TAKING CREATIVE RISKS IN THE HIGH SCHOOL WRITING CENTER: HOW SECONDARY WRITING CENTERS FOSTER THE DEVELOPMENT OF RISK TAKING THAT ULTIMATELY LEADS TO CREATIVE AGENCY IN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT WRITERS

by

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This thesis explores how high school writing centers foster the development of risk taking that ultimately leads to creative agency in high school students, which, I argue, works in opposition to the current neoliberal educational agenda. To explore this topic, I used a mixed-methods approach for data collection. Working with the frameworks of both teacher research and ethnography, I gathered data through observations, interviews, and surveys. The results of this research show that particular methods of writing centers grounded in sociocultural theory do foster the development of risk taking that ultimately leads to creative agency in high school students. The results also show that some of these methods transfer to other educational settings as well. This project concludes with a discussion of the value of research that explores educational environments that oppose the neoliberal agenda.
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

My Writing Center Story

There seems to be two separate narratives that occur when people hear the words writing center. One narrative focuses on small, easily forgotten spaces that employ tutors whose job is to help struggling, weak writers sort out grammar. The other narrative, one that is prevalent in writing center research, focuses on comfortable spaces with coffee and friendly people who engage all types of writers in thought-provoking conversations about writing. I align closely with the second camp, though it hasn’t always been this way.

Because of my lack of experience with my campus’ writing center, when I was an undergraduate studying English Education I thought that the writing center was a “fix-it” place where struggling freshmen went to have their commas put in order and their spelling checked. Although I know that in my English Education courses we talked about writing centers in more adept terms than those I have just described, because I did not feel I needed writing help I never gave the space much thought. It wasn’t until I was approaching the end of my first year of graduate school that I finally began to understand the true potential of writing centers. I was taking a course on Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory and quickly

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Here, I refer to Jackie Grutsch McKinney's idea of the “Grand Narrative” from her book Peripheral Visions for Writing Centers. When referring to the “Grand Narrative” she writes: “...the writing center grand narrative [...] is a story that pulls together certain, disparate events, ideas, and actions in order to tell a coherent or totalizing story about writing centers. And the story, once in motion, excludes other ideas about writing centers that do not fit with the established writing center story. It is also so absolutely ‘normal,’ so tacit, that it functions invisibly. It seems not to be a story, a representation, but more a definition, a fact, a truth" (11).
became interested in the idea of more-capable peers (Vygotsky 84-91) and the role that notion played in collaborative learning (Bruffee). I was constantly trying to make connections between these more-experienced peers, collaboration, and creativity in writing classrooms. I was also considering the limitations of neoliberal education practices, which Shari Stenberg, author of *Repurposing Composition: Feminist Interventions for a Neoliberal Age*, defines as “a set of economic principles and cultural politics that positions the free market as a guide for all human action” (Stenberg 4). Neoliberalism, according to Stenberg, “also prizes individualism and individual responsibility” (Stenberg 5). Based on my limited teaching experience as a student teacher and Graduate Teaching Assistant instructing first year composition courses, I couldn’t see how creativity and collaboration played a crucial role in the learning environments that I had created; the curriculum didn’t seem to allow any room for either of those things. For example, while I had assigned group work in my classes, it seemed inauthentic; because I was the one who was constructing the groups and assigning the work, it seemed that students simply saw group work as an opportunity to get work done faster, as opposed to reflect on what it meant to be a collaborative learner. This certainly wasn’t the students’ fault; rather, they likely did not know what they were supposed to get out of their collaborative learning experiences

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2. In *Mind in Society*, Vygotsky describes the more-capable peer in relation to zones of proximal development, which he defines as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (86). This more capable peer assists those around them to advance zones of proximal development that are not yet fully matured.

3. Here, I refer to Shari Stenberg’s notions of the neoliberal agenda from her book *Repurposing Composition: Feminist Interventions for a Neoliberal Age*. Neoliberalism and Stenberg’s book will be further discussed in the following chapters.
because I hadn’t spent enough time reflecting on what I wanted them to get out of these collaborative learning experiences. Because I was mostly using group work as a means to differentiate instruction at that point in my teaching career, I seemed to break the roles in my classroom into two dichotomies, neither of which were rooted in Vygotsky’s notion of the more-capable peer because I did not yet have that knowledge: There was the role that I played as the instructor (very obviously not a peer as I was assigning grades to the work being done) and the role of the student who submitted work to me for a grade.

Frustrated, I sought out a conversation with the professor of the sociocultural class to help me sort through some of these connections that I knew must be relevant but that I couldn’t place in an educational setting. Being the Director of our university’s writing center, she was able to introduce me to writing centers and showed me that the connections I was making did exist in academic spaces, even if they were spaces that I wasn’t yet familiar with. My professor then put me in contact with the writing center director at a local high school so that I could continue to make connections regarding creativity, collaboration, and more-experienced peers. This was the beginning of my writing center story.

And so, I eventually found myself here, involved in writing center work. There were brief stops along the way and divergences from writing center work; I’ve spent time as a tutor, a tutee, an entry level writing instructor, a graduate writing center intern, but also, a researcher, all in writing center spaces. Ultimately, all those experiences have aided in my understanding of the work that I am doing here and helped me to further understand the varied nuances that happen in educational settings. Through my research, I have come
to understand writing centers as spaces and pedagogical methods that provide the necessary environment to foster the development of risk taking which ultimately leads to more creative high school students. I have also spent enough time in other educational environments to know that writing centers are not the only spaces that provide students those benefits. In addition, I don’t believe that every writing center has that capability or that the development of writers is something that happens everyday. Because of the work that I’ve done in high school settings, I know that writing centers can exemplify places or educational methods that resist the neoliberal agenda’s individualism and commodification. I know that writing centers are places that still value collaboration, creativity, and risk taking, even if current educational trends say that these characteristics are not valuable. This thesis is an exploration of one such space.

In this thesis, I aim to understand how high school writing centers foster the development of risk taking that leads to creative agency in high school writers. This thesis defines development as a process in which concepts and knowledge are internalized through social interaction. This definition has been repurposed from John Nordlof’s essay “Vygotsky, Scaffolding, and the Role of Theory in Writing Center Work,” which was largely influenced by the work of psychologist Lev Vygotsky. Nordlof’s text, coupled with the work of Vygotsky and Joan Wink and LeAnn Putney (authors of A Vision of Vygotsky), which positions student development as a collaborative practice.

The development of risk taking that this thesis explores is grounded in Boquet’s essay “Intellectual Tug-of-War: Snapshots of Life in the Center.” In the essay, Boquet explores how students talk with their peers about writing, as opposed to simply telling their
peers how to best fix their writing. While discussing these peer relationships, Boquet uses Randy Hodson’s essay, “The Active Worker: Compliance and Autonomy in the Workplace” to explore student autonomy. Autonomy is a trait that I argue is essential for risk taking. In order for students to take risks, they must feel supported in their decision to autonomously structure their own work. Because of the connection between autonomy and risk taking, I use both the work of Boquet and Hodson to define risk taking as the ability for autonomous peer tutors and writers to creatively structure their own work.

The creativity that is explored in this thesis is influenced by both Boquet and Eodice’s essay “Creativity in the Writing Center: A Terrible Conundrum,” and creativity theorist Csikszentmihaly’s book *Creativity*. In their essay, Boquet and Eodice use Csikszentmihaly’s work to explore the presence of creativity in writing center spaces. In his book, Csikszentmihaly explores creativity as a “result from the interaction of a system composed of three elements: a culture that contains symbolic rules, a person who brings novelty into the symbolic domain, and a field of experts who recognize and validate the innovation” (Csikszentmihaly 6). Using these three elements, Csikszentmihaly then defines creativity as “a process by which a symbolic domain in the culture is changed” (8). Csikszentmihaly helps his audience understand domains by explaining that they are where creativity belongs. Domains, according to Csikszentmihaly, are similar to fields. For instance, mathematics is a domain, as is science, or even art. To help his audience further understand creativity, Csikszentmihaly introduces a three-part explanation of creativity: 1) a culture that contains symbolic rules, 2) a person who brings novelty into the symbolic domain, and 3) a field of experts who recognize and validate the innovation. This thesis
uses Csikszentmihaly’s definition of creativity and therefore defines it as a process by which a symbolic domain in the culture is changed. In addition, this work also uses Boquet and Eodice’s essay to understand how creativity applies to writing center work.

As a researcher whose work is rooted in multiple educational settings (not just those of the writing center, but those of the writing and English classroom as well), I find that I am constantly looking for creativity and risk taking in educational spaces. While this study was borne out of time in the Belleview High School Writing Center, ultimately I found myself involved in this field of work because I wanted to expand my thinking about the teaching that I would be doing in the future. And while this work situates writing centers as places that foster the development of high school writers by shifting their thinking of both creativity and risk taking, I also believe that these are not the only spaces capable of that shift.

Outline of Chapters

In Chapter II, I first explore the history of high school writing centers. I then move on to discuss and ground my research in sociocultural theory. After discussing this theory, I explore current educational practices as well as establish the writing center as a space that is largely determined by both methodology and physical space. I also use this section to draw on the work of theorists like John Nordlof, Elizabeth Boquet, Michelle Eodice, Joan Wink, and Mihaly Csikszentmihaly to define the terms development, creativity, and risk taking. I then demonstrate how writing centers function as places that encourage both creativity and risk taking and close the chapter with a discussion of why this study is a valuable contribution to the field.
In chapter III, after grounding my own research in the work of writing center Director and teacher researcher Cynthia Dean, with specific focus on her book *The Ecology of Peer Tutoring*, I move to a discussion of the methodological framework of my study. I focus my discussion particularly on Ruth Ray’s, Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle’s notions of teacher research and Bob Jeffrey’s and Geoff Troman’s recurrent time mode of ethnography. After establishing the methodological framework, I discuss the design of and methods of data collection for the study. This section of the chapter recalls my use of interviews, surveys, and observations as a means to construct a mixed-methods analysis of the Belleview Writing Center and the characteristics that foster the development of risk taking in high school writers in that space. Following that, I discuss my selection of Belleview High School as the site of this research and reflect on why Belleview’s Writing Center was a better choice for my research than a closer, neighboring writing center. Before concluding the chapter, I discuss the demographics of both the city of Belleview and the high school as well as the statement of purpose and limitations of the study, which include a lack of variety in the demographics of both the city and the school.

Chapter IV discusses the results of this research. First, I discuss the collaborative environment of Belleview’s Writing Center in addition to student and director perceptions of the collaboration that happens in the space. Next, I move to a discussion of risk taking in the writing center and explore how peer tutors encourage student writers to take risks with their writing. In this section, I argue that this interaction ultimately leads to development for both the peer tutor and the writer due to the fact that each have their own set of mature functions and can therefore teach each other. Following that, I move to a
discussion of student creativity presence in Belleview’s Writing Center and discuss how the autonomous choices made by students ultimately help them to become better writers. This research finds that, in general, students are aware of creativity’s presence in the Writing Center and the benefits of creative thought, though all seem to approach creativity differently. After the discussion of creativity, I move to an exploration of student development and focus particularly on how students are perceiving their own development as writers. This section also includes the director’s discussion of the development of the writing center tutors during their time working in the center. I conclude my thesis with a summary in Chapter 5.

Ultimately, my research revealed several things. The first is that the collaboration that happens between peers in writing center spaces is different than that which happens in traditional classroom spaces. This is not to say that the collaboration is better or worse – simply that it is different. It seems that this is largely due to the fact that students often seek the help of the writing center on their own, whereas group work in classroom spaces is often assigned. It is unclear whether these two types of collaboration produce different results – likely, they don’t; however, it seems that the two variations of collaboration arrive at the same conclusions or outcomes differently.

Second, this research suggests that multiple educational environments have the ability to foster the development of risk taking in high school students. While writing centers do provide a place for students to engage in risk taking without the fear of repercussions, it seems that the benefits that they provide students are largely rooted in pedagogical practice as opposed to physical space. This suggests that various types of
educational environments have the potential to encourage creative, autonomous choices in high school writers.

Lastly, this work shows that there are educational spaces that are working successfully against the neoliberal agenda. Where current educational trends treat students as goods and commodities and value the work of individuals, the Belleview High School Writing Center provides a space for students to work in collaboration with their peers. This space values the work of the collective and meets writers where they are at. Ultimately, this all suggests that despite current trends in education, there is potential for change.
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

This thesis explores how writing centers foster the development of risk taking that ultimately leads to creative agency in the writing of high school students. In order to study this development, I needed to explore writing centers’ grounding in sociocultural theory, writing center methods, writing centers in high school settings, and the current educational environment. The following sections provide an overview of these topics.

Writing Centers and Sociocultural Theory

Writing center theory is grounded in sociocultural theory, which has its roots in Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky’s work. Vygotsky calls for a developmental theory that takes “a comprehensive approach that would make possible description and explanation of higher psychological functions in terms acceptable to natural science” (Vygotsky 5). In laymen’s terms, sociocultural theory aims to understand how people develop in relation to one another and what effects the larger society has on the development of the individual; in short, the theory claims that development is a social and

4Writing center research is also closely related to Activity Theory, which is borne from later models of sociocultural theory. The object of Activity Theory is to “understand the unity of consciousness and activity” (Nardi 7) and is “rooted in the phenomenological facets of lived experience” (McNely). Like sociocultural theory, activity theory “incorporates strong notions of intentionality, history, mediation, collaboration and development in constructing consciousness” (Nardi 7). Activity Theory is important for writing center research because it is “an incredibly useful and malleable framework for understanding and exploring complex, intersubjective, historically and culturally-conditioned, object-oriented human work and learning and the genres and artifacts that mediate such work and learning” (McNely).
collaborative practice. One of the many ways that writing centers utilize sociocultural theory is that they provide students with a place to work collaboratively with their peers. Kenneth Bruffee explains the collaborative nature of writing center environments in his foundational 1984 essay “Collaborative Learning and the Conversation of Mankind”:\(^5\)

To the extent that thought is internalized conversation [(Vygotsky)], then, any effort to understand how we think requires us to understand the nature of conversation; and any effort to understand conversation requires us to understand the nature of community life that generates and maintains conversation. [...] To think well as individuals we must learn to think well collectively [...] our task must involve engaging students in conversation among themselves at as many points in both the writing and reading process as possible… (Bruffee 640; 642)

Bruffee’s understanding of collaborative learning practices suggests that peer collaboration is something that can and does happen in multiple educational environments. These notions of collaborative learning also imply that the educational environments that use collaborative learning are largely rooted in method, as opposed to physical space. This shows us that the collaborative practices that are present in the writing center environment cannot and do not only exist in those spaces. Despite the fact that many practices associated with the writing center largely succeed because of the physical space of the center (i.e. the space away from the classroom environment, the coffee, the relaxed feel of the space), there are also practices that succeed because of the methods that writing centers employ (i.e. collaborative opportunities with peers). These methods tend to push against the previously

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\(^5\)Bruffee further explores collaborative learning, and places it within the context of writing centers, in his essay “Peer Tutoring and the Conversation of Mankind.” This essay is explored in greater depth in the following sections of this chapter.
mentioned commodified view of education by placing value on work that is done collectively as opposed to work that is produced by the individual.

