Organizing for Antiracism in Writing Centers: Principles for Enacting Social Change

Moira Ozias
University of Kansas

Beth Godbee
Marquette University, beth.godbee@marquette.edu

Despite an interest in antiracism, those of us in writing centers often have difficulty imagining ways to make broad social change within powerful institutions. The emphasis on individualized instruction can leave us mired in feelings that systematic change lies beyond our power as writers, instructors, researchers, and administrators. Much potential exists, however, for enacting social change, particularly when we acknowledge the necessarily collaborative and complex nature of this work. As the above goose analogy suggests, there is power not only in numbers, but also in shared leadership and collective action. While only one goose leads the V-formation, all members of the flock take turns in leading. The flock works together, conserving energy by shielding each other from wind and elemental forces. This model suggests the importance of careful attention to the group: to building relationships, setting shared goals, working collaboratively, and sharing positions of leadership. Just as geese gain distance by working together (literally by taking
turns in blocking wind resistance), we can also advocate for a more equitable and just community by working as a group. In fact, the geese's V-formation provides a model of collective action used by community organizers that can inform our work in writing centers, providing us with tools to rethink our current practices, to initiate new partnerships, and to put antiracism into practice—not only in our local centers, but in our professional communities as well.

Previous chapters have articulated why antiracism matters to writing centers; why we must work to dismantle institutionalized racism; why those of us in writing centers cannot hide behind rhetoric of a neutral, safe, or value-free space; and why literacy education as the heart of writing center instruction provides the impetus for making change. In this chapter, we align with these imperatives and suggest general principles of organizing that can help us sustain interest, momentum, and action toward antiracism. As Anne Geller, Michele Eodice, Frankie Condon, Meg Carroll, and Elizabeth Boquet (2007) write, "Since writing centers are situated within institutions which are themselves implicated in the power structures that wittingly or unwittingly foster racism, they cannot completely escape resembling and reproducing much of what students of color experience outside our spaces" (92). While we provide conceptual frameworks that can lead to practical implementations for writing centers, we also recognize the importance of working within unique institutional contexts to transform such power structures and the racism they foster. We argue, therefore, that organizing, like writing center work, involves careful attention to local and institutional culture, so that antiracism in writing centers should tap into and work toward the university's mission, campus initiatives, and goals—in addition to revising those aims when they conflict with antiracist visions for change, or when they support institutional conditions that, as Nancy Grimm (1999) describes above, "contribute to structural oppression" (108).

Because of this first principle—that organizing values and responds to local conditions—this chapter offers no step-by-step directions or easy answers; however, we offer a vocabulary and conceptual framework that both describes our everyday activism in writing centers and presents us with challenging, or "wicked," questions for rethinking the work of antiracism. This chapter contributes a bridging of theory—asking largely what it means to organize in writing centers—with practice—considering the implementation of principles not only in our writing centers, but especially within our professional communities. Our aim is to deepen
the dialogue about antiracist activism within writing centers by introducing language, research, and conceptual frameworks from fields with significant bodies of literature on organizing, including social work, communications, and management. In doing so, this chapter introduces those of us in writing centers to discussions from fields generating research in this area and helps move us beyond questions of whether and how we should engage in everyday activism to questions of how to conceptualize, assess, and more thoughtfully name and plan this work so the means (or process) clearly matches the desired ends.

Toward these larger aims, we move through the chapter in three parts. First, we define organizing and answer the question of whether we in writing centers should do this work by showing how we already are. Second, we identify guiding principles consistent with the aims of antiracism as well as the collaborative and dialogic pedagogies of writing centers. Drawing on cross-disciplinary research, we articulate three frameworks for organizing: (1) direct action organizing (Bobo, Kendall, and Max 2001); (2) a balance of strategies and tactics (Alinsky 1945; Mathieu 2005); and (3) a dialectic approach (Papa, Singhal, and Papa 2006). We find the most potential in this third approach, one we see aligned with current research on both writing centers and community organizing and so we focus our discussion here. Finally, to put the principles into action, we analyze an extended case study of our efforts of organizing in professional associations and invite readers to participate in similar analyses of their own local organizing efforts. Here we add participatory action research (Fine and Torre 2006; Greenwood and Levin 2006; Sohng 1995; Weis and Fine 2004) as a method aligned with dialectic organizing to suggest a future direction for assessing our organizing efforts. Participatory action research (PAR), like dialectic organizing, promotes ongoing reflection, horizontal relationship building, and democratic participation, thereby providing the means for antiracist work within one-with-one writing conferences and shared leadership of writing centers.

While we believe organizing can help shape activism across our local contexts, we also recognize that our own experiences and understandings of organizing are framed by our positions as two young, white women, both working in public research universities, and both identifying as tutors and students in addition to administrators. Throughout this chapter, we have woven cases of our activism into the discussion, not as representations of how organizing should be done (in fact, any cases as exemplars would fail to represent the potential for organizing across contexts), but instead as
Organizing for Antiracism in Writing Centers

Illustrations of the dialectic tensions inherent in organizing. Deeply committed to both antiracism and writing centers, we have been involved over the past few years with activism in our local writing centers, on our campuses, and in writing center professional associations. Together, in collaboration with Frankie Condon, Rasha Diab, Nicole Munday, and others, we have worked to grow the Special Interest Group (SIG) on Antiracist Activism of the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) and the Midwest Writing Centers Association (MWCA). That work, along with our participation in programs and partnerships at the University of Kansas and the University of Wisconsin-Madison, has provided us with a range of experiences and insight. We have found that organizing for antiracism, rather than being ancillary to our work as tutors and administrators, can and should be central to what we already know and call “writing center work.” Not only can organizing help us improve the activism we believe is so important in writing centers, but experience itself can also influence what we consider to be the guiding principles of organizing.

