"Feminized Simulations: The Writing Center as Remedial Clinic and Enforcer of the Status Quo." Paper presented at "Writing Center Ecologies: Developing and Sustaining Our Resources," the **East Central Writing Centers Association Conference (ECWCA),** at Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN. April 2009.

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<div align="center">

Feminized Simulations:
The Writing Center as Remedial Clinic and Enforcer of the Status Quo

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Before I begin my presentation, I'd like to ask you to turn to the back page of your handout. You'll notice a large circle cut in half. On the left side of the circle, inside the quotation marks, I'd like you to write down the name of the object on which you are currently sitting.

Okay, in a moment, you're going to write in the other half of the circle. When I say go, I want you to think about the word you just wrote down, and I want you to write down everything that comes to mind when you think about that word. You have to stay within the right half of the circle, and you have forty-five seconds, starting now.

Okay, time's up. We'll come back that, but for now, go ahead and flip back to the front page of your handout.

Tonight, I'm going to talk to you about the stigma of remediation that plagues all contemporary writing centers. I'm pretty sure by now that we're all familiar with this misconception, but just in case, it's defined on your handout. Ultimately, this misconception depicts the writing center as a place of service rather than scholarship. "Women's work" is generally defined as service-oriented, so this misconception has led to an identification of writing center work as "women's work." Basically, we've been feminized. The term "feminized" is

commonly used to refer to anything that has been identified with the feminine in order to marginalize it. Now I'm not saying that it's bad to be feminine, but as long as the feminine is marginalized, it's bad to be identified with the feminine. Unless of course, you like being marginalized.

For decades, writing center staff and theorists have struggled against the stigma of remediation and against the marginalization of their work, but many centers continue to function as remedial clinics, and those that do not are usually misperceived or misrepresented as such, a misperception that leads to the feminization of the writing center. Why, despite considerable improvements and growth, has so little changed? Because no one has actually addressed the root of the problem: the arbitrary distinction between "good" and "bad" writing. As long as this rigid dichotomy is maintained, all attempts toward solutions will be fruitless. It is this distinction that labels the writing center a remedial clinic and makes possible the writing center's feminization. Finally, it is this distinction that has forced the writing center to function as a simulation, what Jean Baudrillard defines as a system or event with no ultimate goal other than to replicate itself.

A simulation creates a false distinction, which simultaneously challenges and reaffirms the dominant order. In the case of the writing center, this distinction is between "good" and "bad" writers and their writing. The stigma of remediation placed on writing centers has led to the marginalization and feminization of such centers. As a result, the writing center has become a *feminized simulation*, an institution devoid of meaning and referent, battling its own marginalization in order to perpetuate itself but inadvertently serving the status quo by creating distinctions that reinforce the patriarchal academy and reaffirm its own position along the margins of society. The only solution, then, is to discard the arbitrary dichotomy between "good" and "bad" writing and to cease the writing center's function as a feminized simulation.

Otherwise, the writing center will continue to function as a remedial clinic, a marginalized pawn of the academy.

However, before we can understand and implement such a solution, we must first examine the problem itself by asking a few important questions: How have writing centers become feminized because of the stigma of remediation, and how has this feminization led to their current function as simulations, through which they create the illusionary distinction between "good" and "bad" writing and writers? What are the implications of such distinctions, and how do such distinctions reinforce the present hierarchy and—in a vicious circle—also reinforce the stigma of writing centers as feminized remedial writing clinics?

In order to answer these questions, I conducted a case-study of our writing center involving content analysis of our website, our training materials, and our tutorial documentation. To aid in this analysis I relied on secondary scholarship in the fields of writing center theory, feminist theory, and postmodern theory. I believe that this case-study can reveal how contemporary writing centers function as feminized simulations.