Writing Centers as Pedagogical Method. In her 1999 article, “‘Our Little Secret’: A History of Writing Centers, Pre- to Post-Open Admissions,” Elizabeth Boquet uses a laundromat metaphor to encourage her audience to consider whether writing centers are largely determined by physical space or methodology. She writes, “Is the writing center […] primarily a space, a ‘laundry’ where work is dropped off and picked up, where students are brushed off and cleaned up? Or, is it primarily a temporality, an interaction between people over time, in which the nature of the interaction is determined not by site but by method?” (Boquet 464). She goes on to conclude that based upon historical context and the overall purpose of the center, one can largely be both. However, the point that she is ultimately making is that any given writing center has potential to “[exceed] its space,” (478) if we (meaning writing center enthusiasts, scholars, administrators, tutors, etc.) “pay more attention to the things that don’t always demand our attention, […] remember that we only get answers to the questions that we ask and that the asking determines the answers” (479). Boquet’s argument about the pedagogical methods of the writing center is an important one because it shows that – while writing centers are special places that offer students specialized instruction – they are not the only places that are capable of such educational practices.

Stephen Corbett furthers this claim in his book, Beyond Dichotomy. Like Boquet, he emphasizes the idea that peer review can happen in multiple educational settings and reminds researchers in the field to stray away from an “us” (the writing center) vs. “them”
(the writing classroom) mentality. He notes that it is this very dichotomy that potentially contributed to the “self-imposed marginalization of the writing center to the rest of the academy” (11). However, one of the points that Corbett makes is that writing centers are often places that are “just removed enough from the power structures of the classroom to enable students to engage in critical questioning of the [here, Corbett quotes Decker] ‘seemingly untouchable expectations, goals and motivations of the power structures’ that undergraduates [or rather, students] must learn within” (11).

In writing centers, students learn to write within these goals, expectations, and motivations of power structures by engaging in conversations about writing with their peers. The writing center environment provides students with a grade free space to collaborate, take risks, and think creatively without the fear of repercussions. It is this collaboration that provides high school students the opportunity to develop as writers.

Collaboration. In the essay “Outside-In and Inside-Out: Peer Response Groups in Two Ninth-Grade Classes,” Sarah Warshauer Freedman explores the results of peer work in two high school classrooms. She ultimately concludes that the term “peer response” can encompass a variety of classroom activities involving collaboration and that results vary depending on the teacher’s intent for assigning the group work. This is one of the stark differences between peer work that is seen in classroom settings and that which is present in writing center spaces. In classrooms, despite the fact that peers are working in conjunction with each other, there is still an underlying goal that the teacher is attempting to accomplish. This is demonstrated in Freedman’s concluding chapter where she writes that “[t]he differences in the ways groups fit into Glass’s and Peterson’s [the teachers
assigning the group work] overall curriculum and their different goals for the students led them to frame group activities in very different ways” (Freedman 99). Although Freedman isn’t intentionally speaking to the differences in group work from one educational context to another, his observations illustrate one difference between collaborative work in the classroom setting and the potential nature of collaborative work in the writing center setting. Classroom spaces often have group work that is assigned with some sort of underlying motive from the teacher. Because the writing center space lacks the curriculum component that teachers are often held rigorously to, peers are able to work in collaboration with each other without the presence of teacher expectations.

Freedman does acknowledge the benefits of group work in educational settings, regardless of whether or not they are assigned by a teacher. She writes, “[i]deally, through working with their peers, student writers [...] come to internalize\(^6\) the needs of their audience and grow in their ability to imagine and anticipate those needs as they write” (Freedman 72). While students might arrive at different conclusions based on the environment in which they are participating in the group work, they are ultimately benefitting all the same. The fact that students are benefitting in multiple educational settings further illustrates the idea that the writing center is not the only educational environment that fosters the development of high school writers.

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\(^6\) Vygotsky defines internalization as “internal reconstruction of an external operation” (Mind in Society 56). To simplify this, in A Vision of Vygotsky, Wink and Putney identify internalization as “an active restructuring of knowledge between and among individuals” (150).
In “Collaboration and the Conversation of Mankind,” Bruffee notes that collaboration often isn’t seen in classrooms because “many teachers are unsure about how to use collaborative learning and about when and where, appropriately, it should be used. Many are concerned also that when they try to use collaborative learning in what seem to be effective and appropriate ways, it sometimes quite simply fails” (636). However, we also know from Bruffee’s article that students’ work “tended to improve when they got help from peers; peers offering help, furthermore, learned from the students they helped and from the activity of helping itself” (638). Bruffee further emphasizes this point in his essay “Peer Tutoring and the Collaboration of Mankind” when reflecting on how writing centers first came into being. He writes,

[t]hrough peer tutoring, we reasoned, teachers could reach students by organizing them to teach each other. Peer tutoring was a type of collaborative learning. It did not seem to change what people learned, but, rather, the social context in which they learned it Peer tutoring made learning a two-way street, since students’ work tended to improve when they got help from peer tutors and tutors learned from the students they helped and from the activity of tutoring itself. (87)

In high school writing centers, the relationship between peer tutors and students coming to the center seeking help is a mutually beneficial one.

Bruffee then goes on to further promote collaboration among students when he writes, “[b]esides providing a particular kind of conversation, collaborative learning also provides a particular kind of social context for conversation, a particular kind of community – a community of status equals: peers” (642). Here, Bruffee is making a distinction between students who write in a community that consists of them (the writer) and a teacher (or rather, a writing assessor) and students who write in a community with
other writers. Though in this quote Bruffee is speaking more to collaborative learning than he is to writing center practices, when we return to his essay on peer tutoring, he grounds these notions of collaborative learning in the writing center. He writes,

…but peer tutoring provides a social context in which students can experience and practice the kinds of conversation that academics most value. The kind of conversation peer tutors engage in with their tutees can be emotionally involved, intellectually and substantively focused, and personally disinterested. There could be no better sources of this than the sort of displaced conversation (i.e., writing) that academics value. Peer tutoring, like collaborative learning in general, makes students – both tutors and tutees – aware that writing is a social artifact, like the thought that produces it. However, displaced writing may seem in time and space from the rest of a writer’s community of readers and other writers, writing continues to be an act of conversational exchange. (91)

This assertion applies directly to writing center work not only because it anchors peer tutoring and collaborative learning in both sociocultural and activity theory, but also because Bruffee further emphasizes the symbiotic relationship that peer tutoring and collaboration provide for both the tutor and the student coming to the writing center seeking help.

Elizabeth Boquet shares Bruffee’s sentiments in her previously mentioned essay “‘Our Little Secret’: A History of Writing Center, Pre- to Post-Open Admissions.” She writes,

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7 Bruffee specifically does this by discussing the fact that writing is rooted in conversation, a social activity. While referring to Michael Oakeshott’s 1962 essay, “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind,” Bruffee writes,

Arguing that the human conversation takes place within us as well as among us and that conversation as it takes place within us is what we call reflective thought, Oakeshott makes the assumption that conversation and reflective thought are related in two ways: organically and formally. That is, as the work of Lev Vygotsky and others has shown, reflective thought is public or social conversation internalized. (88-89)

By stating that writing is a “conversational exchange” Bruffee is referring to his previous statements regarding sociocultural theory.
Upon entering writing labs, students for the first time saw faces that resembled their own and they saw signs of student investment in that space. Students ceased to simply visit the writing center; they began, and with the advent of peer tutoring, to inhabit it. […] Peer tutors also inhabit student writing in a manner that their faculty counterparts cannot, simply because of their different relationship to the academic system of rewards (Boquet 475).

In this passage, Boquet speaks not only to the advantages of peer relationships, but also highlights why those relationships first do not happen between teachers and their students and second why relationships such as those do happen in writing center spaces.

It is these relationships and the habits that they encourage that ultimately foster the writing development of high school writers. In the next section, I will explore the development that occurs in writing center spaces. I argue that this development is largely fostered by peer tutoring and collaborative learning, both of which encourage the risk taking that ultimately leads to creative agency in high school writers.

**Development.** First and foremost, in order to successfully move forward in this text, one needs to have an understanding of the use of the phrase *development of high school writers*. This development is largely grounded in sociocultural theory and is best explained by John Nordlof in his essay, “Vygotsky, Scaffolding, and the Role of Theory in Writing Center Work.” In his essay, Nordlof explains that Vygotsky understood development or “growth” (Nordlof 56) as “a process that begins with external, socialized communication” which is sometimes instead called “inner speech” (56). Nordlof then points out that Vygotsky’s understanding of development can also be applied to the relationships between tutees and tutors in writing center spaces. He writes, “[g]rowth [what I’m calling development in this work] in Vygotsky’s model, happens through the internalization of
what begins as social interaction. Vygotsky can therefore offer us a model for understanding student learning; it is a development process in which concepts are internalized through social interaction” (56). This is further emphasized by Joan Wink and LeAnn Putney in their book *A Vision of Vygotsky*. When referring to ZPD’s (Zones of Proximal Development) place in a classroom setting, they write

A way of further conceptualizing the zone of proximal development as a potentially transformative classroom process is through Vygotsky’s constructs of reformulation and internalization (Rieber & Carton, 1987; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). Vygotsky theorized that, through dialogic and collaborative practices, learners personally reformulate a problem and then formulate a possible solution in their own words. What begins as a collective work is transformed as students take up, or internalize, common language and knowledge of the collective to be used in their personal academic work. From this perspective, participants working tougher on a problem construct knowledge together that has potential for becoming both collective knowledge and individual knowledge as well as for guiding and transforming subsequent actions… (102)

Nordlof’s, Wink’s, and Putney’s work helps us understand the role of student development in spaces that foster collaborative learning practices. Because of these texts, we understand that growth (i.e. development) is a social activity. As a result, for the duration of this study, I will use Nordlof’s and Wink and Putney’s interpretations of Vygotsky’s understanding of growth to define development as a process in which concepts and knowledge are internalized through social interaction.

**Risk Taking.** In addition to an understanding of development, one will also need to understand both risk taking and creativity as well. For the purposes of this work, risk taking will be defined from several sources, the first of which is “The Active Worker: Compliance and Autonomy in the Workplace” by Randy Hodson. Hodson writes, “workers are active
on their own terms and as motived by their own agendas. These agendas are [...] diverse [...] and include both compliance and resistance as well as autonomous creative effort to structure their own work” (Hodson 47). This definition is perhaps better described in relation to writing center work by Boquet in her essay “Intellectual Tug-of-War: Snapshots of Life in the Center.” At the heart of her essay, Boquet addresses Hodson’s description of workers by exploring how writing centers provide a space for students to talk with their peers about writing as opposed to giving them advice on how to best fix their writing. This is ultimately what risk taking in writing center spaces encompasses; and so, for the purposes of this work, risk taking will henceforth be defined as the ability for autonomous peer tutors and writers to creatively structure their own work.

Cynthia Dean, an Assistant Professor of Education at the University of Maine at Augusta comments on how she saw the role of risk taking at her own high school writing center in her book The Ecology of Peer Tutoring. In Dean’s opinion, risk taking in writing center spaces has largely to do with the fact that writing centers are not classrooms. When referring to the identities and authority of her own peer tutors, she writes, “…I was interested not just in how participants [the tutors] perceived the challenges of acquiring and enacting a tutorial identity in the writing center but also how they perceived that identity in relation to performance demands [referring to Groffman’s The Performance of Self in Everyday Life] in other contexts” (27). She then follows this statement with the following question: “…to what extent did they perceive these contexts as facilitating or disrupting their capacity to sustain a tutorial identity across the school day?” (27). Though Dean is specifically referring to tutorial identity here, what this discussion also encompasses is the
risks that her tutors are willing to take in the academic realm. By pondering the identity and authority of her tutors and whether or not that ultimately clashes with the “performance demands” of other contexts, she is acknowledging that her tutors are making autonomously creative, conscious choices about their own identity, which references both this paper’s definition of risk taking as well as Hodson’s work on the identity of workers. Dean goes on to observe that the risks her peer tutors had taken within their high school writing center were not well received by teachers outside of the space. She begins this observation by stating that all 14 study participants felt that “in their school-based writing, they did not have a say in what or how they wrote” (46), which directly opposes this paper’s definition of risk taking as the ability for autonomous peer tutors and writers to creatively structure their own work.8

While Boquet might argue that encouraging students to take risks seems to be more about the methodology practiced by the writing center as opposed to the physical space of the center, in Dean’s experience at least, it appears that this is not entirely the case. From

8 To further emphasize Dean’s point, I provide two of my own examples. The first is meant to show that risk taking can happen in educational environments outside of the writing center space. The second is meant to show why that is often not the case.

During my time observing at Bellevue High School’s Writing Center, I worked closely with Anthony Yarnell, the Center’s Director. Because Anthony’s position as the Writing Center Director is not a compensated one, he continues to teach full time. Though his schedule differs greatly depending on the semester (he has taught everything from Advanced Placement to Remedial English courses), his style of teaching is largely the same. While Anthony holds high expectations for the students in his class, as someone who works closely with peer tutors, he also knows that he must set high expectations for the relationships that students develop with each other. All of the classes that Anthony teaches (AP and Remedial alike) rely heavily on peer review and collaboration during the writing process. In addition, Anthony often makes writing assignments low-stakes (meaning, not singularly worth a substantial portion of the students’ grade) and creates new assignments every semester so that he and his students can figure out the process together; in addition, revision is always encouraged and welcome. It is – I believe – an environment that encourages the writing development of the students while also allowing them to be creative and take risks.

During my student teaching experience at a local high school in Bakersfield, I was placed in an Advanced Placement History and Honors English II (meaning, I was teaching Sophomore students) that I would consider as very high-stakes and extremely high-stress educational environment. Students were not only given books to read for whole-class discussion, they were also required to read additional books during the semester (in some cases, as many as 3) for a book club that they were required to be involved in. They were given timed writing assignments to prepare them for the Advanced Placement Exam without much direct instruction on how to synthesize, or analyze, or summarize in their own writing. Additional writing assignments were long, complex research pieces that were worth a large portion of the students’ grade. And while revision was loosely encouraged, it was often not a realistic option for students because of the large workload that the class provided.
this, we can conclude that – whether it be by methodology or physical space – writing centers have the potential to foster risk taking in the students who frequent them.

Another methodology that writing center spaces encourage is creativity, which I argue is a result of the risks that students take while writing. When students have the autonomy to take creative risks in their writing, and then present those risks to writing center tutors, they are able to engage in conversations about rhetorical situations and when it is appropriate to creatively structure one’s own work.

**Creativity.** Creativity’s presence in the writing center is illustrated in Elizabeth Boquet and Michelle Eodice’s essay “Creativity in the Writing Center: A Terrifying Conundrum.” To help their audience understand how their definition of creativity (one pulled from author and creativity theorist, Mihaly Csikszentmihaly) fits with writing center work, Boquet and Eodice use their essay to explore both writing centers and Csikszentmihaly’s perceptions of creativity. When justifying their use of Csikszentmihaly’s definition, they write, “Two things attract us to Csikszentmihaly’s view of creativity: first, his assertion of the centrality of creativity; next, his systems approach to creativity” (Boquet and Eodice 6). They note that it’s important for writing centers in particular that Csikszentmihaly recognizes that creativity is not “an add-on, not something folks do only when time and whether permit […] not something they do alone” (6).