When we embark on antiracism, we must be aware of power based on our individual identities: as authors, for example, our shared white privilege may allow us to earn credit for research on antiracism not readily attributed to scholars of color (hooks 2003, 26–27), and so we must advocate against this unjust credit system not only through acknowledging the work of others, but also through troubling unearned privilege. The same is true of collective identities attributed to writing center practitioners: as representatives of the university, we are assumed to regulate academic literacies and White American English, but are also positioned to push against this regulation. Throughout the literature on organizing and PAR, researcher-activists similarly attempt to disrupt

---

1. As advocates of tutor research and as tutors ourselves, we believe strongly that scholarship on writing centers must speak to tutors and not only to directors. Organizing in writing centers would certainly entail a collaborative effort among all writing center staff—administrators, tutors, and support staff alike—recognizing that each person contributes to the leadership and direction of the writing center as a whole. Likewise, these values of collaboration and shared leadership in writing centers help direct our attention to the racial identities of potential organizers—of writing center staff members and student writers—who negotiate and redefine what it means for white people to organize with and alongside people of color. In this chapter, we speak to the writing center community at large, inclusive of tutors and writers, and attentive to the lived experiences and understandings of power we each bring to the work of organizing in writing centers.

2. We use this term from sociolinguistics, drawing especially from the work of Geneva Smitherman (1977; 2006), who uses the term as an alternative to “standard English” to highlight the racial and racist projects of which language is a part within the United States of America.
asymmetrical power relations that cast the organizer as leader and the researcher as knowledge broker. Guiding principles for organizing align with antiracism by challenging hierarchical power relations and promoting organizing as the work of all of us. Analysis of power—along with attention to equitable participation, shared leadership, and social justice—contributes to the rationales for and frameworks of organizing that follow.

WHAT IS ORGANIZING, AND WHY SHOULD WE IN WRITING CENTERS DO IT?

When many of us think about organizing, we imagine labor unions, striking autoworkers (or state workers gathered around Wisconsin’s capitol), World Bank protests, and picket lines. We may even think of the organizing candidates do as they run for office or the mobilizing special interest groups do as they advocate for legislation in Congress. While these are all instances of organizing, they may not seem closely connected with the everyday, lived experience of writing center workers. But we do organize every day in and out of writing centers, often through habit or daily practice, without realizing or reflecting on our actions. Our systematic planning and strategizing are means of organizing, whether we recognize it or not. We organize when we assemble parts into a whole; when we attempt to make sense of what is disordered, jumbled, or messy; and when we work toward a wholeness that interprets or effects change within the individual pieces. In this sense, organizing in writing centers inevitably encompasses administrative activities such as hiring and scheduling tutors, developing tutor education programs, constructing resource collections, and sharing leadership. It also includes the pedagogical work in one-with-one conferences: enacting reciprocal learning, connecting writers with campus resources, building relationships, and discussing arguments and ideologies in texts. Every day in writing centers, when we talk with writers, record notes from sessions, and design research projects, we are organizing. These endeavors are difficult and fraught with irreconcilable tensions, yet the heart of organizing encompasses how we attend to tensions and paradoxes. While it is true that we are always already organizing—as tutors, administrators, and researchers—we must dig deeper to understand how organizing arranges our lives in ways that, when unreflected, can support the status quo, but when intentional and thoughtful, can also work against oppressive structures. We need to ask who is organizing, and for what intended and unintended purposes.
As authors, we recognize that “the ends” of organizing will vary, but we also believe that attempts to articulate those ends and to reflect on them will benefit us all. In writing centers, organizing for antiracism means working against and disrupting institutionalized racism as it shapes our interactions among writing center staff, with student writers, and in collaboration with other members of our campus communities; it also means working toward and seeking writing centers that reflect socially just ways of knowing, embrace critical questioning, and value the strengths of all of us. How we understand these notions of working against and working toward differ, but exploring the tensions—openly, as a staff—is not only a productive first step toward thoughtful organizing, but also a reminder of the connections between organizing and writing centers, as the questions are largely the same:

- Must the path toward change (or revision) include conflict, or can parties (writers and tutors) come to a mutually agreeable and beneficial consensus?
- Can we articulate universal principles for organizing (or writing), or must all organizing be context specific and context bound?
- Are professional or expert organizers (tutors) necessary for effective practice?
- Must all groups (or writing center staffs) be multiracial, or is there a place for racially homogenous groups to organize against racism?