If I had more time, I'd give you a survey of the critical discourse that exists surrounding these subjects, but here's the abridged version: Since at least the 1940's, there have been writing centers that have explicitly functioned as remedial clinics. While most centers may have evolved beyond this point, the stigma persists, partially because some centers are still acting as remedial clinics. Oftentimes, these clinics are restrained by English departments or larger forces of the academy, and most members of the academy outside the writing center continue to perceive the writing center as a remedial clinic. As long as writing centers are seen as places for "bad" writers, these writers and these writing centers will be marginalized. This marginalization arrives primarily through an identification of the writing center with the feminine.

I think we're all familiar enough with feminist theory to understand that women live in a world that is, for the most part, constructed and controlled by men. In this patriarchal world, to be feminine or to be identified with the feminine is to be marginalized. The term "feminization," then, refers to a particular type of marginalization in which someone or something is specifically identified with the feminine so that it can be banished to the margins. There's significant evidence that the entire field of rhetoric and composition has been feminized, and the writing center exists within this field. According to Theresa Enos, "'women's work' is characterized by a disproportionate number of women workers…it is service-oriented…it pays less than 'men's work' (traditional forms of scholarship); it is devalued (females get fewer promotions and less pay)." In fact, most fields in which women excel are devalued. Paradoxically, the few men in such areas of study tend to reap the rare rewards which are available in those areas.

The writing center stands along the margins of this already marginalized field. Because we supposedly only help "bad" writers, we are seen as merely providing remedial service. The remedial stigma makes the work of the writing center appear to be service rather than scholarship, and the feminization of the writing center stems from this misconception since "women's work" is identified as service-oriented.

Some theorists have proposed feminist pedagogies of teaching or tutoring writing in order to empower this field and empower the feminine. However, all of these plans are problematic. Nancy Grimm claims that writing centers remain feminized and marginalized because of their current attempts to avoid marginalization. Grimm claims that writing centers sacrifice their own clear mission in an attempt to make everyone content and to avoid being challenged. Such people-pleasing and mediating simply reaffirms the center's subservience to the academy.

Even as writing centers, in their struggle to avoid marginalization, actually reinforce their current marginalization, so do Jean Baudrillard's simulations both challenge and reaffirm the present order. Baudrillard defines the simulation as "no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality…no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real." Ultimately, a simulation is a copy of a copy in a world in which the original no longer exists. Simulations exist without meaning or motive except to perpetuate themselves indefinitely.

Two of my favorite examples Baudrillard uses are Disneyland and the prison. In the case of Disneyland, Baudrillard claims that the park exists to provide an example of the abnormal: an example of a childish and foolish world visitors tolerate with a brief whimsy in order to pretend that the rest of the world is not also just as childish, just as foolish, and just as fictional. Meanwhile, people label the prison as the world of criminality and incarceration in order to believe in the illusion of their own innocence and freedom. Rather than imitating something real, simulations exist to hide the fact that the real no longer exists at all. Just as Disneyland hides the fact that there *is no* world of maturity and concrete reality, prisons exist to hide the fact that everyone is guilty and everyone is incarcerated within the "banal omnipresence" of society.

Simulations, then, keep people calm and maintain the status quo. The writing center is an example of a particular kind of simulation, one that has been feminized. The writing center aims to improve writers: to transform "bad" writers into "good" writers and "good" writers into "better" writers. Ultimately, the writing center's work is based upon the patriarchal academy's distinction between "good" and "bad" writing. The writing center, in its feminized state, has no goal but to maintain itself and the status quo. It is not reality, nor does it imitate reality. Instead,

it replicates itself indefinitely in an attempt to battle its own marginalization, but this replication, this function as a simulation reaffirms the dichotomy of "good" and "bad" writing, a dichotomy that labels the center as a feminized remedial clinic. The best evidence for such claims is the language used in various writing center documents.

For my primary research, I conducted content analysis to carefully study the specific language used in the UCWbL website, the major UCWbL training materials, and a random sample of UCWbL tutorial documentation. For the numerical results of my content analysis, see Appendix A on your handout.

The training materials I investigated are the four main training manuals that were distributed to all new and returning staff members at the beginning of the year: the *Writing Center Handbook for Graduate Assistants*; the *Writing Center Handbook for Writing Consultants*; *WC Online: An Introduction for Basic Administrators*; and *The University Writing Center's Office Management Handbook*.