Boquet and Eodice then introduce Csikszentmihaly’s definition of creativity, which is the definition that will also be used for the purposes of this study. In his book, *Creativity*, Csikszentmihaly explores creativity as a “result from the interaction of a system composed of three elements: a culture that contains symbolic rules, a person who brings novelty into
the symbolic domain, and a field of experts who recognize and validate the innovation” (Csikszentmihaly 6). Using these three elements, Csikszentmihaly then defines creativity as “a process by which a symbolic domain in the culture is changed” (8). This definition largely does away with preconceived notions that creativity is something that a person either has or doesn’t have and instead shows that creativity is something that a person can learn or at least has potential to in the right context.

Not only does Csikszentmihaly’s definition support the work of writing centers because it encourages collaboration (here referring to Csikszentmihaly’s “domains” (6)), but also because Csikszentmihaly’s work “straddles the border between scholarly and non-scholarly” (Boquet and Eodice 6). This dichotomy is something Boquet and Eodice argue that writing center workers can sympathize with and, after reviewing Csikszentmihaly’s definition of creativity, Boquet and Eodice then move on to discuss his “tripartite explanation” (6), which is described as follows:

1. A culture that contains symbolic rules
2. A person who brings novelty into the symbolic domain
3. A field of experts who recognize and validate the innovation

This “tripartite” is something that Boquet and Eodice argue can easily be applied to writing centers. They go on to state that writing centers have symbolic rules “that grow out of a presumed shared philosophy or way of understanding of the work” (6); they provide an example for this by recalling that writers often hold their own writing utensils during sessions to “signal textual ownership” (6). Boquet and Eodice also note that they often see people who bring novelty into the writing center’s symbolic domain “every time a writer
walks in the door or a new tutor is welcomed into the fold…” (7). Lastly, the authors write that the field of experts that Csikszentmihaly refers to are present in writing centers as “the tutors and writers themselves” (7). Though Boquet and Eodice are referring to writing centers at the collegiate level as opposed to those in high schools, the points they are making are still applicable. Despite the discrepancies between college and high school writing centers, the spaces themselves function under largely the same premises, which is helping writers. Because of this, the claims that Boquet and Eodice are making in terms of domains and creativity ring true even in the high school writing center setting.

Boquet and Eodice then use Kevin Barrett’s article “Creativity and Improvisation in Jazz and Organizations: Implications for Organizational Learning” to discuss how they have seen the presence of creativity in their own writing centers; they do this by analyzing their writing centers from the perspective of the seven principles of Jazz music that are listed in Barrett’s article. These seven principles are:

1. Provocative competence: deliberate efforts to interrupt habit patterns
2. Embracing errors as a source of learning
3. Shared orientation toward minimal structures that allow maximum flexibility
4. Distributed task: continual negotiation and dialogue toward dynamic synchronization
5. Reliance on retrospective sense-making
6. “Hanging out”: Membership in a community of practice
7. Taking turns soloing and supporting (8).
When analyzing the creativity present in their own writing centers through the lens of Barrett’s first principle, Boquet and Eodice note that the deliberate interruption of habits is important because – while habits themselves are not inherently bad – they often cause us to fall into a “competency trap” (8). In his article, Barrett notes that competency traps are a result of actions becoming “automatic and not even accessible to ordinary recollection and analysis […] long after [we] have ceased to be able to provide an account of their purposes” (Barrett 608). They then go on to provide an example of deliberately interrupting habits and therefore avoiding competency trap from Ann Ellen Geller (former writing center director at Clark University). After one of her peer tutors admitted that she had likely “stepped over the line [in terms of the help she offered]” (9), Geller asked the peer tutors in her writing center to all deliberately step over the line in an upcoming session with the intent of reflecting on it in the following week’s meeting. By asking her tutors to deliberately disrupt their own habit patterns, Geller was ensuring that competency trap was avoided in her writing center; this allowed the tutors to “imagine alternative possibilities heretofore unthinkable” (Barrett 610).

Boquet and Eodice use the rest of their article to explore creativity in writing centers through the lens of Barrett’s other principles. While doing so, they note several important instances of creativity in their own spaces. For instance, when exploring Barrett’s second principle, Boquet and Eodice note that embracing error is essential in the creative process because “error is a condition of creativity” (10) as well as a “very important source of learning” (Barrett 610). In addition, they note that Barrett’s fourth principle (distributed task: continual negotiation and dialogue toward dynamic synchronization) is important “it
suggests collaborative ‘flow’ [Csikszentmihaly] in order to achieve some dynamic element of working together, a performance which each instrument in our combo pushes its player and each player pushes her instrument to do more than expected and never in quite the same way twice” (13).

Boquet and Eodice conclude their essay by noting that creativity in writing centers is both a “work in progress and work in process” (18). They encourage their audience to remember that creativity is not something that we either have or do not have, rather, it instead is something for which we “strive collectively” (18).

While Boquet and Eodice’s article doesn’t specifically state that writing centers are the only places that can emulate Barrett’s principles of jazz music and produce creative innovation (nor do they say that this is the only way to do so), it does show us that writing centers provide an environment for creativity to thrive. Their article also demonstrates that if we are able to change our thinking of creativity away from an “us vs. them” mindset, we leave room for everyone to alter our symbolic domain.

Boquet and Eodice aren’t the only people to actively take note of or encourage creativity in their writing center spaces. Andrew Jeter, director of the world’s largest peer tutoring program located at Niles West High School in Skokie, Illinois, finds multiple ways to make creativity a priority in his Literacy Center. He does so by holding events in the Literacy Center such as t-shirt design contests, having an entire wall dedicated to student art, and bulletin boards devoted to his students’ success. In addition to all of that, Jeter’s Literacy Center regularly holds spontaneous speed-story writing, six-word memoir events, and equation solving competitions (Jeter 47). Participants and winners of these events come
away with varying prizes, but the most notable and sought after is the infamous five-pound gummy bear.

While Jeter isn’t explicitly connecting the work of his Literacy Center to creativity theory, he and his tutors are ultimately changing their symbolic domain. By having spontaneous events (or rather, events that students participate in simply because they’re in the center at the right time), Jeter and his literacy center tutors are likely altering perceptions of creativity. They’re essentially advertising that creativity can happen at any time and in any place; and apparently in Niles West High school, the time is now and the place is the literacy center. In addition, Jeter and the literacy center are further altering their symbolic domain by offering incentive prizes (i.e. the five-pound gummy bear) that bring new writers/learners into the space, which creates new writing that has the potential to alter the domain.

Writing Centers in Secondary School Settings

Although the first writing centers appeared in university settings, it wasn’t until the 1970s that they moved into high school environments. Writing centers first made an appearance in high schools around the United States during the late 1970s (Farrell 13). Up until that point, writing centers were largely seen only in the post-secondary education realm. When conducting a survey on high school writing center activity in the United States, William A. Speiser found that the first, recorded high school writing center began in 1976. Despite being an often times “marginalized” space, high school writing centers

9Jennifer Fells and Dawn Wells describe “marginalized” as spaces “placed on corrective action, high schools that are underfunded, and high schools that serve diverse or
are seeing growing success in schools across the nation (Fels and Wells 1). In 1981 during a transcribed conversation with Pamela B. Farrell, Speiser reported that there were over 100 active high school writing centers in the nation (Farrell 13). According to the International Writing Center Association’s website, there are currently over 150 documented high school writing centers in the United States and likely more that are in existence though not documented (Baran).

Throughout their existence, high school writing centers have served a multitude of purposes. They have been used to bolster Writing Across the Curriculum\(^{10}\) efforts. In Pamela B. Farrell’s book, *The High School Writing Center: Establishing One and Maintaining One*, Farrell and William A. Speiser discuss the history of high school writing centers and Farrell notes the historic expansion of the writing center into one with a cross-curricular focus (Speiser 14). Writing centers have fulfilled student volunteer hours or provided class credits to the tutors who work there, as demonstrated in Richard Kent’s book *Creating Student-Staffed Writing Centers: Grades 6-12*. Most importantly, however, they have largely benefitted both the tutors who staff them and the students who come to them seeking help, as Kent demonstrates when he notes that a writing center’s presence in marginalized student populations.” However, when I think of the term being applied to educational settings, I often think of spaces that are underfunded, underappreciated, or underutilized.

\(^{10}\)The Purdue Online Writing Lab defines Writing Across the Curriculum as “a pedagogical movement that began in the 1980s that share[s] the philosophy that writing instruction should happen across the academic community and throughout a student’s undergraduate education.” They also note that Writing Across the Curriculum programs “also value writing as a method of learning” and that they “[acknowledge] the differences in writing conventions across the disciplines, and [believe] that students can best learn to write in their areas by practicing those discipline-specific writing conventions” (Wells).
his own school created new awareness and more conversations about writing (Kent 10). Cynthia Dean, author of *The Ecology of Peer Tutoring* illustrates how writing centers benefit high school students when she explores the role of tutorial identity in high school students. The benefit of high school writing centers is further illustrated in the work of Andrew Jeter, director of the nation’s largest literacy center, in his essay “Building a Peer Tutoring Program.” In the essay, Jeter refers to the way that his school’s literacy center plays an “invaluable role” in his school community (Jeter 40). One of the ways that writing centers benefit both tutors and tutees is by providing students with a space to work in collaboration with their “more capable peers,” an experience that is closely tied to sociocultural theory (Vygotsky 88).

Sociocultural theory emphasizes the idea that individual development is largely rooted in the social. When reflecting on the social nature of sociocultural theory, Joan Wink and LeAnn Putney, authors of *A Vision of Vygotsky*, write that “Vygotsky charged us to think of learning as a process that we carry out first as an intermental [their emphasis] plane – in relation and cooperation with others” (61). They go on to say that “[t]he individualization of our thinking happens as a result of our intermental processing of information. Learning becomes and intermental processing as we begin to internalize what

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11When discussing “more capable peers,” in their book, *A Vision of Vygotsky*, Joan Wink and LeAnn Putney write that Vygotsky “recognized that children were able to solve problems beyond their actual development level if they were given guidance in the form of prompts or leading questions from someone more advanced. This person, the more capable peer, could be another student, a parent, and/or a teacher” (86). The more capable peer is closely tied to ZPDs (zones of proximal development) which Wink and Putney define as “the distance between the actual developmental level, as determined by independent problem solving, and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (153). In short, because these more capable peers have zones of proximal development that are further matured than those coming to the writing center seeking help, the more capable peers are able to help writers develop by teaching and modeling how to perform writing in various ways. This teaching can take a variety of ways. Sometimes peer tutors teach students seeking help by talking to them about the writing choices that are in a piece of writing. Sometimes tutors take a more directive approach and simply tell their help-seeking peers where a mistake has been made. Sometimes tutors will model how to do something the first time and encourage their peer to do it after. How the teaching happens is less important than the fact that more capable peers provide the guidance that students need to develop as writers.
we have learned throughout interactions with others” (61). Because writing centers are relational spaces that utilize sociocultural theory, they are inherently rooted in the social. Because writing centers are inherently rooted in the social, they work in direct opposition to current education trends, which ultimately value the work of the individual above all else.

In her book, *Repurposing Composition: Feminist Interventions for a Neoliberal Age*, Shari Stenberg discusses the current trend in educational practices, a trend that Stenberg believes is less than ideal. She argues that western education systems often remove students from social settings and instead place value on work that is created by the individual (the student) as well as reviewed and evaluated by the individual (the teacher).

**The Neoliberal Agenda**

This individualistic educational trend, according to Stenberg, is a result of the neoliberal educational agenda. Stenberg defines neoliberalism in her book as:

"A set of economic principles and cultural politics that positions the free market as a guide for all human action, substituting for, as Paul Treanor argues, ‘all previously existing ethical beliefs.' ‘Liberal’ here references economic, not political, ideology; it seeks to remove all barriers to the free market, upholding an ideal in which entrepreneurs and private enterprise—not the state or federal government—control the economy. Neoliberalism, then, also prizes individualism and individual responsibility. Individuals are regarded as rational economic actors who are expected to make choices that will maximize their human capital. (5)"

In short, neoliberal education aims to commodify learning into something quantifiable and measureable. Because of this commodified view of education, subjects that are more easily quantified (like math and science) are valued more highly than those that are less
easy to quantify (like writing and English). In order to adequately evaluate student knowledge in these courses, students are given standardized tests; these high-stakes tests lead to anxious, deceptive, and frustrated students who are unwilling to think creatively or take risks because creativity and risk-taking aren’t valued in the current educational system (Pope 6). Stenberg argues that “neoliberal logic carves education into a narrow path, with a singular purpose: to prepare the future workforce and bolster the economy” (Stenberg viii). She convincingly suggests that this view of education is far less than ideal as it does away with necessary creative and social learning processes and replaces them with cookie-cutter, individualistic ones. As a result, educational environments that encourage collaboration (a social process) aren’t valued. Because social processes such as collaboration aren’t valued in neoliberal educational settings, students often don’t have a space to take the kind of risks that ultimately foster creative agency. One of the reasons that the Belleview Writing Center is able to work against the neoliberal agenda is because it provides students with a grade-free space to talk about the creative choices they have made in their writing without the fear of repercussions. When students take risks in these spaces and have a peer to discuss the risks with, they have the opportunity to internalize when it is appropriate to take creative agency with their own writing.

When referring to risk taking in primary educational settings, teachers Michael Thornton and Cheryl Harris write that risk is how students “learn, create, and even adapt” (Thornton and Harris). Their blogpost explores the ways that educators allow risk into learning environments and reflects on why risk is so crucial in the role of learning. They write that all students deserve the chance to “[rise] to challenges and [take] risks in an
environment where they know those risks are valued and celebrated, and where they know they have a community of support” (Thornton and Harris).

Teacher and writer Leticia Guzman Ingram shares these opinions in her blogpost titled “A Classroom Full of Risk Takers.” In the blogpost, Ingram explores effective ways to encourage risk taking in educational settings. She notes that students are often hesitant to take risks in educational environments because “taking risks can be at best unrewarded, and at worst ridiculed and unnecessarily penalized” (Ingram). However, she also notes that it is important to create educational environments that celebrate perseverance, allow students a place to share their mistakes, and allow redo’s, among other characteristics. Lastly, she writes that these characteristics remind educators that they must “be deliberate about creating environments that maximize learning for all students” and to encourage educational environments where risks are “encouraged and celebrated” (Ingram).

The very characteristics that Thornton, Harris, and Ingram are calling for here – a community of support for risk takers, a place to share mistakes, the allowance of redo’s – are all characteristics that are present in writing center spaces. Because writing centers often function as a temporary stop between when writing is assigned and when it is assessed, students are provided with a platform to share their risks without the fear of being “ridiculed or unnecessarily penalized” as stated by Ingram. In addition, because writing centers are staffed by students, the peer-to-peer relationships that are present in the space give writers a community of support where they can share their writing and risks with other students who have likely made similar moves.
These notions of risk taking move in direct opposition to the neoliberal educational practices that Stenberg is referring to. Instead of placing value on work that is produced for the sole purpose of evaluating student performance, Thornton, Harris, and Ingram are calling for educational platforms that encourage students to take risks, think outside of the box, and even potentially fail.

Conclusion

This chapter defines the key terms needed to understand and engage with the rest of the research presented in this work. The definition of development used in this research largely aligns with the work of theorists such as Nordlof, Wink, and Putney, all of whom understand student development as happening during collaborative work.

In addition, this chapter utilizes the work of Hodson, Boquet, and Dean to understand both the definition for and the role of risk taking in the writing center space. This is followed by a discussion of Csikszentmihaly’s definition of creativity as applied to writing centers by Boquet and Eodice. Coupled with an exploration of collaboration, the discussion of these terms, the literature surrounding them, and their application to writing center work help readers understand the study conducted and findings of the research in following chapters.