These praxis tensions—conflict versus consensus, universal principles versus context-sensitive action, professionalization versus grassroots and ground-up leadership, coalition versus caucus membership—are familiar to us in writing centers, as our literature echoes these questions about participation, leadership, professionalization, and integration. We find that in the organizing literature, just as in literature on writing centers, questions such as these are more than theoretical; they also guide and are refined by practice. Further, they help connect what are often considered separate spheres of action: schools and communities. Organizing, like leadership itself, offers all of us in writing centers—directors, tutors, staff members, and writers who visit our centers—the potential for working against oppression and contributing to a just and equitable world, in and out of the writing center, however we collectively envision it. Organizing itself becomes part of the work of antiracism,
and so antiracist organizing must draw on the values, practices, and ideals of anti-oppressive and liberatory work.

In the next section, we present three frameworks of organizing that we see as compatible, although to differing degrees, with the aims of antiracism in writing centers. Any theory of organizing, like any definition of social change or antiracism, we believe, must be rooted in reflective action—a blending of reflection and action, theory and practice. Many times what can keep us from acting is a belief that we don’t know enough, that we need to read more or educate ourselves before stepping into the work. While organizing should be thoughtful and systematic, we also worry that when reflection prohibits action, we fall into familiar patterns that reinforce the status quo, thereby organizing without intentional effort at antiracism. This additional tension between reflection and action motivates us to articulate principles of organizing, which provide us with ways of understanding our actions—more than a “how to” guide—to critically articulating and making use of the dialectic tensions that drive our everyday work. In this way, we contribute to an understanding of writing center work as everyday leadership (Geller et al. 2005), within a new conceptual framework (Grimm 2009), and as enacted through identity politics (Denny 2010).

PRINCIPLES OF ORGANIZING FOR ANTIRACISM IN WRITING CENTERS

Many organizers ground their work in the focused and pragmatic strategies of direct action organizing, as practiced and outlined by Saul Alinsky, a labor organizer who first organized workers in Chicago’s Back of the Yards district in the 1930s. Others find it helpful to balance strategies and tactics—to focus simultaneously on long-term and short-term goals with multiple institutionalized and improvisational ways of making change. Still others, such as Michael J. Papa, Arvind Singhal, and Wendy H. Papa (2006), advocate a “dialectic approach” based on complexity science and the notion that organizing is always nonlinear, contradictory, paradoxical, and messy, much like the literacy work that happens in writing centers themselves.

Of these three frameworks for organizing, we find dialectic organizing the most provocative and promising framework for understanding antiracism in writing centers. This framework is cumulative in that it allows for direct action as well as strategies and tactics, while simultaneously asking us to recognize the necessarily complicated nature of this
work. In what follows, we review these three frameworks, building to an argument for dialectic organizing and providing illustrations of its usefulness in writing centers working toward antiracism.

Framework 1: Direct Action Organizing

Perhaps the most commonly acknowledged framework, direct action organizing brings people together to address an immediate problem. As explained by Kim Bobo, Jackie Kendall, and Steve Max (2001), authors of *Organizing for Social Change: Midwest Academy Manual for Activists*, activists who operate within this understanding identify a problem; agree on a solution; and draw on the strength of their numbers to pressure particular people, such as politicians, elected officials, or administrators, to implement change (11). Because of the focus on working through established institutional channels, the framework of direct action responds best to problems with specific, policy-driven solutions. In the case of antiracism, then, direct action organizing requires advocates to identify specific incidents or tangible parts of the much larger problem of institutionalized racism.³

Such an approach works well for addressing overt racism, including discrimination, hate speech, and prejudice in hiring, but is often inadequate to the task of undoing a university culture infused with whiteness and white supremacy that operate in often covert and implicit ways. The direct action framework focuses not necessarily on means, but on particular ends, which allow organizations and campaigns to declare success at having achieved their proposed solutions even when other dimensions of racial oppression remain culturally ingrained and unmoved, even within the organizations working for change.

Direct action organizing taps into what many of us in writing centers already do on a regular basis: planning campaigns to raise awareness around writing or some writing-related issue and building partnerships across our campuses and in surrounding communities. From our own writing centers, we see that direct action often provides the most clearly definable antiracist efforts. An example comes from the collaboration of UW-Madison’s Community Writing Assistance (CWA) program

---

³ A direct action approach involves a careful planning process of identifying goals, constituents, allies, opponents, targets, and tactics (Bobo, Kendall, and Max 2001, 33). The manual of the Midwest Academy describes three guiding principles for taking such action: first, efforts should be aimed at gaining immediate, concrete improvements in people’s lives; second, people should gain a sense of their own power; and third, the organizing itself should alter power relations (11–12).
with community partners to offer a grant-writing workshop for members of neighborhood and nonprofit organizations in South Madison, a racially diverse quadrant of the city with low-income families and mixed-income housing. The CWA program was invited to partner with a number of area organizations, including the City of Madison Weed and Seed, Grassroots Leadership College, and South Metropolitan Planning Council, who collectively identified a problem—that people from the South Madison communities were frequently not submitting community-improvement grants or not being approved for grant money, while other neighborhoods, particularly those with more money and predominantly white residents, applied for and received grants annually. The workshop was an immediate solution to distribute information about local grant opportunities, to share insight into grant writing, to analyze successful grant applications, and to offer feedback on community members’ proposals.