Meanwhile, the sample of tutorial documentation includes the information from twenty-five randomly-selected face-to-face tutorial sessions, including the tutee profile, the appointment log, and the tutor log for each session. The tutorial documentation was randomly selected from the first three weeks during which we were open for business for this term.

On the explicit and conscious level, the UCWbL is not a remedial clinic. The center explicitly aims to help writers at every level of ability and does not merely "fix" or help a writer "fix" a particular piece of writing but instead trains writers to become better at writing. Despite such a disclaimer, however, it is possible that the UCWbL, on an implicit and unconscious level, acts as a remedial clinic, helping "bad" writers "fix" or conform their writing to meet the standards of the academy. In fact, my primary research reveals language that suggests that the

stigma of remediation placed upon the UCWbL has led to its feminization, which has, in turn, led to its function as a simulation, a specifically feminized simulation that ultimately reaffirms the present patriarchal structure of DePaul University.

Language suggestive of a remedial clinic appears nineteen times in the sample of tutor logs, forty-one throughout the website, and 598 in the training materials. Tutorial documentation reveals a common thread among students who identify themselves as "bad" writers and who visit the center at the last minute to have their work "fixed." Training materials admit the perpetuation of this misconception as well as the difficulty in defining the boundary between helping and "fixing" a writer.

Furthermore, the use of "student" as a synonym for the tutee, client, visitor, or writer at the writing center is highly problematic in that it reaffirms the stigma of the writing center as a remedial clinic. Although the majority of our tutees are, in fact, students, the UCWbL is also open to DePaul faculty and staff, so to refer to all tutees as students is to normalize the tutee population as *only* students. It implies that it would be abnormal for a faculty or staff member to visit the writing center, that the highly educated faculty members and the highly qualified professional staff members need not deign to visit the UCWbL. The word "student" is used as a synonym for any UCWbL tutee eight times throughout the sample of tutorial documentation, forty-one times on the UCWbL website, and 582 times throughout the selected training materials. Despite our explicit openness to *all* writers at *every* level, we have normalized our tutee population as students, suggesting that, at a certain point in one's development, one need not visit the writing center. Those who do visit, then, have not developed as far as those who do not visit, reinforcing the stigma of remediation that exists on this and all writing centers.

The word "student," when used as a synonym for the tutee, is problematic not just because it enforces the remedial stigma placed on writing centers. Even when the tutee *is* a student, such a label should be avoided because it reminds student tutees of the hierarchy in which they exist, of the need to fulfill their professors' expectations rather than freely embrace their own voices. In contrast, despite the oft-advertised philosophy that tutors should be collaborators with their clients rather than authoritative experts, a page on the UCWbL website allows tutees to "Browse Writing Consultants by Area of Expertise," which specifically labels tutors as experts on writing within particular disciplines. The tutor is thus identified as "expert" while the tutee is a mere "student," a label that reminds student tutees of their own status—or lack thereof—in relation to their tutor.

The constant appearance of these labels suggests a hypersensitivity to the rigid structure of the academy, which is symptomatic of the center's feminization. Language suggestive of this feminization appears thirteen times within the tutorial documentation, fifty-six times on the UCWbL website, and 716 times throughout the center's training materials. For instance, tutees exhibit a hyperawareness of DePaul's hierarchy, a fact revealed by a pattern of writers who visit the center primarily concerned with addressing the comments or guidelines of their professors, a pattern that appears both in several tutor logs and within the training materials.

The staff training materials also reveal a preoccupation with the academic hierarchy in which the center exists. The preface to the *Writing Center Handbook for Graduate Assistants* reminds readers that the writing center "could not operate without the support of the Office of Academic Affairs and the Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and Discourse." Both of these organizations on which we are dependent are currently presided over by men: Charles Strain and Peter Vandenberg, respectively.