In the chapters to follow, I will explore these characteristics in greater depth using observations, survey and interview responses, and writing center events to emphasize the development that happens in writing center spaces. In later chapters I will also explore both student and director perceptions of the presence of creativity, risk taking, collaboration, and development in their own writing center space.
In the next chapter, I will introduce both the methodological framework for this study and the Belleview Writing Center. My methodological framework will be largely rooted in Ruth Ray’s study of teacher research, and, because of this, my exploration of Bellevue’s Writing Center will be one that consists mostly of observation.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODS AND INTRODUCTION TO THE BELLEVIEW HIGH SCHOOL WRITING CENTER

My primary research question, which is examined through a mixed-methods analysis, asks how high school writing centers foster the development of risk taking that ultimately leads to creative agency creativity in high school writers. In this chapter, I begin with a description of my methodological framework, particularly teacher research, and then situate myself as the primary researcher of this study. After a discussion of the methodological framework, I move to address specific methods of data collection and discuss my choice of selection for Belleview’s Writing Center before concluding the chapter.

Framework

When I was in the early stages of navigating this research process, I became attuned to the similarities of Dean’s (2014) work and my own: We both explore high school writing centers and the effect they have on the students who inhabit them. Because of these similarities in our research and the studies we conducted, I chose to let Dean’s reasoning for using both teacher research and ethnography guide me in my work. Like Dean, in this study I use a mixed-methods data collection approach that explores my findings through the use of interviews, survey responses, and observations. For these reasons, I have chosen
to align my research framework closely with Dean and explore the Belleview High School Writing Center through the lens of both teacher research and ethnography.

While conducting this research, I especially connected with Dean’s idea that teacher research allowed her to report on the “challenges and tensions associated with acquiring a tutorial identity” (33). Despite the fact that I wasn’t specifically exploring tutorial identity, I agree that teacher research allows the researcher the freedom to explore research that isn’t considered quantifiable. I also connected with the way that Dean links teacher research to ethnography in her work. She writes that in ethnographic studies, “the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis” (33), and then connects these two methods of research together by noting that because the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis in ethnographic studies, they must be able to manage biases that could potentially impact the study.

Lastly, like Dean, I partially grounded my understanding of teacher research in the work of Henry (1999) who acknowledges that “disengaged observation and analysis in ethnography is impossible” but also that “valid and reliable scholarship can result from studies in which a researcher shares a close connection with informants” (33).

Teacher Research. The purpose of this study is to explore the writing development of students that is nurtured in writing center spaces, which is best done through the methods of teacher research. I agree with Ray’s (1993) understanding when she notes that teacher research is a way to explore connections and interrelationships because it’s grounded in the notion that theory doesn’t come from any one specific place. Instead, it comes from many varied places (like classrooms) and people (like teachers and students). Because my work
is largely rooted in classrooms (or rather, an educational environment that functions within a classroom) and the relationships between people in those spaces, I consider myself a “teacher-researcher […] who is looking for the bigger picture, searching for connections between this form of inquiry and others…” (xii).

Ray’s work further spoke to me as a researcher because she acknowledges that in order for a teacher to develop the role of teacher researcher, they must allow themselves to work within situations that are intellectually uncertain. She writes that they must also develop an attitude that causes them to be critical of oneself, yet still be open to attempting new ideas and trying new practices. This development from teacher to teacher researcher is essential, according to Ray, because through teacher research one develops confidence in the judgments that they’re making; this newfound confidence helps to improve classrooms on both a local and global scale and the field of teacher research in general (Ray 51).

I find Ray’s argument that teachers develop confidence in their own judgement central to my current researcher first because I have often felt the intellectual uncertainty that she writes about. I often find myself hesitant and uncertain about the work I am doing with fear that I won’t draw the conclusions that I anticipate, or, worse still, that I will come to no conclusion at all. Additionally, the research journey that I am currently embarking on is grounded in an openness to new ideas and practices, which originally stemmed from a dissatisfaction with my own teaching methods.

While working on this project, I found that the intellectual uncertainty that Ray writes about means that even I, as the researcher, have to take risks in the writing center
space. During my time at Belleview, I was an observer and intern in their Writing Center. As a researcher, I was drawn to and deeply invested in the risk taking and creativity that manifested in the writing center; as a past, current, and future educator, I also found myself invested in the essentialness of the physical space itself. Not only was I making conclusions and assumptions about this space during my time there, I was fighting for its validity as well. Fighting for the validity of the writing center included writing a proposal for the center’s director to receive funding for his work; this in itself seemed like a very risky endeavor since we structured the proposal as an ultimatum due to unsuccessful funding attempts in the past. Not only were we risking losing Anthony as the center’s director, we were risking losing the writing center as a whole, as well.

As a teacher-researcher in Belleview’s Writing Center space, I initially intended to make note of the role that creativity and risk taking play for high school students in the writing center; however, I did not anticipate that the space would also encourage me to take risks as well. Ultimately, this research has heled me understand the inner workings of these spaces and the logistics of running a successful high school writing center; however, time with the writing center’s director in multiple educational settings has also showed me that what I found in Belleview’s Writing Center is possible in other learning environments (and for multiple ages of learners) as well.

I am further invested in Ray’s notions of teacher research as a past and future teacher because my new role as researcher requires that I develop a sense of confidence in my own judgement – that I push aside the previously mentioned fears and uncertainties and find assurance in the research questions I am asking. Above all, I continue to work
towards a study that will potentially contribute new knowledge not only to my own future classrooms (and writing center spaces), but to other learning environments that have the potential to foster creativity and risk taking as well.

Throughout this process, I used Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1990)’s definition of teacher research, which they define as a “systematic and intentional inquiry carried out by teachers” (2). Additionally, I supplemented this definition of teacher research with Ray’s understanding that “[f]rom the beginning, teacher research has been defined against [emphasis hers] traditional means of producing knowledge” (Ray 51). With Ray’s guidance, I have noted the distinction between teacher research and scientific research. She claims that teacher research is done in education (as opposed to on) by people who are active participants in the learning environment, as opposed to those who simply view the environment from the outside. I further connect with Ray’s claim that teacher research was originally a form of political and intellectual activism against traditional forms of research that were often put in place by those outside of the educational environments being studied. This political and intellectual activism ultimately led to a collective and central goal for teacher research: to improve teaching and learning (Christianakis 100).

With the intent to further explore this common goal, I spent time reviewing more work from Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999). They acknowledge this common goal as one of the impetuses for teacher research. In addition to this impetus, they note that the other reasons for past influxes in teacher research are a paradigm shift that provided an alternate view of the teacher; teacher’s involvement in research as a component of social change; and a group of educators who began to understand the possibilities of teacher researcher
and placed those possibilities in opposition to more traditional, historical university-based research.

While reviewing Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s work, I found that my own research aligned closely with five trends that they argue resulted in a change in the teacher research movement around the 1980s. The trends that they provide are (1) the prominence of teacher research in teacher education, professional development and school reform; (2) the development of conceptual frameworks for teacher research; (3) theorizing research as a social inquiry; (4) theorizing teacher research as ways of knowing in communities; and (5) theorizing teacher research as practical inquiry.

These five trends are important because they move the field of research away from the first, less ideal of the two paradigms that Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1990) discuss. They note that historically there has been two paradigms that have largely governed teacher research in the last twenty years. The first (and the one that the five trends move away from), which is often referred to as process-product research, focuses on teaching that is deemed effective by correlating teaching behaviors with specific products, like standardized tests, for instance. The problem with this type of research, Cochran-Smith and Lytle note, is that it “emphasizes the actions of teachers rather than their professional judgments and attempts to capture the activity of teaching by identifying sets of discrete behaviors reproducible from one teacher and one classroom to the next” (2). As an educator who has experience teaching in multiple educational settings, I feel that this method does not do justice to the nuanced differences that are present in various learning environments.
For that reason, the teacher research conducted in this study will align more closely with Cochran-Smith’s and Lytle’s second paradigm (and by doing so, with the previously mentioned five trends) which is a “diverse group of qualitative or interpretive studies” of classroom environments and relationships. This group of qualitative or interpretive studies draws from multiple fields and acknowledges that teaching is complex, interactive and environment specific. In addition, Cochran and Lytle’s second paradigm further acknowledges that these nuances all help us understand the disparities among classrooms, schools, and communities – all of which are pivotal. Similar to the second paradigm, this study’s research will provide “detailed, descriptive accounts of customary school and classroom events that shed light on their meanings or the participants involved” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 3). According to Ray, this type of research – specifically that which exists in K-12 schools – is particularly essential because it “brings about fundamental change through individual acts” (50).

Ethnography. While this study is largely rooted in teacher research, my role as the researcher in this study is also grounded in that of ethnography, specifically, what Jeffrey and Troman (2004) call a “recurrent time mode of ethnography” (542). According to Jeffery and Troman, this mode of ethnography is one “where temporal phases formalize the research methodology” (542). Meaning, these types of ethnographical studies “aim to gain a picture by sampling the same temporal phases, e.g. beginnings and ends of terms, school celebratory periods such as Christmas, examination periods, inspections” (542).

As a teacher researcher and ethnographer, I found myself especially identifying with a recurrent time mode of ethnography because in this particular type of research, the
researcher studies the site through the lens of recurring visits. Like Jeffery and Troman note, my recurring visits to Belleview’s Writing Center helped me determine the similarities and differences of particular events or processes over time. In addition to mapping these similarities and differences, like Jeffery and Troman, I made note of the way that the recurring visits and conversations happening during the ethnographical recurrent time mode were grounded in the past, present, and future.

This focus on multiple periods of time is best represented in this study by questions from the survey that Belleview’s Writing Center tutors were asked to take. For instance, the first question asks students to reflect on their own writing during their time as a tutor: In what ways have you seen your own writing develop during your time in the writing center? (These can be specific examples if you have them, or broad ones if you don’t.)

This question asks students to compare their past ability as writers to their current ability. Another question asks tutors to recall specific examples from past experiences that demonstrate their own writing development: Can you think of any specific examples of development in your own writing that has occurred since your time visiting/working in the writing center? Both of these questions are representative of Jeffrey and Troman’s ethnographical recurrent time mode.

During this process, I have found numerous similarities between Dean’s previously mentioned understanding of ethnography and my own. My time spent in Belleview’s Writing Center meant that I shared a “close connection with the informants” (33); in

\[12\] This question comes from a larger survey that Belleview High School tutors were asked to participate in. These questions (and others) and tutors’ responses to them will be explored in later chapters. The entire survey can be found in the appendices.
addition, while this research was being conducted, I was also participating in an internship at Bellevue’s Writing Center. During that time, I worked on travel grants so that the tutors could attend conferences; I assigned readings and led mock tutoring sessions so that tutors had a better understanding of the tutorial moves they were making; I scheduled events, structured training activities, and planned new tutor orientations. I was very much enculturated into the center and to say that my status was that of an “outsider” (33) would be misleading. However, like Dean, I agree that – despite this close relationship to the informants of this research – valid and reliable scholarship has come from this experience.

Design of Study

The findings in this IRB-approved study expand upon the local knowledge of the writing center field. In her book, Ray defines “local knowledge” as “knowledge for the community of teachers within one’s department, school, community, district, or state” (Ray 97). I collected a large portion of the research through observations while researching and interning within the Belleview High School Writing Center. These observations helped me understand the candid way that creativity and risk taking present themselves in individual tutoring sessions. Additionally, through observation I made note of the way that tutors were encouraging their peers to take risks, even if the tutors were unable to identify their actions as such.

In addition to observation, I also administered surveys to tutors, conducted interviews\textsuperscript{13} with tutors and the writing center’s director, and organized events specifically

\textsuperscript{13}Both the surveys and the interview questions are included in the appendices at the end of this document.
catered to showcasing creativity and risk taking, including a Writing Out Loud event held in a local coffee shop. I selected participants for the interview based on convenience (who could participate in interviews on specific days) and observations that I made during sessions. Throughout the course of my internship, I made note of conversations between tutors and tutees where I observed instances of encouraged creativity, risk taking, and reflection of their own development. The interview was designed to push tutors to think critically about the day-to-day choices that they make as tutors and how those decisions might inhibit and encourage creativity and risk taking in their Writing Center.

Site Selection. I originally selected the Writing Center at Belleview High as the site for this research because of proximity. Belleview High School’s Writing Center director, Anthony, has worked closely with the Writing Center director at MSU in the past, and so I was able to use that connection to gain me entrance into Belleview’s Writing Center first as an observer and later as a researcher and intern.

As my time at Belleview progressed, my interest in the Belleview Writing Center

14 Our Writing Out Loud event (a name that we borrowed from Caitie Leibman’s article “Speaking Truth to Power: Write Out Loud Events as Brave/r Space”) was held off location from the Belleview Writing Center at a small, local coffee shop. Anticipating that the event would have more participants if it was held after school and extracurricular activities were over, we opted to hold the event at 6:00 in the evening. Participants were asked to RSVP ahead of time and to bring a piece of work of their choice to read out loud. Because this event put very few parameters on the writing requirements (such as time limitations and school appropriate content), and because there were participants reading writing on a multitude of subjects, the creative domain of the Writing Center was inherently changed, simply for expanding the domain beyond the traditional academic writing that typically comes through the center. In addition, the event was an inherently risky one because it asked participants to share their work with people that they didn’t know. And, because the audience members weren’t assessing or grading the work that was presented, participants were free to autonomously structure their own writing.
as the site for this research became rooted in what the space was accomplishing despite a lack of administrative support. There is another high school writing center located in Bakersfield High School, but the goal of the center and the way that it functions does not align with the work that I aim to do. The Writing Center in Belleview was eager to have me as part of their space, and the tutoring strategies that are used there supported the research that I was doing.

The Belleview High School Writing Center. Belleview is located 12 miles west of the much larger, much less industrial, Bakersfield, Montana. As of the 2016 census, there were an estimated 8,254 people living in the city. Of those 8,254 people, 2.7% were labeled “foreign born persons”; 4.9% of people over the age of five marked that English was not the language of choice at home. In terms of education, 93.6% of the Belleview population twenty-five years and older reported that they had at least obtained a high school diploma; in addition to that, 29.5% of people twenty-five years or older said that they had obtained at least a bachelor’s degree.

The 2016 census also reported that 75.4% of Belleview’s population that is 16 years or older is in the civilian labor force. While this statistic is misleading in the sense that it

15 Bakersfield High School’s Writing Center is located in a computer lab near the school’s library. There are several students who volunteer at the Center (between 4 and 6), who have very little training prior to becoming writing tutors. When a student needs help with writing, they approach the Writing Center’s Director who then gets in contact with one of her tutors. Her tutors then work with the tutees at a time that is convenient for both of them, and usually outside of the Writing Center Space. In addition, the Director works diligently to produce a writing manual for the high school, which takes up the bulk of the Writing Center staff’s time. This is not to say that one model of Writing Center is better or worse than its counterpart; however, when I began my research, I did not anticipate that I would encounter the types of tutoring strategies needed to pursue this study.
includes a wide range of people, it does show that there are students in Belleview who attend high school while also working during the week. The average household income in Belleview is roughly $54,000. That being said, the census also shows that 9.4% of Belleview’s population lives in poverty (QuickFacts: Belgrade City, Montana).