While we have yet to see the outcome of this workshop, the idea behind it matches direct action organizing, as organizers identified a problem, proposed a solution, and then strategized a set of tactics to reach the end goal—a fairly linear process that highlights the tension of organizing as both a process and an end product. Partnering organizations worked together, and different constituents from the writing center, including tutors and a director, were involved in planning, publicizing, and teaching the workshop. The same problem might have led (or might lead in the future) to alternative solutions, such as advocating for the granting organizations to alter their evaluation criteria, or to ensure that the South Madison community receives a grant annually. With the problem of inequitable access to and distribution of grants, varied solutions could arise, but one way of understanding the action of any group working toward a particular solution is direct action organizing.

Framework 2: Balance of Strategies and Tactics

Many organizers also depend on distinctions between strategies and tactics to guide them through planning for both long-term, long-reaching and short-term, immediate change. Alinsky, for instance, distinguishes strategies as overarching plans from tactics as deliberate acts, or “doing what you can with what you have” (1971, 126). The Midwest Academy similarly defines strategies as an overall design for building power and tactics as particular ways to make a group’s power felt, such as through protest, petition, or other display of numbers (Bobo, Kendall,
A strategy, therefore, might involve the campaign’s mission or the commitment to nonviolent protest, while tactics might include e-mailing petitions, planning teach-ins, and picketing a campus common area. This distinction between long-term planning strategies and more immediate tactics presents organizing work as linear and programmatic. Inputs produce outputs. Working social and political networks to make change is often more complicated, however. The common reliance on measures of time or scale as the primary distinctions between strategies and tactics downplays what we see as more complicated negotiations between working strategically (positioned within organizations) and tactically (disrupting from outside). Rather, negotiating the apparent binary of strategies and tactics includes recognizing a range of personal, political, and institutional dimensions that also play roles in organizers’ planning and action.

Paula Mathieu (2005) deepens and complicates scalable notions of strategies and tactics, helping university people understand the political and social nature of working strategically as well as tactically for transformation and change. For Mathieu, strategies are more than ways of working toward long-term, programmatic goals; they are rooted in Western notions of property, and, therefore, control practices and relationships in order to “minimize temporal uncertainty.” Strategies are made possible by what Mathieu calls a “victory of space over time” (16), as strategies help to create a sense of stability that relies on measurability (showing success or improvement over time) and rationality (assessing means as logical to the overall aims). More than simply working toward long-term goals, strategic thinking is affiliated with and often occurs within organizational space, so strategies themselves are often symbolic of the slow change that characterizes organizations like our educational institutions.

Mathieu (2005) helps us understand that organizers must also work from a place that “belongs to the other,” engaging in tactical thinking from outside the organization. Drawing from Michel de Certeau, Mathieu writes that tactics take advantage of “opportunities” and depend on “a clever utilization of time, the opportunities it presents and also the play that it introduces into the foundations of power” (16). Tactics, then, allow people not only to gain power in places belonging to others, but also to seize the moments for which strategic planning cannot account. As much as bureaucracy organizes our lives, it cannot account for the totality of our time and work, nor should it, as Anne Geller (2005) asserts in “Tick-Tock, Next.” Writing centers are uniquely positioned to work simultaneously as
institutional agents and amplifiers to "turn up the volume"—the "noise" (Boquet 2002, 67)—of students, staff, and community members who remain un(der)served and oppressed by racism. As Elizabeth Boquet emphasizes, making noise can involve one person, or "it can also be a many-person undertaking. And the many-person version is quite likely to yield different results" (60). By doing what we in writing centers do best—collaborating—we can work strategically and tactically, with students, faculty, and administrators to first amplify the noise of racism and then (re)organize the systems of which we are all a part.

The multiple or dual approach implied within a negotiation of strategies and tactics leads us to conduct organizing through a combined approach of collaboratively planning long-term, structural change as well as watching for daily, unexpected opportunities. Programs of consciousness raising (and conscientization) usually occur both strategically and tactically through a multitudinous approach of disseminating information and engaging in dialogues, both planned and spontaneous. For example, tutor leaders at the University of Kansas planned education curricula around building an awareness of how race and privilege affect tutoring practices. While the regular staff meetings provided opportunity to structure readings and discussions, "down-time" conversations provided unstructured time for talk. One white tutor was especially troubled by a reading on privilege, claiming that the methodology the author used could not prove racism as the cause of customers' differential treatment in retail stores. After the formal meeting, another white tutor seized an opportunity in the breakroom to describe how she saw this racist treatment of her partner, a black man, every day in stores, on the streets, and at school. This consultant seized a tactical opportunity and took a risk to speak what she knew to be true to another consultant. Together, they worked toward a better understanding, uncomfortable and imperfect as the process was, of how students and tutors of color at KU may feel spending time in a writing center with a mostly white staff. While tutors were already working strategically—intentionally building readings and conversations about racism into staff meetings—the learning opportunity was enhanced by the ability to work tactically, to seize those moments when challenging questions are asked or difficult situations arise. Directors can increase the likelihood of such tactical conversations by hiring a staff with diverse racial identities and experiences and by building conversational "downtime" into tutors' schedules.
In negotiating the apparent binary of strategies and tactics to organize for antiracism, we also encounter other apparent binaries: inside/outside, short term/long term, small scale/large scale, and planned/spontaneous. Like the balance of strategies and tactics, what may at first appear to be an oppositional dichotomy can often be recast as a productive dialectical tension. Writing center practitioners are prepared for negotiating these dialectical tensions; our discipline offers us experience in thinking about the tensions between peer/expert, process/product, nondirective/directive, global/local concerns, and writer/writing. As practitioner-researchers skilled at resisting and negotiating oppositional and paradoxical thinking, we have much to learn from a framework of dialectical organizing, which helps us re-see the principles of direct action and a balance of strategies and tactics in more complicated and contradictory ways.