We exist within a patriarchal hierarchy. DePaul is named after a man and is founded upon principles of a patriarchal religion. The top officers of the university are all men: the President, Chancellor, Provost, Executive Vice President, and Secretary of the University. The academic officers, the deans of each college, are primarily men: six men and three women. The administrative officers are also mostly men: eight men and four women. Although the director and one of the assistant directors of the UCWbL are both women, the director reports to *Charles* Strain, Associate Vice President of Academic Affairs, who reports to the Provost, *Helmut* P. Epp. The Provost reports to the President, the Reverend *Dennis* H. Holtschneider, who must answer to the Board of Trustees, which is comprised of thirty-five men and only nine women.

Despite our encouragement of a democratic and collaborative atmosphere, we maintain our own clearly delineated internal hierarchy from top to bottom: a director, two assistant directors, office managers, graduate assistants, and tutor consultants. The vertical structure of this hierarchy evinces itself quite clearly in the vertical layout of the staff profiles on the center's website, and the various levels of authority and control are referenced numerously throughout the training materials.

The internal hierarchy of the UCWbL reveals one of the ways in which the center has been feminized. The Director, Lauri Dietz, and the Assistant Director of Student Services, Liz Coughlin, are both females and comprise two-thirds of the main leadership of the center. However, Matthew Pearson, the Assistant Director of Faculty Services, is a male and is the only staff member whose name and contact information appears on the website's page titled "Location and Hours," which is probably one of the most commonly viewed pages on the entire website. Anytime a potential tutee visits the website to investigate this necessary information, Matthew Pearson appears as the sole representative of the UCWbL. While the female Director

Lauri Dietz may be in charge of making significant policy decisions, the male Matthew Pearson acts as the center's liaison to the DePaul faculty. Meanwhile, Liz Coughlin "is the immediate supervisor of all UCWbL graduate assistants, tutor consultants, and support staff." In this way, the women in leadership positions at the UCWbL oversee the daily activities of the center and work in the shadows, at least in comparison to the lone male in a leadership position who is in more of a position to receive recognition from the faculty.

Furthermore, the images throughout our website display a larger proportion of female staff members than are actually on the staff while our staff is actually comprised of a higher percentage of females than exists within the student population of DePaul. Finally, the writing center is feminized in that it is identified with the misogynistic definition of "women's work" as service-oriented. The word "service" or "serve," in reference to the activities of the UCWbL, appears once within the sample tutorial documentation, eight times throughout the center's website, and twenty-two times within the selected training materials.

The final symptom of the center's feminization is the paranoia and anxiety exhibited by its staff concerning the need to justify the center's existence to the DePaul community. This unease both reveals and reaffirms the subservient position of the UCWbL where the focus of any tutorial session must always be to honor the particular requests or suggestions of any involved faculty member and where the primary use of tutor logs are not to improve future tutors' effectiveness but to answer questions or challenges posed by those same faculty members. Because of our vulnerable position along the margins, we cannot afford to challenge authority but must instead work to appease the faculty so the center's existence will be tolerated.

This need to justify itself and to transform itself in response to the whims of the academy is symptomatic not only of the UCWbL's feminization but also of its function as a simulation.

Language that parallels Baudrillard's definition of a simulation or the binary distinction between "good" and "bad" writing appears thirty-one times on the UCWbL website, forty-five times throughout the tutorial documentation, and sixty times throughout the selected training materials.

The writing center exists to provide people with the illusion that its tutees are "bad" writers while everyone else is a "good" writer. What the writing center disguises is the fact that such a distinction is an illusion. Our foolishness is the same, within and beyond the gates of Disneyland, and our criminality is the same, within and beyond the walls of the prison. Our writing is the same, within and beyond the doors of the writing center, for I argue that there is no such thing as "good" writing.

However, the very existence of the writing center suggests otherwise. According to the *Writing Center Handbook for Graduate Assistants*, "The UCWbL is dedicated to making better writers." But who defines "better writers" or "good" writing? Faculty members define it for their students, and supervisors define it for the faculty. Both parties share one trait, however: their definition of "good" writing is dependent upon the standards and values of the patriarchal DePaul administration.

