analyzing and writing up research, planning, training and learning, even those casual conversations in the break room. Shared practice builds a community of trust and wisdom and skillful means. But there are other flows as well. For example, flows of resources in the institution. Real estate is always a scarce commodity in the university, and generously provided for appointments by the college here.

(22:00) Many writing centers I know at other universities labor in dark, cramped corners and basements. We are fortunate not only in beautiful space, but in resources such as technologies, and other flows of upgrades and replacements that are required for that and networks that need to be maintained. So there's also the flow of energy over the course of the semester and the year as well. The mood of excitement and possibility at the start turns more serious and then anxious, even panicky for our students.

(22:30) It's important then to encourage, cheer small successes, reassure and calm. When students are drowning, consultants offer a lifeline. By the end of the semester, everyone is exhausted, depleted, and students and consultants help each other to the finish line. And the flow of students is at the same time the flow of teachers for our consultants who are also developing

the craft of reading, writing, and revising consulting research. This work with students inevitably hones consultants on academic work.

(23:00) Seeing writing centers as ecosystems we can see the interdependencies of the environment, relationships and flows. Our work, then, as administrators, has been creating causes and conditions for the health and well being of systems at every level, from the individual to the center, the university and the larger society. We remove obstacles to that well being, advocate for needed resources,

(23:30) craft training and support for development, plan for the illusionary future of the systems, watch for signs of dis-ease and distress. Most of all, we share the Good News of the work in the Writing Center, building appreciation for its value among students, consultants, faculty, and the administration. That appreciation is the lifeblood of a healthy human ecosystem. So what lies ahead?

(24:00) We return to the topic of the inadvertent symposium, the future of writing centers. William Gibson famously said, “The future is already here. It's just not evenly distributed.” We continue to be challenged by the ever changing technological landscape. Years ago, we had to manage the transition in consulting from print drafts to screens on laptops. Now we face the dilemma of AI in writing, currently exemplified by Chat GPT.

(24:30) Further, for at least the next decade, we will be seeing the consequences and educational trauma from the pandemic disruption. Some students will have had serious setbacks in their learning, especially in reading, critical thinking, and writing. Yet they are also immersed in online universes that amplify the worst qualities of bad writing and critical thinking. Unsupported assertions, misinformation, bad faith arguments, distortions, outlandish conspiracy

(25:00) theories, and outright lies. We still have the challenge of an ever changing pandemic landscape and our efforts to keep our students, consultants, and staff as safe and healthy as we can. We have the challenge of dealing with larger societal forces that impact students in general—issues of partisan politics, gender, racism, economic inequality, climate crisis, and so on. These are not individual issues: they are culturally shared systemic issues.

(25:30) They can't be fully resolved at the individual level, but we are primarily working at the individual level, one on one, student by student. Writing centers can and should be part of a larger effort to meet these challenges at the societal level, not only within the university, but in the larger society beyond. Writing centers should lead the way in finding resolutions and an evolution of public consciousness toward a society that is wise, compassionate

(26:00) and humane. Clear writing is its expression; education liberates the mind, body and heart. So is it time for writing centers to take a larger public role? There's plenty to concern us, yet every day you have the privilege of meeting the bright-eyed, the anxious, the confused, the terrified, the despairing, and the enthusiastic optimism of the river of students pouring through the doors for what they can only find here

(26:30) day after day, semester after semester: skillful, caring, individual coaching for the main measure of academic and professional success: as the dean noted, clear, intelligent, well reasoned writing. Every day, our consultants hearten and support students in realizing their potential and ultimately making contributions they are here to prepare for. This is only possible within a thriving ecosystem of care,

(27:00) a community of practice for consultants, a caring response of the university to students' needs, a bright-clean-spacious environment, a dedicated staff and enlightened university. To meet the challenges that we face as educators, it's essential to preserve and nourish this healthy, resilient ecosystem called the Writing Center, so that we can free the potential within every student. And this way, we serve the future, we serve the world. I want to leave you with a little

(27:30) gift. It's a short poem called "Some Feathers."

On these ruins left to us we build our home.
The view from my porch includes today's maples
and pines that were, and even long-gone cycads.
We tell our stories, which means that I could tell you
my father's story, and some he'd heard before:
my great-grandfather's story. Pass it on.
This yard is gently touched, garden and rooftop
by faint far starlight, and still more gently touched
by cryptic spores almost intangible.
More messages come in than we can read.
I cherish more than I can understand.
but I have fathomed some. Pass it on.

(28:30) Oh, newborn mice and newborn wrens and newborn
of ours, trusting mouths open to be fed:
Your trust may not be valid, but your selves
are valid. We in whom you put your faith
may let you down, but we are not without faith,
for we have faith in you. Pass it on.

[“Successors,” by Chandler Davis. Published in Springer Science+Business Media New York, Volume 36, Number 1, 2014.]

You've been listening to Peg Syverson, former director of the University Writing Center at the University of Texas at Austin, where How We Write is produced. To learn more about Peg

(29:00) and her work, visit appamada.org and learningrecord.org How We Write's theme music was created by Michele Solberg. Until next time, keep writing!

(29:14)