Framework 3: A Dialectic Approach

In Organizing for Social Change: A Dialectic Journey of Theory and Praxis, communication scholars Papa, Singhal, and Papa (2006) argue that organizing, as a human activity that is simultaneously individual and social, is also inherently dialectical. As recognized through the negotiation of strategies and tactics, dialectical nuances characterize the work of organizing, as well as writing centers. After all, as Harry Denny (2010) describes in Facing the Center, "Writing centers make local, material, and individual all the larger forces at play that confound, impede, and make possible education in institutions" (6). Just as new writing center tutors and administrators may work toward simplification and "neatness" in our work, those new to organizing may also want to resolve tensions that arise in the process of organizing. Aiming toward such resolution, however, fails to acknowledge the complex nature of social systems and organizations, as well as teaching and learning. For example, when working toward antiracism in writing centers, we may wait to take action until we have devised a fully participatory organizational structure. Not only does this postpone our action, but it may also increase the work that needs to be done. While we aspire for full democratic participation, we should also recognize that autocratic pressures may mount over time. Rather than being dissatisfied with rising tensions or noting them as weaknesses in our organizing, a dialectic approach asks us to recognize tensions as evidence of change and to work within them to further the process. Unlike the direct action approach that promotes articulation of
a policy-driven problem and solution, the dialectic framework emphasizes the paradoxical nature of both means and ends, which are inextricably linked within dialectic organizing.

Such a dialectic approach to organizing recognizes the realities of making change within our social world; it also provides us a lens with which to view organizing that is congruent with writing center pedagogies. As Boquet (2002) articulates in *Noise from the Writing Center*, “Order develops out of chaos, not through the elimination of it. Moments that threaten the stability of a system are also moments that may, in the words of information theorist Eric White, ‘provoke systemic transformation’” (51). Further, Boquet argues that for the writing center “to function as an apparatus of educational transformation,” we must “imagine a liminal zone where chaos and order coexist” (84). Writing center directors and tutors embrace the chaotic endeavor of collaboration, entering into the dialectical tensions laid bare in this relational work. Andrea Lunsford (2001, 96) and others note that centers based on collaboration do not present easy models, rather more difficult but potentially more just models of writing centers. Like Lunsford, Grimm (1999) theorizes writing centers “in which accommodation is mutual and personally transformative, in which history does not have to be erased and systems become more flexible” (xvi). “To change a worldview,” she says, “one needs to find and name its contradictions, to locate the places where it leaks” (92). In these leakages, the noise breaks through. Tutors, writers, and directors alike have to grapple with the chaos, with the dialectic tensions. In these articulations of writing centers and writing center pedagogy, scholars recognize the value of uncovering dialectic tensions and negotiating rather than eliminating or silencing them. Dialectic organizing requires many of these same abilities: to suspend judgment, listen deeply, look for the unseen, and recognize our own positions and assumptions. As tutors, we all do this daily. As administrators, we try.

Four of the many tensions that characterize writing centers and organizing efforts are the focus of Papa, Singhal, and Papa’s (2006) research of organizing for social change: control and emancipation, oppression and empowerment, dissemination and dialogue, and fragmentation and unity. These dialectics do not represent either/or choices, but the mutual existence of seemingly incompatible parts that nonetheless depend on one another. Papa, Singhal, and Papa remind us that even as we are working toward one end of the dialectic—for example, the emancipation of Bangladeshi women from poverty through microlending
from the Grameen Bank—we inevitably draw on the other end—by also exerting control over the lives of borrowers who work together to determine social criteria for bank membership. The dialectic represents a scenario in which two components may be reconciled into one unified whole, as in the example of reflective action, in which thought and action can be brought together, or in which the two coexist or exist at odds with each other, as in the example of oppression and empowerment or the earlier framework of strategies and tactics. To make change within complex organizations, it is helpful to use the principles Papa, Singhal, and Papa find representative of complexity science: (1) mutual causality, (2) the butterfly effect, (3) valuing outliers and positive deviance, and (4) celebrating paradoxes by asking wicked questions. Because we see a direct correlation between dialectic organizing and antiracism, we now describe each of these principles with examples of how they might operate in writing centers and in our professional community.