As the 2016 census report notes, Belleview is a varied city: the families that do well do very well; and, in turn, the families that struggle really struggle. The high school in Belleview is equally varied. There is a mix of students who come from a multitude of backgrounds with a plethora of interests. But mostly, Belleview High caters to a large number of students who plan to work in the trade industry. This is something that the school’s administration both acknowledges and embraces, made obvious by the school board’s approval for a school expansion that includes more space for classes like shop.

Whether it’s because a large portion of the student body is dedicated to trade professions or that the school lacks necessary funding for additional pivotal resources, the Belleview High School Writing Center seems to be one of the “marginalized” spaces that Dawn Fels and Jennifer Wells refer to in the introduction to their book The Successful High School Writing Center (1). This marginalization, according to Fels and Wells, is especially prominent in high schools “placed on corrective action, high schools that are underfunded, and high schools that serve diverse or marginalized student populations” (1). While Belleview High School itself isn’t necessarily an “underfunded” school (as demonstrated by the new addition), the writing center itself is a drastically underfunded resource.

In addition to being a marginalized space, Belleview’s Writing Center also seems to be teetering on the cusp of either making its own place in the school and finding success
or becoming obsolete and shutting down. This tension is best demonstrated by its location; for years the Writing Center has been transient, as it exists within the classroom of the center’s director, Anthony Yarnell, and is relocated every time he is reassigned to a new classroom. This relocation often causes confusion for returning tutees when the school year starts fresh and the writing center is in a new, and sometimes unfamiliar, location.

It is this transient location – above all else – that shows that Belleview’s Writing Center is first and foremost what Elizabeth Boquet would call a “temporality” or “an interaction between people over time, in which the nature of the interaction is determined not by the site, but by the method” (Boquet 464). This temporal identity does not seem to be one that the writing center has taken on intentionally; rather, without the privilege of a permanent residence, the writing center has had no choice but to find identity in the methods they use.

Recently, Anthony and the administration have moved toward a permanent space. The school’s addition (the one mostly catered to trade-based education) also includes a new home for the counseling center and after the counseling center has vacated its current space, the writing center will move in. This space is much more appropriate for a writing center, mostly because it is most definitely not a classroom. However, until 2020 (the date when the addition is set to be complete) the writing center will remain as it is now: transiently located within whatever classroom temporarily belongs to Anthony.

Anthony does his best to make his writing center less like a classroom. Stuck fast to the wall above the Smart Board is part of the hood and the entire bumper from an old car. Student art and old license plates cover the majority of the walls; there are old movie
posters, cardboard cutouts of famous literary characters, and shelves and shelves full of books and more student art. Most recently, a wall has been devoted entirely to the writing center. This wall has newly written tutor biographies with accompanying pictures and a calendar devoted entirely to writing center events. Music plays continuously during the writing center/lunch hour and students (whether they’re there for a writing appointment or simply to eat lunch) constantly enter and leave the room during that time. There is very much a sense of the “hanging out” mentality that Kevin Barrett, Elizabeth Boquet, and Michelle Eodice write about (Barrett 616; Boquet and Eodice 14).

However, despite all of these wonderful installments the room is still much more of a classroom than it is a writing center. First and foremost, there is the bell that rings periodically to signal the beginning and end of periods. This is a normal addition for any high school writing center space due to the fact that they’re located in schools – places that revolve around the chiming of bells. But more than that, the physical existence of Belleview’s Writing Center is regulated by the ringing of the bell, appearing and vanishing over the course of fifty-five minutes. They “open” when the first lunch bells rings at 11:55 and they “close” when the last lunch bell rings at 12:50; it’s not so much that the bell rings (as it does within any high school setting), but rather that the center still feels very much like a classroom because it must abide by the regimental schedule set forth by the ringing of the bell.

Second, Belleview’s Writing Center noticeably lacks many of the attributes that make writing centers uniquely their own. There are no comfortable couches to socialize or do homework upon. In fact, despite Anthony’s best efforts, the desks that he has arranged
in large circles to form “tables” are still very obviously desks. The center doesn’t have individual spaces for separate tutoring sessions, so all appointments happen in close proximity to each other mixed in with people who are using the center to “hang out.” There is no coffee or tea available. There’s no front desk, staffed by someone to welcome you to the center; there isn’t even a current system for appointments and the center works strictly with walk-in clients. This particular feature isn’t unmanageable during the beginning and middle parts of the semester when work at the writing center is slower, but during finals week tutees occasionally get sent away due to an overabundance of walk-in appointments.

During my time as an intern in the center, Anthony and I have discussed the importance of having a clearly defined mission statement once the center moves into its new space. In his essay “Building a Peer Tutoring Program,” Andrew Jeter discusses the importance of establishing a mission statement in order to “guide work, communicate [the center’s] purpose to the school community, and, at the same time, protect its peer tutors” (Jeter 41). A clearly established mission statement is important, according to Jeter, because it protects the center from being used as a space that takes on many roles (i.e. a place for students to be while in ISS, or a place for students to serve detention). While discussing this idea with Anthony, he admitted that he was somewhat anxious that this displacement could happen in the future writing center space if a clear mission statement was not put forth.

Potentially the most noticeable quality that makes the space seem unwriting centerish is the fact that there is a limited amount of time – by both tutors and Anthony – that can be devoted to the space. There is a relatively small number of tutors and therefore, working
(rather, volunteering) during the lunch hour works best for them because they are all in class during every regular period. However, for Anthony the issue is more complex.

Anthony currently isn’t paid or compensated for the hours that he directs the writing center. In fact, he does all of the administrative work (i.e. “hiring” tutors, filling out travel grants for conferences, managing the writing center’s website, overseeing the center during working hours, and he sometimes even tutors when they are short on staff) by himself for no compensation. This, according to Anthony, is the largest issue that the center currently faces. The administration seems unwilling to make the writing center director position a paid one or even give a reduced course load for the work that is being done; yet, Anthony doesn’t have more time to put into the writing center because he’s teaching full time but is also unwilling to do so because of the lack of support from his administration.

Anthony and I have sat down several times during the last year and discussed what options are available to the center as it currently stands; we both agree that the writing center is on the cusp of either success or failure, and we also agree that substantial changes need to happen for the space to survive the school’s transition from Class A to Class AA in 2020. Currently, Anthony is working on proposals for a webpage on the school’s main website and money for an online scheduling software. He has asked the administration for both in the past but has been unsuccessful due to “timing” issues. Anthony notes that the most positive change in the writing center’s future would be support and acknowledgement of the space’s value from the administration; I agree.

Despite these less-than-ideal circumstances and despite being a “marginalized” space, the Belleview Writing Center is still a place of creative agency and autonomy.
Student writers frequent the Center during the lunch hour to seek the assistance of their peers. During these times, the writing center tutors have discussions with writers about anything from grammatical inconsistencies to risky and creative choices (even if they don’t refer to them in such specific terms).

Often during my observations, I hear tutors helping their peers by providing new knowledge that is based on the tutor’s own previous writing experiences. This ability to think through writing as a process, to reflect on past successes and failures with writing, to internalize concepts and knowledge through social interaction, shows me that development can and does happen in these spaces. In fact, I’ve witnessed instances of it on more than one occasion. I’ve heard of it in tutoring sessions when a student says that they “don’t think the teacher will like this part,” but that they “tried it anyway” and wanted to know what the tutor thinks; I’ve seen development when a tutor reinforces this agency in their peers’ writing; I’ve been actively part of it during mock tutor sessions where I’ve asked tutors to read through theoretically dense texts and they have internalized the knowledge together. This, to me, illustrates that high school writing centers are places that foster development; It also shows that development is possible, really, in any educational space that encourages this type of social interaction between peers.

Limitations of Study

This research expands upon a case study that I did as a final assessment for a course focusing on sociocultural theory. During the semester that I was observing in Bellevue’s Writing Center, there was a largely different group of tutors volunteering in the space as the case study research and this current research were conducted almost a year apart. That
being said, the requirements for writing center tutors are largely the same now as they were a year ago. The tutors are referred to Anthony Yarnell, the writing center’s director, by one of their teachers. After the recommendation is put forth, Anthony contacts the tutor candidate and encourages them to apply for the position. The application process includes a writing sample and a brief questionnaire which addresses the student’s year in school and why they want to become a peer tutor. If the tutor application is accepted, Anthony sends them a letter through the mail welcoming them to the space; the letter also includes some “homework” that needs to be done prior to the student’s first session.

The first limitation of this study is that the tutors who work in the writing center represent a very small number of the demographic population of Belleview High School. A demographic report of Belleview High School shows that 89.8% of the student population at Belleview identifies as Caucasian. Additionally, 6% of the school population identifies as Hispanic; students who identify as Asian represent .8%, while students who identify as either Black or two races represent .9% of the population respectively. Students who identify as American Indian make up 1.3% of the school population, and students who identify as Pacific Islander make up the last .2%.

In addition, the demographic report shows that the student body is predominately male (53%), while only 47% of the students are female. Belleview High School also has a relatively higher percentage of English Language Arts passing rates than other schools in Montana. The demographic report notes that the English Language Arts passing rate for Belleview High School is 57%. Of that percentage, 72% of females were marked as
achieving a higher proficiency than the additional 47% of their male counterparts (Belleview High School).

While Belleview High School doesn’t provide the diversity of a larger school, there are multiple populations that are represented by the student body. Despite this variance in the student population, the nine tutors who work in Belleview’s Writing Center are all female and mostly only represent the Caucasian population. This is a limitation to this study because a portion of the student population is not represented as tutors in the writing center and therefore lack some representation in the research being presented.

The second (and, I believe, largest) limitation of this study is that is does not attempt to understand how students use the tools that they gain in the writing center (i.e. a shift in their understanding of creativity and the ability to autonomously structure their own work) outside of the writing center space. This study simply aims to explore the educational platform of the writing center as a place that fosters writing development. I did not attempt to further that research by asking how these students applied this newfound knowledge because I did not feel that there was enough time during the course of this study. While it would likely be valuable to know how students’ knowledge of creativity and risk taking transfer to educational settings outside the writing center, first and foremost this work is devoted to exploring whether or not the writing center is a space that fosters that kind of activity.

**Conclusion**

This chapter discusses the methods used to collect data for this study. The role of teacher research and ethnography are pivotal for understanding my role in this research as
an educator, researcher, and intern in the Belleview Writing Center space. Not only is this understanding largely rooted in Dean’s exploration of high school writing tutors, identity, and authority, but also in Ray’s and Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s discussion of teacher research as well, all of which explore the researcher as an active participant (as opposed to objective other) in the educational setting that is being researched.

This chapter also explores both my decision to use Belleview’s Writing Center as a site for this research, as opposed to a closer, neighboring high school. I also use this space to explore the demographics of the city of Belleview and the high school and discusses how the lack of cultural and socioeconomic demographics of both places are potential limitations of this study.

In Chapter IV, I will provide a discussion of the results of this study. The chapter will provide student and Director perceptions of risk taking and risk taking and explore the Writing Center as a platform that encourages the development of high school writers.
CHAPTER FOUR

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

This project explores how high school writing centers foster the development of risk taking that ultimately leads to creative agency in high school writers. Through my observations, interviews, etc., I have concluded that, although the students may not explicitly make connections regarding risk taking and creativity in their own, they understand that the writing center is a place that helps them develop as writers. During my time at Belleview, I asked students about their perceptions of collaboration, creativity, and risk taking in order to better understand how – if at all – they were making connections between these characteristics and their own development as writers. Based on my own observations, responses to the surveys administered, and the interviews conducted, I believe that students do understand that collaboration, creativity, and risk taking have a significant role in their development as writers, even if they don’t know how to explicitly make those connections at times.

In this chapter, I will discuss the observations, interviews, writing center events, and surveys what ultimately led to the findings of this research. First, I use data from my observations, student interviews, and the director’s survey responses to establish the writing center as a collaborative space. I then show how the Belleview High School Writing Center functions as a creative space by applying several of Kevin Barrett’s seven principles

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16 All names used in this thesis have been changed to protect the identity of the participants.
of jazz music to the center and connecting these principles to the development of high school writers.

Following that, I use sections of interviews and survey responses to discuss student perceptions of the writing center as a creative space. After that, I discuss students’ perceptions of the writing center as a creative space. I then explore a scenario that establishes the writing center as a risky space before moving to discuss student perceptions of risk taking in the center; I demonstrate this through observations and student survey and interview responses.

After exploring student perceptions of the presence of creativity and risk taking in the writing center, I discuss director perceptions of both characteristics in the space. I use interview and survey responses to illustrate how both his and the students’ perceptions of creativity and risk taking are rooted in the development of high school writers.

Finally, I move to a discussion of perceptions (both student and director) of development of high school writers. First, I explore student responses to being asked about their own development as writers before examining Anthony’s perceptions of how his tutors have developed as writers during their time in the writing center. Lastly, I conclude with a summary of the findings of this chapter before moving to the final installment of this paper.

The Writing Center as a Collaborative Space

During my time in Belleview Writing Center, I came to understand it as a collaborative space that was influenced by what Stenberg (2015) terms “feminine values” (4). Stenberg notes that one of the ways educators can work in opposition to the neoliberal
agenda\textsuperscript{17} is by repurposing education as a “complex” and “relational” practice that involves “learning to respond well to others” (8). I witnessed this repurposing often in Belleview’s Writing Center as I saw tutors and writers work together in the relational space of the center and as I watched tutors navigate the most appropriate way to respond to their peers writing. In short, Belleview’s Writing Center, and educational environments similar to it, are repurposing education to involve more collaborative, relational learning opportunities for students therefore resisting the focus on individualism and production that is valued by neoliberalism.

I witnessed collaborative practice in Belleview’s Writing Center similar to that described by Bruffee his article “Peer Tutoring and the Conversation of Mankind.” Tutors agree to work in the center knowing that they will be expected to collaborate with their peers, and, in turn, the students who come to writing centers seeking help know that they will be expected to work with their peers in order to receive the help that they need. Because sociocultural theory shows us that “the true direction of the development of thinking is not from the individual to the social, but from the social to the individual,” we know that writing centers are places that have the potential to foster development (\textit{Thought and Language} 38).

\textsuperscript{17} Stenberg defines Neoliberalism as a set of economic principles that “prizes individualism and individual responsibility” (5). She also notes that Neoliberalism regards individuals as “rational economic actors who are expected to make choices that will maximize their human capital. To be rational, according to neoliberal logic, is to act in service of profit. There is no distinction between the economy and the society; what’s best for one is considered the best for the other” (5).
I also argue that the collaborative practices that are present in Belleview’s Writing Center are different than those that are present in other educational environments. In the writing center, students come to the center to work with their peers, and this is often done on their own volition. Together, the tutor and the student ultimately decide where the writing needs work. However, in the traditional classroom setting, despite the fact that students are working closely with their peers, collaborative work is often assigned to meet some sort of criteria. When collaborative work is assigned by a teacher, the nature of the interaction changes – there is an ulterior motive (like a grade or a fulfilled requirement), and there is an agenda in place. While this is sometimes also true for writing center work due to the fact that teachers occasionally require that their students seek help, it is not always the case. Because students are working in a collaborative setting that is not the same as the traditional classroom, the collaborative practices that happen in writing centers and the work that is produced there are different – not better or worse, simply different.