Symptomatic of its function as a simulation, the UCWbL exhibits a preoccupation with templates, boilerplate texts, and the infinite replication and recreation of past tutorial sessions. During our training, we've conducted mock tutorials, shadowed experienced tutors, and have been shadowed by experienced tutors. These actions are replications of the actual face-to-face tutoring experience, and we had to experience these replications before ever tutoring independently. So the actual tutoring we've been doing since then has simply been reenactments of our earlier training experiences. Each subsequent face-to-face tutorial session has been merely a copy of a copy.

We also exhibit a preoccupation toward record-keeping, something on which we all spend a great deal of time. While the need for record-keeping is certainly understandable, we exhibit an anxious compulsion toward copying and saving each and every document or correspondence in a constant replication of past events that can no longer truly be referenced. The *Writing Center Handbook for Writing Consultants* states that "records are crucial for accurate data collection, which helps us justify the program's funding." It seems, then, that this constant replication results from the marginal and feminized position of the UCWbL within the DePaul patriarchy. Such appeasement of the academy, however, reinforces the academy's marginalization of the writing center.

The UCWbL also reinforces the dominant order and its own position along the margins by supporting the academic standards which delineate between "good" and "bad" writing, and it is this dichotomy that ultimately lies at the root of the problem. The center's website instructs student writers to "always defer to your professor's specifications for a given assignment" in a total of thirteen references which equate "good" writing with writing that matches professorial expectations or desires. The *Writing Center Handbook for Writing Consultants* makes seven similar references, and other references also appear throughout the tutorial documentation.

This emphasis placed on this dichotomy between "good" and "bad" writing merely reinforces the UCWbL's existence as a feminized simulation. The word "good" is used in reference to writing, such as "good political science papers" or "good academic writing" seven times on the UCWbL website along with countless other synonymous rigid dichotomies such as "successful," "better" or "correct." This dichotomy also permeates the language of my sample of tutorial documentation and the *Writing Center Handbook for Writing Consultants*. However, the handbook also associates "good" writing with "good" reading and "good thinking," and it

equates difficulty in writing with poor thinking. This judgment uses a person's "bad" writing as a symptom of "bad" or inadequate thinking. The implications of such a distinction are dangerous: "bad" writers are also "bad" thinkers, "bad" students, and "bad" individuals who deserve to be relegated to the margins of society and silenced.

The reality, however, is that "good" writing is writing that fits within the standards of the patriarchal academy. For this reason, there is no such thing as inherently "good" writing because there is no way to objectively define "good" writing. However, if we analyze this situation through another lens, we can see that "good" writing does not exist for another reason beyond the subjective nature of its definition. The UCWbL, in creating a distinction between "good" and "bad" writing, provides the illusion that there *is* such a thing as "good" writing, when, in fact, all writing is "bad" writing because all writing fails to serve its true purpose: communication.

Let's flip over to the back page of your handout. Take a look at the word you wrote within the quotation marks. Ferdinand de Saussure argues that each particular word, text, or other representative artifact is devoid of inherent meaning. Its meaning relies on the existence of other texts around it and on the language system of which it is a part. Now look at all the writing you did on the other half of the circle. The connection between a particular word and its denotations and connotations is an arbitrary construction. As you can see on your handout, the sign does not equal the referent. A chair is not a "chair"; it is an object we collectively agree to label as "chair." However, it is not even an "object," because such a term is merely another reductive label. Now I only gave you forty-five seconds to write within a small space, but the fact is that we all exist within time limits and space constraints. Hopefully, you didn't have nearly enough time or space to write down everything you wanted to. There is an infinite amount of information regarding any particular object, and so a discussion of any object requires the

selection and omission of particular pieces of information. To label or discuss anything is to reduce it, so true communication is impossible.