**Mutual Causality**

First, the concept of mutual causality can be seen whenever we work toward change in one way or on one issue and find that we are simultaneously influencing other issues and areas of people’s lives. An example in community organizing comes from the Carter Center’s involvement in the Sudan and Uganda since the late 1970s, when efforts to eradicate guinea worm disease brought leaders together and allowed for peace negotiations. We can also recognize such mutual causality on our campuses when in advocating for an increased student voice in departmental decisions, opportunities also open for increased talk about writing in or across disciplines. Much of the work we do in writing across the curriculum (WAC) and writing center outreach programs can result in mutual causality. Every semester the UW-Madison WAC program distributes a newsletter to faculty and teaching assistants across campus. While this newsletter supports the aims of WAC by bringing attention to writing, providing support for writing instruction, and also highlighting instructors’ innovative teaching, it also allows the program directors to act as student advocates—encouraging fair grading criteria, seeking student input into course design, and recommending one-with-one conferencing. In a recent themed newsletter on “writing with an accent,” the assistant director distributed information to instructors across campus about English language learning (ELL) and the difficulties many multilingual writers who are also students of color face in writing assignments. Rather
than present student writers within a deficit model that puts the burden of change on them, the newsletter focused on educating and asking instructors to rethink their expectations and interactions with multilingual writers. As a form of mutual causality, the newsletter furthered the aims of WAC, building bridges across disciplines, while also addressing one type of racism we see on our campuses through the stereotyping, Othering, and subsequent harsh evaluations of many multilingual writers. This example, we believe, shows how mutual causality results not only in multiple organizational benefits, but also in the overlap of anti-oppressive organizing. As we participate in antiracism, for instance, we are also working against colonization, nationalism, and other oppressive forces shaping our institutional lives.

**The Butterfly Effect**

Wisdom embodied in the “butterfly effect” urges us to value small contributions: a butterfly that flaps its wings in Peru, it is said, can affect the weather in Colorado. Put more prosaically, “Small changes in input conditions, when sustained over time, can often cause cascading huge effects” (Papa, Singhal, and Papa 2006, 236). Because social systems are complex and adaptive, variables are rarely independent or dependent; rather, they are simultaneously both. While the butterfly effect seems to privilege causality, for organizers its value lies in helping us attend to small moments. When looking backward, we may never truly know that one decision led directly to a corollary outcome. When we trace change back to small moments, however, we see that the choices we make in them contribute to larger currents that hold the possibility for change. As an organizing tool, the butterfly effect gives us a model for thinking about the far-reaching influence of small, everyday moments in larger social-change work.

Acknowledging such conditions can help us celebrate small gains. In the KU Writing Center, for example, we have found that when tutors of color work in a predominantly white writing center, the daily work and talk changes. Whether the consultant is a Middle Eastern man or an Asian or African American woman, other staff in the center are suddenly faced with difficult decisions, such as what to do when visiting writers refuse to work with these consultants or question their credentials and experience. The group also has to change its ways of talking about multilingual writers or “underprepared students” when “they” become “us.” Sometimes all it takes is a welcoming smile to a visiting writer, a small conversation, and
encouragement to apply for a position. The effects on how the center engages students in learning can be profound. The butterfly effect, then, encourages us to acknowledge the significance of single acts and how these acts can inspire, call to action, and grow movements toward change. We might ask retrospective questions: What if Ghandi had never read Thoreau’s work? Would members of the UW-Madison Writing Center have formed a Social Justice Committee if Victor Villanueva had not spoken at the 2005 IWCA/NCPTW Conference? How would our lives be different if we had not been involved and influenced by others dedicated to antiracism? No matter what we name as the flap of the butterfly’s wings, we see that small contributions and decisions have decidedly far-reaching effects, and our daily work can be enriched by looking for small, micro-level ways to effect change.

**Valuing Outliers and Positive Deviance**

Like the principles of mutual causality and the butterfly effect, which ask organizers to make small changes and to value action that has already taken place, the practice of valuing outliers allows communities to find internal solutions to their problems without requiring outside resources. Also called positive deviance, this principle asks communities to recognize the small, unacknowledged pockets of positive practices and then to build on this local wisdom to make broader change. An example comes from Vietnam, where in the 1990s many children were malnourished. Rather than looking for knowledge and resources outside the community, organizers identified those families who avoided malnourishment and learned they were foraging for shrimp and adding sweet potato greens to their meals—positive practices that were subsequently shared with all community members (Papa, Singhal, and Papa 2006, 238–239). Using the positive deviance approach, organizers worked to identify positive deviants in the community and to make them “visible and actionable” (239). By valuing outliers and positive deviance, groups can make change by building on their strengths, even if these strengths are commonly acknowledged as strange, or unacknowledged altogether.

Consider, for example, what has happened at KU as we have hired more multilingual writers as consultants. As we see how these tutors work effectively with other multilingual writers, consultants have begun to learn how silence in a session can be profoundly productive or how allowing a writer to brainstorm in her native language can spur revision.
While research may indicate that these practices are helpful, tutors give a different kind of hearing and imagination to practices they see themselves in their own centers. As these multilingual consultants take on leadership and teaching roles, racist hierarchies that our writing center inherited from our surrounding campus community suddenly turn on their heads. The same "they/us/we/them" now scratches throats; its contradiction highlights the racism and language privilege in writing center talk. Similarly, attention to friendship networks, to successful multiracial tutoring relationships, and to collaborations that surprise or challenge our usual patterns of interaction can help us recognize positive deviance. Acknowledging and then tapping into these outlying practices can suggest pathways for change.