This style of peer collaboration also benefits the tutors who work in the writing center. Because of the nature of this study and my close work with the tutors at Belleview High for a year and a half, this research largely focuses on how high school writing center tutors understand collaboration in the writing center space. Tutors develop through peer collaboration by acting as experts, or rather, more capable peers for the writers who come into the center. Because the tutors have internalized specific knowledge and concepts regarding writing, they are able to help their peers understand unfamiliar concepts and internalize new knowledge that they can later apply to situations where they are writing on their own.
The Belleview High School Writing Center exemplifies the collaborative nature of writing centers that Bruffee, Bolquet, and Eodice write about by providing writers a place to work closely with their peers and have conversations about writing, rhetorical situations, and composition choices. When asked to reflect on the presence of collaboration in their writing center, across the board, all tutors felt that it was an essential component of their space. One tutor wrote that she sees collaboration in the writing center as a “learning opportunity” and a way to “come out of [her] shell” (Survey Response #4). She also wrote that collaboration helps her as a writer because now she is “more familiar with what questions to ask [herself]” (Survey Response #4). This tutor’s response – particularly the last part – demonstrates the way that the collaborative practices of the writing center help this student develop. By stating that because of collaboration she is “more familiar” with the questions she needs to ask herself in order to effectively read a particular rhetorical situation, she is highlighting the way that being in contact with her peers helps her internalize new knowledge and concepts. In short, by asking her peers questions about their writing, she has come away with a better understanding – she has internalized\(^\text{18}\) an

\(^{18}\) Joan Wink and LeAnn Putney define “internalization” (a term first used by Vygotsky) in their book *A Vision of Vygotsky* as

an active restricting of knowledge between and among individuals. It is:

- Involvement of individuals in exchanges that are characterized by a sharing of meaning.
- An inherent developmental relationship between external and internal activity.
- An active process of co-construction leading to creative contributions.
- A person’s transition from joint collective accomplishment of an activity to individual accomplishment. (151)
understanding – of what questions will be helpful when she finds herself in writing situations of her own. This student’s internalization of new knowledge is what Vygotsky would refer to as a zone of proximal development, which he defines as “the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Mind in Society 86). In short, by working with other students who are considered school experts in writing, the student seeking help was able to gain new knowledge.

Another student takes this understanding perhaps one step further when she writes,

Collaboration in the writing center is vital because without discussion neither person in a session develops their writing only a paper. For me, collaboration allows me to gain a better perspective on writing styles and how effective they can be depending on the type of paper or writing, showing me how to utilize different devices and techniques when writing my own paper” (Survey Response #2).

First, this tutor illustrates the idea that collaboration is important because the discussion helps to develop both the writing and the paper. However, by stating that “neither person in a session develops if…,” she is acknowledging that she not only helps her tutee learn in any given session but that she also learns something herself during these times as well. This suggests that in tutoring sessions, both the tutor and the tutee have the ability to function as the more capable peer since they are both teaching and learning simultaneously.

Internalization is central in the maturation of zones of proximal development as both processes happen in the presence of more capable peers, and because the maturation of zones of proximal development often lead to the internalization of new knowledge and concepts.
Next, like her peer, this tutor understands that her development as a writer is largely affected by the knowledge that she gains from tutoring her peers. By coming into contact with other writers and helping them work through difficulties, these tutors are also ultimately becoming better writers because they’re learning how to read various writing situations and apply different “devices and techniques” to their own work.

The writing center’s director, Anthony Yarnell, also understands the important role that collaboration plays in the writing center. He writes that in the Belleview Writing Center collaboration is “absolutely central” and that the “whole thing makes the argument that writing is a collaborative act;” he ends his response by stating that “we all write better when we write together” (Director Survey Response). His comment that the writing center “makes the argument” that writing is a collaborative act suggests that it is an argument that has been called into question in the past. Dean notes in *The Ecology of Peer Tutoring* that her tutor’s tutorial identities were called into question by teachers who preferred a more “directive stance” (60). She notes that when conducting her study, she saw that as “tutors [became] more acclimated to their collaborative roles, they began to voice some tension related to their classroom experiences with teachers” (60). Dean’s conclusions coupled with Anthony’s comment about collaboration hint, briefly, at the idea that peer collaboration is not something that is always accepted in the traditional classroom setting.

The conclusion of Anthony’s response insinuates his belief in the role of collaborative practices to encourage development not just for high school student writers, but for all writers as well. By stating that “we all write better when we write together,” he
is acknowledging that both writers (or in this case, the writer and the tutor) have the potential to develop during a session.

This is not to say that all educational environments or classrooms are opposed to collaboration; however, it is something that Stenberg associates with current trends in education. When reflecting on the neoliberal agenda’s influence on education, Stenberg writes:

In a view of education as job training, writing becomes a master-able, commodified, skill whose purpose is deployment in the workplace. Other purposes for writing – civic engagement, personal inquiry, exploration of unfamiliar perspectives – become ancillary to more ‘profitable’ ends. And since neoliberal logics value a streamlined approach to predetermined outcomes or competencies, there is little tolerance for leaning processes that entail engagement of (an often recursive) process, collaboration and dialogue among learners, and reflection – in other words, exactly the kind of learning research in composition and rhetoric promotes” (8).

Stenberg’s response to the neoliberal agenda, coupled with Anthony and Dean’s understanding of the role of collaboration in their own spaces, suggests that there are some educational environments that either more willingly or more easily utilize those collaborative practices than others.

**Risk Taking in the Belleview High School Writing Center**

One of the characteristics I noted in the collaboration that takes place in writing centers is that students are allowed to take risks. Again, because this is an ungraded space, students can take the risk of messing up or even failing that is not available to them in the classroom. As I studied risk taking, I came to understand how the Belleview High School Writing Center fosters the development of risk taking that allows high school students to think creatively about their own writing. In risky spaces, (which I define as spaces that
allow autonomous peer tutors and students seeking help to structure their own work), students (both tutors and tutees alike) must feel encouraged to autonomously structure their own work. This definition of risk taking is repurposed from Hodson’s essay, “The Active Worker: Compliance and Autonomy in the Workplace,” by Boquet in her essay “Intellectual Tug-of-War: Snapshots of Life in the Center.”

I witnessed risk taking’s presence in Belleview’s Writing Center multiple times throughout my time there; however, one particular scenario sticks clear in my mind because of its direct opposition to teacher feedback – or rather, an outright risky and autonomous writing experience. During the previously mentioned tutors-tutoring-tutors development exercise, the tutors and I were discussing the Carino article mentioned above and how power and authority present themselves in various tutoring sessions. After we had discussed the article, I broke the three tutors into one group of two who would tutor and be tutored, and one observer who would take notes on the power and authority dynamics of the mock session. During the mock session, Rachel, one of the tutors, was tutoring a fellow junior tutor. The tutee had brought a piece of writing specifically for this workshop because she was feeling pressure to conform her writing to better fit the feedback that she had received from one of her teachers. The assignment that the tutee brought in asked students to read a poem and then form an interpretation based on contextual clues.

The tutee explained to Rachel that she felt that she had fulfilled the requirements of the essay but when she had met with her teacher, the teacher had instead provided the tutee with an entirely new interpretation and examples from the text to draw from. The tutee said that she felt discouraged and was worried that if she chose to take the teachers advice she
would not be writing something that she actually believed; she felt that the writing was quickly becoming her teachers instead of her own.

Rachel communicated to the tutee that they would read through her essay together and, if the teacher’s feedback seemed valuable when they got to the end, they would find a way to incorporate it while still keeping the tutee’s own tone and voice in the paper. As Rachel read, she stopped occasionally to ask the tutee questions about her interpretation or for clarification about what was happening in the poem. The tutee began to explain why she had made the interpretive choices she had.

As the mock session progressed, it became clear that Rachel (the tutee’s current audience) was more receptive to the tutee’s original interpretation of the text rather than the teacher’s suggested interpretation. Rachel first expressed that as a reader she enjoyed the tutee’s initial interpretation better and then asked how she would like to proceed. The tutee asked whether or not her interpretation made sense, and when Rachel replied that it did, the tutee asked if it made as much sense as the teacher’s suggested interpretation; again, Rachel said that it did. From there, Rachel asked how the tutee wanted to progress with the session and the tutee said that if her original interpretation seemed to make sense, then she would like to work on revising that as opposed to starting over. The two began to work through the paper and they discussed various strategies for bolstering the argument that the tutee had already made. At the end of the mock session, the tutee said that she was much happier with this draft and that she was relieved that she was able to use her original interpretation.
In this session (which turned out to be more real than mock), both the tutor and the tutee agreed to embrace the riskiness of the writing situation. Instead of falling prey to potential fears of repercussions or a bad grade, the tutee was able to (to use Cynthia Dean’s phrase) “write beyond the demands of a classroom assignment” (Dean 77). This was made easier by the encouragement of her peer, who was able to read the tutorial situation and understand that the tutee would gain more from a writing experience that included her own interpretation as opposed to one that was provided by the teacher. After meeting with the teacher in her classroom, the tutee felt pressured to alter her interpretation because the teacher had suggested it; however, in the writing center, a place “beyond the competition, evaluation, and grade-grubbing” (Dean 102), and in the presence of a peer, the tutee felt allowed to autonomously structure her own work. This conversation allowed both the tutor and the tutee to discuss and internalize new knowledge about when it is appropriate to take risks in academic writing situations and therefore led to development. The type of development that this conversation fostered is best described in Vygotsky’s *Mind in Society*. When discussing the zone of proximal development, Vygotsky writes that “learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers. Once these processes are internalized, they become of the child’s independent developmental achievement” (Vygotsky 90). Because the tutee was in the presence of a more knowledgeable peer and discussing concepts that were just outside her zone of proximal development, she was able to internalize new knowledge about when to take risks with her writing, thus becoming part of her own independent developmental achievement.
While all tutors individually agreed that creativity presents itself in the writing center in various but necessary ways, there seemed to be hesitation throughout about how to respond to the survey question regarding risk taking. The question asked the students whether or not they felt that the writing center allowed them to take risks while writing and if so, how. I believe that this discomfort might be rooted in the fact that the tutors were unsure about the idea of risk in the writing center before they had encountered my survey. Truthfully, I probably didn’t do as good of a job of making sure that the tutors understood the term before administering the survey, but I am glad that most of them attempted to answer the question regardless. Nonetheless, this collective hesitance made for indecisive and scattered responses. One tutor even expressed her discomfort when she returned the completed survey to me, saying, “I didn’t really know with the risk question. I just, well I just tried.” This, above all else, showed that I had not effectively communicated a working definition for risk taking prior to asking the tutors to respond to questions about it.

The tutors’ hesitance, and my failure to communicate a definition of risk taking, was especially obvious in several of the tutors’ survey responses. One young woman wrote that the writing center allows her to take risks because it “helps with my confidence on my papers because I know I can come into the writing center for help” (Survey Response #5). While this response does speak to the social nature of the writing center and how students perceive the benefits of collaborative learning, it really doesn’t explain how the space helps the tutor feel more confident or why she feels that’s related to risk taking.

Another student writes that the writing center allows her to take risks because “hearing and receiving new input in the writing center allows me to take new risks because
I heard it works for someone else” (Survey Response #4). My first instinct is to note that the student seems to be internalizing knowledge that addresses reading various rhetorical situations. However, because of the vagueness of the response, I’m unsure what she means when she says that she heard “it works for someone else.” Is this her participating in thoughtful conversations with other writers regarding students structuring their own work? Or, is this students who have previously taken the same classes as this tutor simply telling her what they had success with as writers in that situation? If it is the former, then the student is likely attempting to illustrate how the writing center provides her with a space to have conversations with her peers about how to make a writing assignment her own. If it is the latter (which I suspect it might be), then the student is not obtaining new knowledge about risk taking from the experience; instead of learning how to navigate these situations on her own (i.e. how to read various writing situations), she is instead relying on the knowledge of others.

Despite these varied responses to risk taking in the writing center space, there were several answers to the question regarding risk that reaffirmed my belief that the writing center fosters the writing development of high school students by providing them with a place to take risks with their writing. When responding to the question, one tutor seemed to equate taking risks to breaking rules, which in a sense, is somewhat accurate. She writes,

In some cases, I agree with this because I experienced this ‘risk taking’ when writing my Common App essay but it entirely depends on the purpose and audience. However, it is also helpful to be knowledgeable of the rules so that you can understand when your writing choices are justified which I have been able to learn within the writing center (Survey Response #1).
The definition of risk taking that this paper works within addresses students’ ability to autonomously structure their own work. Because taking risks while writing sometimes creates a tension between the work that students structure and the work that teachers ask for, equating risk taking to breaking rules is not far off. Like the scenario involving the mock tutoring session mentioned above, this tutor is acknowledging that she has internalized knowledge regarding when it’s appropriate to take risks in the writing center, even if she doesn’t explicitly say how.

Another student response to the question addressing risk seems to be drawing from both risk taking and creativity. She writes that she agrees that the writing center allows her to take risks while writing because “it allows you/teaches you to possibly try something with your paper that you haven’t before, such as trying to relate some aspect of my paper to myself rather than being detached” (Survey Response #2). This idea of trying something “that you haven’t before” addresses the idea of Csikszentmihaly’s creative domains. According to Csikszentmihaly, in order to alter a symbolic domain, one must present a novel and unique product to a “field of experts who recognize and validate the innovation,” therefore, rendering the domain changed (Csikszentmihaly 6). However, the tutor’s response also expands upon that idea and illustrates the way that being creative can also be risky. In short, attempting to alter a creative symbolic domain can be a risky endeavor because one does not know whether or not they will be successful. Tutors seem to agree that the writing center gives them a space to present their risks and creative moves to other people to gauge the appropriateness of their writing choices.
This is a sentiment that is expressed by yet another tutor. In an interview, she said that the writing center encourages her to take risks because “by coming into contact with other writers, I feel like I can structure my own work” (Personal Interview #1). Like the tutor above, she is reflecting on the collaborative nature of the writing center and how that space provides her with a place to take risks and think creatively, both of which lead to the development of the writer.

When discussing risk taking in the writing center space, Anthony, the writing center’s director, notes that simply coming to the writing center is a risk for most students, because it’s out of their comfort zone. He also notes that, “tutoring protocol address risk… tutors are trained to assess the risk a writer is taking in their paper, to grow writer confidence through a session, and increase metaknowledge which should [his emphasis] lead to increased comfort when taking risks” (Director Survey Response). Anthony’s understanding of risk taking in the writing center environment suggests that not only are tutors trained to understand and acknowledge that their peers are taking risks with their writing, but to have conversations about those risks and help to increase the writer’s knowledge about when it is appropriate to take them. This in turn suggests that tutors are helping their peers internalize knowledge about risk taking which is therefore leading to the students’ writing development.

Creativity in the Belleview High School Writing Center

In this paper, I use Mihaly Csikszentmihaly’s definition of creativity as a means to understand the creativity that is present in the Belleview Writing Center as a result of the development of risk taking in high school students. According to Csikszentmihaly, a
creativity theorist, creativity results from “the interaction of a system composed of three elements: a culture that contains symbolic rules, a person who brings novelty into the symbolic domain, and a field of experts who recognize and validate the innovation” (Csikszentmihaly 6). Using these three elements, Csikszentmihaly then defines creativity as “a process by which a symbolic domain in the culture is changed” (8).