No matter what the genre or style, every writer is struggling to communicate information through an inadequate medium: language. The writing center and the academy at large struggles to hide the fact that true communication—through writing, speaking, or any other form of representation—is unachievable. If the prison exists to hide the fact that everyone breaks the law and that everyone is encaged within the rigid confines of society, then the writing center exists to hide the fact that everyone is a bad writer because no one is capable of complete communication.

Ultimately, the UCWbL functions as a feminized simulation. The stigma of remediation has created a population of writers—its tutees—commonly perceived by the rest of society as "bad" writers. By virtue of this identification, all those who are not our tutees are defined as "good" writers, despite the fact that no such writers exist. The language used by the UCWbL reinforces this stigma of remediation, which reinforces the perception that the work of the UCWbL is service, not scholarship. Such a misconception allows the UCWbL to be identified as and marginalized with the feminine.

The unstable and vulnerable position of the UCWbL along the margins of the DePaul community results in the need for self-justification and an emphasis on self-perpetuation. The UCWbL seems to be more concerned with its own regeneration than with its original mission: to help all writers at all stages of their writing process. Instead, the UCWbL has become an institution with no existing referent, empty of meaning, seeking only to replicate itself as it delineates between "good" and "bad" writing, writing that does or does not conform to the standards of the patriarchal academy on which the feminized UCWbL depends. Its function as a simulation reaffirms the academy's standards and thus reaffirms the academy itself. This support

of the academy simultaneously reinforces both the stigma of remediation and the feminized status the academy has thrust upon the UCWbL.

This study is not meant to degrade or attack the work of any writing center, any school, or any individual. While we may never be able to escape the language games in which we are imprisoned, the UCWbL and other such writing centers at least allow us to navigate throughout the prison more freely. On a conscious and explicit level, the UCWbL is not a remedial clinic or explicitly advertised as such, nor is it purposefully identified with the feminine or marginalized. However, the language used to discuss the UCWbL suggests unconscious associations toward the opposite. One of the first steps toward a solution is to become consciously aware of these unconscious associations in order to alter the language being used and the thought processes of which such language is symptomatic.

We need to consciously admit the fact that "good" writing can only be defined subjectively and that true communication and thus "good" writing is actually impossible. With a better understanding and awareness of the problem, we can alter our language. We can rid ourselves of the static dichotomy between "good" and "bad" writing and thus move beyond problems that have plagued writing centers since their inception. We can end, or at least minimize, the stigma of remediation and the subsequent feminization of the writing center. We can bring empowerment to the "bad" writer, to the feminine, and to writing centers in general. We can deconstruct the very illusion we have inadvertently constructed so we can stop functioning as feminized simulations.

Thank you.

Appendix A. Primary Research Results: Table documenting the appearance of language suggestive of particular concerns

Type	Remediation	Feminization	Simulation	Totals
Website	41	56	31	128
Training Materials	598	716	60	1374
Tutorial Documentation	18	13	45	76
Totals	657	785	136	**1578**

Appendix B. Breakdown of gender among various DePaul University populations

Gender	Tutee Sample[1]	Tutor Sample[1]	UCWbL Staff[2]	DePaul Student Population[3]	DePaul Faculty Population[3]
Male	7 (28.0%)	12 (48.0%)	24 (45.3%)	10774 (46.0%)	496 (57%)
Female	18 (72.0%)	13 (52.0%)	29 (54.7%)	12627 (54.0%)	374 (43%)
Totals	25	25	53	23401	870

1. This sample comes from the twenty-five randomly-selected tutorial sessions used in the content analysis of tutorial documentation, accessed through *WCOnline*.
2. This information comes from the UCWbL website, *Center for Writing-based Learning*.
3. This information comes from the webpage "DePaul University: Office of Institutional Planning and Research."

Appendix C. Breakdown of UCWbL tutorial sessions by type from 17 September through 7 October 2008

Type of Tutorial Session	Number of Sessions	Percentage of Total Sessions
Face-to-Face	446	81%
Feedback-by-Email	60	11%
IM/Webcam	18	3%
Quick Question	27	5%
Totals	551	

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