**Celebrating Paradoxes**

In addition to recognizing hidden strengths and positive deviance, we can celebrate paradoxes that suggest change in complex social systems. Such paradoxes as the simultaneous need for "centralized coordination and decentralized initiatives" and the need to "foster team building and reward individual achievement" (Papa, Singhal, and Papa 2006, 241) are unavoidable and present opportunities for creative and innovative change solutions. To become more adaptive and to continue ongoing learning and growth, we might draw strength from opposing ideas through critical questioning, creative problem solving, and deeper learning by posing wicked questions—or those questions that have no obvious answers but that "help expose people's straight-jacketed assumptions about an issue, context, or situation" (242). Such questions might include how can we chart a course for the future when we don't know what's to come? Or how can we be both a system and many independent parts? Or how can we, as writing centers, be both an integral part of our larger institution and provide an alternative to it? Those of us who embark on antiracism may also ask wicked questions that tap into the four dialectics that Papa, Singhal, and Papa claim are central to any organizing work: control and emancipation, oppression and empowerment, dissemination and dialogue, and fragmentation and unity. Discussion and action based on questions expose assumptions and open opportunities for imagining new ways forward.

An example from our own experience comes from a year-long discussion about the name and mission of the Social Justice Committee (formerly the Inclusivity Committee) at UW-Madison. The committee,
which sponsors monthly article discussions, creative workshops, community participation, and other activities, was started in part to sustain conversations around race and racism in addition to other anti-oppression work. When the group began in 2005, following Villanueva’s keynote address, it was called the “inclusivity committee,” but writing center staff members quickly began asking what we might consider wicked questions: Who is excluded by an inclusive model? Where are boundaries or borders of inclusion? By assuming the inclusive model, the committee also tacitly communicated that what needed to be changed was membership rather than culture. Some group members argued that the inclusivity model acknowledged the power of some of us (for example, to extend inclusive membership), but failed to question how our daily spaces, practices, and habits of being might need to be changed. From these conversations, we decided as a group to rename the committee to represent both its broad scope and the aims of what we are working toward: social justice.

“Wicked questions,” those with “an embedded paradox or tension” (Papa, Singhal, and Papa 2006, 242), remind us of the kind of Trickster mindfulness that Geller, Eodice, Condon, Carroll, and Boquet (2005) ask writing center practitioners to adopt. In The Everyday Writing Center, the authors describe Trickster moments as “joint-disturbing:” “Trickster toys with some of our most sacred binaries: certainty and uncertainty; knowledge and ignorance; change and stability; boundaries and fluidity,” and in doing so, exposes our complicity and potential to challenge institutional practices (27–28). Trickster, then, toys with many of the dialectic tensions that organizers embrace in order to create social change. By asking wicked questions, organizers can seize Trickster moments, exposing the cracks between binaries and the gaps between reified policy and real practice. Geller, Eodice, Condon, Carroll, and Boquet call us to embrace uncertainty in an effort to challenge ourselves toward more responsible writing center practice. We hear Papa, Singhal, and Papa (2006) echoing this call as they ask organizers to recognize mutual causality, understand the butterfly effect, build on positive deviance, and celebrate paradoxes. These principles invite—even demand—our joining together to do the hard work of imagining, creating, and acting for change. We now turn to a case that illustrates the potential of dialectic organizing—more than direct action organizing or the balance of strategies and tactics—to facilitate reflection and collaborative knowledge construction as we organize for antiracism in writing centers.
As a way to consider enacting the principles of dialectic organizing, we turn now to an extended case study of our work with the IWCA and MWCA Special Interest Group (SIG) on Antiracist Activism. This cross institutional initiative, we believe, speaks to the value of guiding principles for organizing both across and within unique institutional cultures. In many ways the formation of the SIG itself represents direct action organizing. Members of our professional associations identified a lack of discreet space for talk about matters of race and racism, prompting the creation of the SIG as just such a place: a place to talk openly about challenges members face on their own campuses and matters of racism at the regional, national, and international levels. Along the way, members proposed two projects that would bring the group together to work on making concrete changes. The first project seeks to connect under-funded urban high schools that are chronically under serving African American and Latino/a students with college writing centers, which might provide resources and a pathway to college (and to writing center work) for many students. The second project—relationship building between the MWCA and tribal colleges in the region—would similarly provoke the association to rethink many of its core assumptions and constituencies. We understood that MWCA itself would need to change in order to become a more open and trust-worthy organization for tribal colleges, so we talked about learning from tribal colleges by attending their conferences.

All three of these initiatives—the creation of the SIG itself and the proposals to create collaborations with high schools and to build relationships with tribal colleges—draw on direct action strategies. Organizers identify a particular policy, practice, or situation that needs change; then propose a policy-driven, tangible solution; and finally work toward the achievement of that plan. While these strategies represent a start, we think a dialectic approach toward organizing for antiracism would (and will) offer the groups more creative and effective means toward making change at the local, regional, and national levels. Direct action can certainly occur in conjunction with dialectic organizing, but the dialectic conceives of antiracism as everyday work in addition to planned campaigns. By cultivating dialectic thinking and acting, the SIG will be reinvigorated and strengthened as we work toward fostering more equitable writing center cultures and practices.