Every tutor who responded to the survey question regarding creativity felt that creativity plays a crucial role in their writing process. This suggests that these students acknowledge that they both have the potential to be creative and understand how to channel that creativity while writing. While students didn’t specifically state that they felt they were altering their symbolic domains, many of them did note that creativity plays a critical role in how they determine the success of their writing experiences. When reflecting on the role of creativity in her own writing and writing process, one tutor wrote, “Creativity, I have found, plays a critical role when I’m writing my introduction. I always strive to introduce the topic in a new and eye-catching way so that my audience remembers my writing” (Survey Response #1). Even though the tutor isn’t explicitly referring to the creative domain of the writing center, what she is saying is that she continuously strives to structure an introduction that is “new and eye-catching.” We can assume that by “new” she means something that has not been tried before, therefore, we can also assume that she uses her

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19 The question was as follows: “In what ways—if at all—do you see creativity playing a role in your own writing or writing process?”
introduction as an attempt to alter the symbolic domain, even if she entirely isn’t aware of it.

Another tutor demonstrates development when reflecting on creativity in her own writing process when she writes that “[c]reativity is the most important tool in [her] writing process” because it “allows [her] to take a new approach on all aspects of [her] paper making them unique, personal, and well developed” (Survey Response #2). Like the tutor above, this response suggests that this tutor continually looks for new ways to structure her work; this ultimately means that she is attempting to think outside of the creative domain by striving to autonomously and creatively structure work in ways that she hasn’t seen before.

This idea is shared by a fellow tutor who is reflecting on the collaborative nature of creativity in the writing center: “By discussing the paper with another person, they’re [the writer] able to create different ideas. Working with another person brings out creativity in people. You’re [the tutor] discussing what they [the writer] did. You can comment and suggest something – another idea. It’s just like putting two minds together” (Personal Interview #1). Unlike the tutors above, this tutor is thinking about creativity in terms of working with another person. Here, though she may not know it, she is thinking through creativity in terms that are similar to development; similar to the more-experienced peer that Vygotsky refers to, by modeling how to think creatively about a work, tutors help writers internalize how to think creatively in academic writing situations and develop. This type of learning is described by Wink and Putney. When discussing zones of proximal development and learning, Wink and Putney write that “learning takes place in the context
of purposeful activity as learner and teacher [or, in this case, tutor] work together to create a product that has its own intrinsic value” (Wink and Putney 86).

Like his tutors, Anthony, agreed that the center provides a place for tutors to be creative, but he also acknowledged that the writing center fosters creativity for the writers seeking help as well. When responding to the question, “In what ways — if at all — do you see creativity playing a role in the writing center?”, Anthony noted that creativity is prevalent in this space for both the peer tutors and the writers who come to the center seeking help. When referring to the tutors, he writes, “tutors must be creative in questioning, sequencing, timing of sessions depending on who walks through the door and what writing is in their hands” (Director Survey Response). This notion of creativity suggests that the tutors at Belleview High must be able to think on their feet and adapt to situations as they happen, which further illustrates that the tutors have internalized the skills to read situations creatively in order to best help the writers who are coming to the center seeking help.

When reflecting on creativity’s role in the writing center in regard to students who come to the space seeking help, Anthony writes that the center asks writers to “solve writing problems with only some [his emphasis] guidance from tutors” (Director Survey Response). The center encourages development because students who come to the writing center seeking help are given enough guidance to know that they have made mistakes, but not so much guidance that those mistakes are being fixed for them. In this way, the tutors are acting as Vygotsky’s more-knowledgeable peers and helping their tutees to internalize how to fix the mistakes made and, therefore, develop as writers.
In addition to student and director perceptions of creativity in the writing center, I also observed its presence during my time there. Like Boquet and Eodice, during my time with Belleview’s Writing Center, I found myself applying several of Kevin Barrett’s principles of Jazz music to the space as I observed the creativity that was present.

Barrett’s first principle (provocative competence: deliberate efforts to interrupt habit patterns) discusses what it means to interrupt habit patterns not only in the students who come to the writing center seeking help, but also the patterns of the directors and tutors. According to Barrett, this first principle is essential because “all habits are worth disrupting so that our work can remain fresh and imaginative” (Boquet and Eodice 8). Boquet and Eodice’s (and Barrett’s) notions of disrupting habit patterns is similar to Vygotsky’s understanding of fossilized knowledge and his claim that “automated or mechanized psychological processes [are] repeated for the millionth time and [become] mechanized” (Vygotsky 64). If one does not attempt to seek new knowledge and continue to grow, they will fossilize and learning and development will become stagnant. I encountered provocative competence during my second observational visit to the Belleview High School Writing Center. While I was there, Anthony was tutoring a student who wanted to look at her practice essays for the Advance Placement exam as she was hoping to receive the highest score possible. Anthony was tutoring her since the tutors were all busy with sessions of their own. He first began by asking her questions about her paper: What’s the paper for? Did you originally write it as a timed piece? How many times did you work on it? Etc. From there, the conversation naturally progressed to a discussion of the audience of the piece. It seemed that most of the young woman’s troubles with the piece
came from attempting to determine who the audience of the piece was. During the session, the two discussed how, while the young woman knew that her writing was being assessed by a nameless third party, she had been writing with herself as the intended audience, or rather, been writing what she felt was important as opposed to acknowledging the fact that her audience was looking for a way to distinguish between her and her peers. This is best observed in the previously mentioned interaction:

Anthony: Standardized tests are about giving your assessors something to score. It’s not about the number you get; it’s about differentiating between you and other students.

Student: So, do you write for them? Or do you write for yourself?

Anthony: Them! Definitely them.

This discussion between the student and Anthony demonstrates the way that the young woman’s perception of audience was disrupted during this session; she was asking questions regarding her audience that gave her habit patterns the opportunity to be disrupted and the person who was tutoring her had the appropriate knowledge to disrupt them. In addition to aligning with one of Barrett’s seven principles of jazz music, this scenario also demonstrates development – or rather, the potential for development – of the student since the model being used is that of a more experienced tutor educating a less-knowledgeable peer (Vygotsky 86).

During my time at Belleview’s Writing Center I also experienced provocative competence while observing the tutors. An example of this was during our scheduled tutors-tutoring-tutors event. During the activity, I asked tutors to read Peter Carino’s article “Power and Authority in Peer Tutoring.” I selected the article because it was one that had
been introduced to me during my time as a peer tutor in my college’s writing center. In addition, I like that Carino asks his audience to reflect on their own understanding of the word “peer” and that he discusses both directive and nondirective tutoring approaches. By providing the Belleview High tutors with the tools to identify the types of tutoring practices they were employing during sessions, I hoped to give tutors a way to voice their understanding of their own tutoring practices.

During the next two days, I sat down with the tutors and we briefly discussed the article before moving into the tutors-tutoring-tutors exercise. My intent for the activity was to provide tutors with new knowledge to help them think about why they make the choices that they do while tutoring. When discussing Carino’s article, many of the tutors admitted that they had never thought about the ways that power and authority presented themselves in tutoring sessions. They also discussed both direct and indirect tutoring strategies (something that Carino discusses in his article) and which strategy they found they used most while tutoring. Although prior to the Carino reading tutors didn’t have explicit terminology to name their preferred style of tutoring, they did understand that they did use either a more or less direct approach. This conversation also encouraged a discussion of the presence of both directive and nondirective tutoring strategies in sessions and how they simultaneously present themselves. Most tutors initially claimed that they either tutored one way or the other, but after one tutor claimed that she “was usually pretty indirect, unless it was about grammar,” other tutors began sharing their own experiences where they had employed both direct and nondirective tutoring strategies in the same session.
This conversation illustrates the ways that tutor assumptions of tutoring strategies were made conscious, or rather, disrupted. This also suggests that the staff had been either tutoring without giving thought to why they were making specific choices or were unable to give voice to the choices they were making for so long that tutoring became an “automated or mechanized psychological processes [are] repeated for the millionth time;” the act of tutoring had “[become] mechanized” (Vygotsky 64). By calling this mechanization out and encouraging tutors to think about their own tutorial choices, disruption was encouraged.

I observed Barrett’s second principle (embracing errors as a source of learning) during a discussion about students who are sent to the writing center by teachers instead of coming on their own volition. Rebecca, a junior who has been tutoring in the center for two years, said that she had occasionally felt guilt during these sessions because she would offer suggestions to her writer and instead of thinking through these suggestions and putting them into their own words, the writers would often instead put the suggestions she had made verbatim into their own papers and then looked to her for further advice. The tutor said that in these sessions she was often frustrated because she didn’t feel that she was really tutoring; instead she felt that she was giving students answers as opposed to helping them come to conclusions on their own. In Rebecca’s opinion, this was an error, a flaw in her own tutoring. Other tutors followed her experience with examples of when they felt that they had crossed the line during tutoring sessions. We used this as an opportunity to explore “errors” as a source of learning and discussed how these sessions might be approached in the future. We also entertained the idea that these errors or faults that the
tutors were admitting to might not actually be faults at all, but rather a way to think about our own strategies and interactions as tutors.

Much like the students who come to the writing center seeking help, Rebecca and her peers were acknowledging that they had encountered a problem that needed to be solved. However, by bringing it up in group discussion – by asking a question – the tutors put a plan in place to solve the task at hand. By discussing the problem with their peers, they were also acknowledging that they were “unable to perform all the necessary operations” on their own (Vygotsky 39). Like the student writer mentioned previously, it seems that the tutors had become somewhat fossilized in their perceptions of error and its presence in the learning process. This discussion helped them to expand their thinking and internalize the notion that error is an essential part of development.

Lastly, I made note of Barrett’s seventh principle (taking turns soloing and supporting). According to Boquet and Eodice, in the writing center space, taking turns soloing and supporting means “deep listening, reflection, collaboration, and on many occasions, a good sense of humor” (Boquet and Eodice 16). Like Jazz music, for a writing center to successfully foster creativity, all these components must be in place. While most of the work that is observed in writing centers demonstrates the “soloing” component of this principle, writing centers themselves are built upon this principle. Writers often work in isolation prior to coming to the writing center for help. It is in this space that they feel supported and receive the collaboration necessary to send them back into a solo writing environment.
This support can often be misconstrued by teachers who don’t understand the mission of writing center work. A tutor’s job is not to discourage solo practice for the writers who come to the center. Instead, tutors are meant to provide the support that the writer needs to return successfully and confidently back to solo work. It is in this way that writing centers work to create better writers as opposed to just better writing.

The Development of Student Writers

Most of the tutors who filled out the anonymous questionnaire seem to agree that the development of their own writing is largely dependent on the students that they tutor and the work those students bring in. For instance, when responding to the survey questions about the development of her own writing during her time in the writing center, one tutor wrote, “When I do a session I always learn more. I’ve learned about run on sentences, commas, comma splices, helping the writer develop their ideas, and just developing ideas through writing” (Survey Response #5). This suggests that this tutor understands her own development as a writer through working with other writers.

This idea that both the tutor and the tutee are capable of learning during sessions was shared by another tutor when responding to how the writing center caters to the development of high school writers. She writes that the writing center caters to the development of high school writers because “…there are different students at different levels from different classes which not only helps them but also the tutors to think about different situations” (Survey Response #4). Both responses align closely with sociocultural theory and the idea that people develop best when they are in social situations. Like other examples, these also suggest that in tutoring sessions, both the tutor and the student coming
to the writing center seeking help are taking turns being the more-experienced peer as they are both teaching and learning simultaneously.

Another tutor noted the relationship between collaborative learning and development when discussing the development of her own writing during an interview. Like those previously mentioned, she attributes much of her own development as a writer to the students she has tutored and the writing those students bring in. In response to being asked the question “In what ways have you seen your own writing develop during [your time tutoring in the writing center]?” she said,

I’ve realized that there are mistakes that others make. Reading others’ papers helps me relay that information back to my own work. Seeing how others make mistakes makes me focus on my own. By letting the tutors help the students, I think it helps […] both people grow stronger as writers, and I think by helping someone else it helps take a step back from your own essay and can show you something about your own writing that you didn’t know (Personal Interview #1).

The last sentence of this response suggests that the writer understands that collaborative practices and development are linked – something that this particular student seems to understand. By stating that helping someone else shows a writer “something about [their] own work that [they] didn’t know,” the writer is referring to the internalization of new knowledge and concepts through the use of social interaction (development), even if they don’t specifically know that’s the connection that they’re making.

Another student shares similar thoughts in regard to development and says that “…because the majority of papers that come through the writing center are ‘finished,’ I can see what I’d like my essay to be as a final product – and so I can take the proper steps to create it” (Personal Interview #2). This student also says that tutoring other people’s work
has made her more aware as a writer: “As a tutor, you occasionally have people coming in who are working on the same paper and seeing the rhetorical situation from different points of view has helped me to try to acknowledge perspective in my writing” (Personal Interview #2).

This all suggests that while students come to the writing center seeking help from more experienced tutors, they are actually teaching their tutoring peers as well. According to Vygotsky, the zone of proximal development “defines those functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation, functions that will mature tomorrow but are currently in an embryonic state” (Mind in Society 86). Students do not develop all at once and instead develop various functions as zones of proximal development mature. Because of this, we can begin to understand that – despite the fact that writing center tutors are often seen as the school’s experts in writing – there are potentially writing functions that are not yet developed in those tutors, just as there are writing functions that are not yet developed in their tutee counterparts. And so, when students come to the writing center seeking help, it is possible that while they are maturing writing functions in the presence of their more knowledgeable (about that specific function) peers, they are potentially helping the tutors develop due to other, mature writing functions that have not yet developed in the tutor. This suggests that students (both tutor and tutee alike) are developing as writers in the writing center space.

When reflecting on the development of tutors in the writing center, Anthony had very specific examples for each student. He wrote that overall, tutors demonstrated the ability to create “more thoughtful argument[s]” and had “more careful execution” (Director
Survey Response). In addition, he noted that two of his tutors’ writing was “Wow!” And when discussing the development of another tutor he said that she “has decreased her wordiness and increased argument conclusion” (Director Survey Response).

While some of these responses are vague, it is clear that Anthony has been aware of the changes in his tutors’ writing over time – changes which all seem to be for the better. Based on tutors’ responses to questions about their own development, and Anthony’s perception of tutor development, it seems that the tutors spend as much time internalizing new knowledge and concepts as those coming to the writing center seeking help, which suggests that it is a place that fosters development for both the tutor and the writer.

When interviewing Anthony, he took this notion of both the tutor and tutee benefitting from working together outside the realm of the writing center. When referring to how tutors helps their peers outside of the writing center space, he said, “…over a year or two [of tutoring in the writing center] [the tutors] have ownership of [the tutoring process] and can make it happen for themselves and then they model it for a classroom. But it wouldn’t be any surprise to sort of claim or sense that when you have a writing tutor in a writing classroom that everyone benefits, the teacher, the students, everyone” (Director Interview Response). Anthony also noted that being involved in writing center work ultimately helped students understand collaborative work in the classroom setting: “…when I have the luxury of observing them back in their English classrooms I see them not only solving their own writing problems pretty confidently and competently […], but also knowing how to exist in that space and be productive” (Director Interview Response). Anthony followed this by saying that being a writing tutor helps students “[ask] for and
[set] up what they need to get from a peer editing situation” outside of the writing center space” (Director Interview Response).

Anthony’s responses suggest that first and foremost the writing center does provide a space for students to develop as writers. It also implies that the knowledge that tutors gain in the writing center is knowledge that they use elsewhere in their schooling. Not only are students internalizing new knowledge and concepts during their time in the writing center, but they’re also learning how to apply that knowledge in other places.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I used observations and interview and survey responses from both writing center tutors and the director to explore how the Belleview Writing Center fosters the development of risk taking to encourage creativity in the writing of high school students. From my research, I found that students utilizing the writing center – particularly those tutoring in the space – develop their ability to read rhetorical situations and therefore take appropriate creative risks due to the collaborative nature of the writing center. In addition, the research suggests that tutors, at least, are aware of the benefits that they reap from using and working in close proximity of their peers without the unique demands of the classroom space. This suggests that the collaborative learning that happens in the writing center is ultimately different – not better or worse – than the collaboration that happens in other educational environments.

Perhaps the most interesting part of this research is the way that it positions educational spaces like the writing center in opposition to the neoliberal agenda. Neoliberal educational practices promote the work of individuals above all else, and view education
as a commodity or means to an end; however, the work of the Belleview Writing Center moves against the practices of neoliberalism because the center promotes creativity, collaboration, and risk taking – all characteristics absent from neoliberal educational values. This, above all else, suggests that educational settings have the potential to oppose neoliberal practices and instead work towards educational practices that value the learners in educational environments as people and learners, as opposed to commodified goods.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I explore the way that high school writing centers foster the development of risk taking that ultimately leads to creative agency in high school writers. Writing centers are educational settings that encourage collaborative learning. The research in this thesis finds that the collaborative learning that happens in the writing center space is largely different than the collaboration that happens in classroom settings. Despite the fact that collaboration in the classroom setting and collaboration in the writing center both often include work with one’s peers, because one is often assigned and monitored by a teacher, the collaborative learning that happens in the classroom is not the same as the collaborative learning that happens in the writing center space.

These collaborative learning practices are greatly influenced by sociocultural theory and utilize many of the theory’s practices. For instance, in tutoring sessions one or both students (the tutor and the tutee) often function as what Vygotsky refers to as a more-capable peer, or rather, a person who has more mature knowledge of the subject at hand and can therefore model or teach their peer.

In addition, the writing center space functions as a setting for students to mature their zones of proximal development in the company of their peers. When students work in close contact with peers who have more mature zones of proximal development, they are able to collaboratively complete tasks that they would not have been able to on their own. This study largely focuses on high school writers’ maturation of understanding
rhetorical situations and their ability to appropriately take risks and think creatively while writing. The results show that when students are able to discuss risk taking and creative agency with their peers, they better understand how and when those moves should be made in any given writing situation; this ultimately leads to the development of student writers. Additionally, this research also found that students are aware of the benefit of both risk taking and creativity in their own writing and understand that the writing center is a place that helps them to develop as writers. This suggests that students are not only taking risks and thinking creatively in their own work, but that they are doing so consciously with the knowledge that they are becoming better writers in the process.

Furthermore, this study explores the neoliberal agenda and discusses the ways that spaces like the Belleview High School Writing Center move in opposition to that agenda. Simply by valuing collaboration, risk taking, and creativity, educational environments like Belleview’s Writing Center are able to work against neoliberalism and its emphasis on economy, commodity, and individualism. Exploring the neoliberal agenda has been an important addition to this thesis as it has called into question my previous writing center vs. the classroom mindset and instead moved my thinking towards an educational settings vs. neoliberalism mindset. The distinction is an important one since it does away with an “us” (the writing center) vs. “them” (the classroom) ideology and instead focuses on the educational trends that shape the way that students are learning in the current academic environment. In my opinion, it is more important to make note of what spaces are actively opposing the neoliberal agenda and how they’re doing so than it is to claim that the practices of the writing center are better than those of the classroom or vice versa. If we
(educators, researchers, scholars, etc.) have a better understanding of current trends in education and also understand how we can either take those trends up or directly oppose them, we better understand how to educate the students in our learning environment.

There are some limitations in this study that need addressed. The first is that this study largely focuses on the development of risk taking that leads to creative agency in tutors. While there are some places in this research where I speculate on the development of a tutee in a session, all of the interviews, surveys, etc. have been solely rooted in tutor’s perceptions of their own use of risk taking or creativity and their own development as writers. Because I was with the Belleview Writing Center for a year and a half, I established a sense of rapport with the tutors there. During this time, I had the opportunity to actually see them develop as writers and to take risks and think creatively. Because of my time spent in the center, I can confidently say that this space does have the potential to foster the development of risk taking that ultimately leads to creative agency in high school writing tutors.

Another limitation of this research is a lack of representation of the school’s climate in the writing center space. Every tutor who works in the writing center this year is a female student, most of whom are Caucasian. Belleview High School has a varied population of students who come from a wide variety of cultural background, but I feel that the population at large is not well represented in the Writing Center space. While this research indicates that the writing center fosters creative agency in high school students, it would be more accurate to claim that the writing center fosters creative agency in high school female students, or white high school students, or even white female high school students.
Because there was not a larger population of tutors that better represented the school in its entirety, I cannot confidently say whether or not this narrative is true for everyone who will work in Belleview’s Writing Center.

Moving Forward

Exploring creativity’s presence in writing centers is not a new idea. Boquet and Eodice do this in their essay “Creativity in the Writing Center: A Terrifying Conundrum,” and Boquet explores creativity in the writing center again in her book *Noise from the Writing Center*. Similarly, while exploring risk taking in writing center spaces is a fairly new topic, it has been done by Dean as demonstrated by her book *The Ecology of Peer Tutoring*. However, I think it is important to make note of these characteristics’ presence in educational environments because it shows that there are multiple settings that have the potential to foster the development of high school writers.

The impetus for doing this project was multifaceted. First and foremost, I wanted to explore the development of high school writers. My interest in this particular subject was borne from time spent in a class about sociocultural theory and Vygotsky. However, as the project began to grow and take shape, I came to realize that this project was also about shedding light on the value of Belleview High School Writing Center. Anthony first had a hard time getting the administration to agree to a writing center; now he’s having trouble getting that same administration to see enough value in the space to make the Director’s position a compensated one. Anthony consistently argues that if he is compensated for the work that he does then he will be able to contribute more to the writing center: he will be able to extend writing center outreach, help teachers write assignments,
and potentially even send his tutors to conferences. However, a precedent has been set and because Anthony has done this job for free for an extended period of time, the administration is hard pressed to begin paying for his services now. During my time with the center, Anthony and I have been working on a proposal for compensation for the director position. Because Anthony has submitted proposals like it in the past with little success, this proposal, unfortunately, must be structured as an ultimatum. It’s hard to see the potential end of something that so clearly benefits the students, but in the same respect it is hard for Anthony to continue to devote 200+ hours a year to something without compensation for the work that he is doing.

I may have come into this project solely looking for student development in writing center settings, but I have left with the hope that this project – and projects like it – will shed light on the value of educational settings that oppose the neoliberal agenda. I hope that soon there will be enough research about these spaces that collaborative learning, risk taking, and creativity are more normalized in other educational environments, like the one that I taught in at Bakersfield High. I also hope that if collaborative learning, risk taking, and creativity become more normalized in various educational settings then there will be enough value placed on those settings that the people facilitating them don’t have to do their job for free.

Conclusion

I came into this process over a year ago looking for the presence of creativity in writing center spaces. At that time, I didn’t know that I would later explore connections between writing centers, creativity, risk taking, sociocultural theory, development, and the
neoliberal educational agenda. Through this project I came to better understand the nuances of the high school setting and how current trends in education shape the way that high school students learn. For me, this has been both a troubling and reassuring experience.

This experience has first been troubling because I have both taught within the neoliberal educational agenda and witnessed its influence on high school students’ perceptions of school and learning. When I reflect on my time student teaching at Bakersfield High School, I realize that a large portion of the curriculum that I was teaching within was influenced by the neoliberal agenda. This isn’t to say that students in my advanced placement European History and Honors English class didn’t learn anything; in fact, based on many students’ academic performance on quizzes, exams, and essays, I think they learned quite a lot. However, I question how much students actually retained after the class was over considering that so much of the work was memorization in short amounts of time. I also question what the students in those classes learned about schooling, grades, and what it means to be students during their time in the course.

However, this experience has also been reassuring since it has shown me the ways that writing centers and other educational environments can work in opposition to the neoliberal agenda. During my time at the Belleview High School Writing Center I saw that there are places that value collaboration, risk taking, and creative agency, and I saw students internalize new concepts and knowledge in the presence of their peers. As a future educator, this experience has provided me with the tools to structure a learning environment that isn’t confined by the constraints of neoliberalism.
PICTURES OF BELLEVUE HIGH SCHOOL WRITING CENTER

The Tutor Bio Wall: Located in the Belleview High School Writing Center.

The Center’s Director: Anthony, working on a proposal to make the Director position a paid one.

Tutors Waiting: For students to come in seeking help with their writing.

Laptops Available: To all who tutor, seek help, or have class in Anthony’s room. There will be a printer included with the cart.
WORKS CITED

Barrett, F. J. “Creativity and Improvisation in Jazz and Organizations: Organizational Implications for Learning.” *Organization Science*, vol. 9, no. 5, 605-621.


Boquet, Elizabeth. “‘Our Little Secret’: A History of Writing Centers, Pre- to Post-Open Admissions.” *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 50, no. 3, 1999, 463-482.


Director Interview Response. 1 March 2018.

Director Survey Response. 27 February 2018.


Personal Interview #1. 20 February 2018.

Personal Interview #2. 22 February 2018.


Survey Response #1. 12 February 2018.

Survey Response #2. 12 February 2018.


Survey Response #5. 20 February 2018.


APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

SURVEY CONSENT AND QUESTIONNAIRE
APPENDIX A

Taking Creative Risks in the High School Writing Center
Juedeman

CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION IN HUMAN RESEARCH AT MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY

Project Title: Taking Creative Risks in the High School Writing Center: How Secondary Writing Centers Function as Creative, Risk-Taking Spaces that Foster Development in High School Students

Your child is being asked to participate in a research study examining how students develop as writers during time spent in the writing center. This study may help provide a better understanding of (1) the perceptions of students of their own creativity and risk taking in the writing center, (2) the perceptions of students of their own (and others) collaboration in the writing center, (3) the perceptions of students of their own development as writers based on the skills that they gain in the writing center.

Your child has been selected to take part in the following survey because they are a Belleview High School student who either (1) utilizes the services of the writing center while seeking help on writing or (2) works at the writing center as a peer tutor.

Participation is voluntary. If your child agrees to participate they may be asked to participate in a brief (15 minutes or less) survey responding to questions about your perceptions of and experiences with the creativity, risk taking, collaboration, and development that happen for students in writing centers. They will also be asked at the end of the survey whether or not they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview. They may choose not to participate at any given point in time and/or they can stop participating at any point in the study.

Any responses from surveys will be anonymous. Inconveniences are namely with the time given. No other risks are foreseen.

This study is of no benefit to your child. However, their responses will give them a chance to reflect on their experience as either a writing center participant and peer tutor (or both) and what the role of the writing center has played in that experience. Their
responses may potentially help with the implementation of writing centers in other high schools in the future.

If you have any questions about this research, you can contact Elaina Juedeman (elainajuedeman93@gmail.com or 406-899-0886). If you have additional questions about the rights of human subjects, you can contact the Chair of the Institutional Review Board, Mark Quinn – (406) 994-4707 (mquinn@montana.edu).

By participating in this survey, your child is indicating their consent to participate in this research study. Please save a copy of this consent form for your own records. At any time, your child may refuse to participate, and withdraw from the study.

Signed (Parent of Student Participating in Interview):

________________________________________ Signed (Student Participating in Interview):

________________________________________

Witness:________________________________ (optional)
Investigator:____________________________
Date:___________________________________
APPENDIX B

SURVEY FOR STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF CREATIVITY, RISK TAKING AND DEVELOPMENT IN WRITING CENTER SPACES
APPENDIX B

What year are you in school?

• Freshman
• Sophomore
• Junior
• Senior

What is your age? •

14
• 15
• 16
• 17
• 18

In what ways have you seen your own writing develop during your time in the writing center? (These can be specific examples if you have them, or broad ones if you don’t.)

In your opinion, what specific aspects of Belleview High School’s writing center cater to writing development in both tutors and students who come to the center seeking help?

Can you think of any specific examples of development in your own writing that has occurred since your time visiting/working in the writing center?

In what ways — if at all — do you see creativity playing a role in your own writing/writing process?

Do you feel that the writing center allows you to take risks while writing? Why or why not? And if so, how?
How do you perceive the role of collaboration in the writing center? How do you think it helps you develop as a writer?
APPENDIX C

ANTICIPATED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
APPENDIX C

Taking Creative Risks in the High School Writing Center
Juedeman

1. How long have you been using/tutoring at the writing center?

2. In what ways have you seen your own writing develop during this time?

3. Do you think of writing as a creative process? Why or why not?

4. (Follow-up) In what ways do you see creativity playing a role in your own writing?

5. Do you think that writing involves taking risks? Why or why not?

6. In what ways does the writing center allow you to take risks with your own writing?

7. (Follow-up) Why do you think that is?

8. How do you perceive collaboration in the writing center?

9. (Follow-up) How is that different from or similar to the ways that you perceive collaboration outside the writing center?
APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM
Taking Creative Risks in the High School Writing Center
Juedeman

**Project Title:** Taking Creative Risks in the High School Writing Center: How Secondary Writing Centers Function as Creative, Risk-Taking Spaces that Foster Development in High School Students

Your child is being asked to participate in a research study examining how students develop as writers during time spent in the writing center. This study may help provide a better understanding of (1) the perceptions of students of their own creativity and risk taking in the writing center, (2) the perceptions of students of their own (and others) collaboration in the writing center, (3) the perceptions of students of their own development as writers based on the skills that they gain in the writing center.

Your child has been selected to take part in the following interview because they are a Belleview High School Student who either (1) utilizes the services of the writing center while seeking help on writing or (2) works at The writing center as a peer tutor.

Participation is voluntary. If your child agrees to participate they may be asked to participate in a 30-minute Interview responding to questions about their perceptions of and experiences with the creativity, risk taking, collaboration, and development that happen for students in writing centers. They will also be asked at the end of the survey whether or not they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview. They may choose not to participate at any given point in time and/or they can stop participating at any point in the study.

**Quotes from interviewees will be anonymous. Inconveniences are namely with scheduling and time given. The time you take for the interview is simply volunteered. No other risks are foreseen.**

This study is of no benefit to your child. However, their responses will give you a chance to reflect on their experience as either a writing center participant and peer tutor (or both) and what the role of the writing center has played in that experience. Their responses may potentially help with the implementation of writing centers in other high schools in the future.
Other students at Belleview High School will also be interviewed.

If you have any questions about this research, you can contact Elaina Juedeman
(elainajuedeman93@gmail.com or 406-899-0886). If you have additional questions about
the rights of human subjects, you can contact the Chair of the Institutional Review Board,
Mark Quinn – (406) 994-4707 (mquinn@montana.edu).

Authorization: I have read the above and understand the discomforts, inconvenience and
risk of this study. I, _______________________________ (name of subject), agree to
participate in this research. I understand that I may later refuse to participate, and that I
may withdraw from the study at any time. I have received a copy of this consent form for
my own records.

Signed (Parent of Student Participating in Interview):
_______________________________  Signed (Student Participating in Interview):
____________________________________
Witness: ______________________________ (optional)
Investigator: ______________________________
Date: ______________________________