One risk an organization with an overwhelmingly white membership runs as it embarks on antiracism is the risk of perpetuating oppression
by taking a paternalistic stance toward the Other. While direct action organizers would not advocate such a stance, a focus on direct action can open the possibilities of “doing for” and “doing to” rather than “doing with.” As members of the MWCA SIG have talked formally and informally about potential projects, wicked questions of “why” often arise. Why should the organization encourage more students of color from urban high schools to work in writing centers? Why should the organization connect with students and faculty at tribal colleges? It does not suffice to say these projects will “make our organization more diverse.” When we strive for a more racially diverse membership without interrogating how our organization came to be so racially homogenous in the first place, and without asking why it remains that way, we put the responsibility for organizational change on new members, rather than on those of us who have, over time, made the organization into what it is today. As relatively long-time members of MWCA and IWCA, we take responsibility for contributing to the current culture of these organizations and the ways they close off spaces for tutors, directors, and scholars of color. We think a dialectic approach to organizing helps us remain aware of these challenges and tensions as we work to organize against racism in all its forms. For this reason, we turn now to the possibilities offered by the dialectic approach, drawing on mutual causality, the butterfly effect, valuing outliers, and celebrating paradoxes. This analysis, we hope, illustrates how models can help us imagine new futures and ways of working toward them with socially just means, means that can be adapted and revised in varied local contexts.

While the principles of mutual causality and the butterfly effect may seem easier to apply in retrospect than to use as a future-focused strategy, they can help us cultivate a radical sense of hope that our work will result in change, whether we see it immediately or not. To understand mutual causality, we might look to the potential of our work to effect change in multiple arenas: for example, to recognize a range of oppressions—sexism, heterosexism, classism, and others—overlapping within racism. As we are engaged in antiracism, we are often working against other oppressions as well, so the principle of mutual causality can help us see that our activism need not conflict with social justice more broadly. As we attend to injustices in our centers and organizations, we may find partners and build momentum by identifying those who are working against these other oppressions—for example, by partnering with the LGBTQ SIG that has formed within IWCA. In working toward social justice, however, it
becomes important to name each oppression, giving voice and legitimacy to the lives of people who experience them differently. Otherwise we run the risk of reproducing the "new racism" that Villanueva described in his IWCA keynote and subsequent article (2006). When applying the principle of the butterfly effect to our thinking about antiracist organizing, we can recognize that our actions can result in changes we might not have predicted. We can use a historical perspective to help us see what events, situations, and strategies have been most far reaching. For example, we know now that Victor Villanueva’s IWCA keynote resulted in many conversations, projects, and SIG meetings, which together have created spaces in which writing center practitioners can talk about issues of racism. We can also tell you that Frankie Condon’s work on race influenced both of us to begin interrogating these issues for ourselves: with a simple e-mail, she and Michele Eodice put us in touch with one another, and the effects on our personal and professional lives cannot be overstated. An e-mail. Putting two colleagues in touch with one another. And before we knew it, we were imagining and planning a SIG and an article.

Just as important as seeking socially just and effective ends are the means by which they are sought. By valuing outliers and celebrating paradoxes, those of us in writing centers can access and build on creative and innovative strengths we previously overlooked. If our SIG were to apply the principle of valuing outliers to the projects of recruiting students from underserved urban high schools and building relationships with tribal colleges, we might ask ourselves these questions: Where are these collaborations already happening? What writing centers have formed strong relationships with urban high schools? What writing centers have already begun to build relationships with tribal colleges, and how have these partnerships emerged? What student services or academic programs on our campuses have been successful in reaching First Nations students? Rather than looking outside our communities for knowledge or resources to make change, we can look at what we are already doing well and build on those strengths. We can also strengthen our organizations by celebrating the paradoxes in our work. Wicked questions can be raised in strategic ways, in board meetings and planning committees, and also in tactical ways, taking advantage of informal conversations. Celebrating paradoxes involves the inevitable push and pull of dialectical tensions, but explores them in such a way that the creative and innovative possibility of our organizations can be leveraged for antiracism.
PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

The questions and tensions revealed by a dialectic approach to organizing suggest the importance of participatory action research (PAR) for ongoing reflection and partnership in knowledge creation with all stakeholders. PAR is both a qualitative research method and a theoretical perspective that has historically developed adjacent to community organizing; its origins can be traced to community organizer Kurt Lewin in the United States and to theorists and practitioners Orlando Fals Borda, Paulo Freire, and Ignacio Martín-Baró in South America (Weis and Fine 2004, 96–97). More recently, educator-researchers such as Sung Sil Lee Sohng (1995), Robin McTaggart (1997), Davydd Greenwood and Morten Levin (2006), Michelle Fine (2006) working with Lois Weis (2004) and María Elena Torre (2006), and others call for PAR as a way to share power, learn together, and dismantle oppressive systems, replacing them with more participatory and democratic governance and culture. PAR asks institutionally recognized researchers to collaborate with folks whose expertise goes unrecognized by the institutions with which their lives intersect. In this way it extends the impetus of that strand of writing center scholarship that seeks to highlight and draw from the expertise of peer tutors (e.g., Brown, Fallon, Lot, Matthews, and Mintie 2007; Fallon 2010; Fels 2010) and promotes cross racial, cross status research toward antiracism. Further, it is aimed not only at generating new knowledge but also at making change, as the “action” part of “participatory action research” requires participant-researchers to bring about change based on what is discovered through the research process.

Rather than assuming we are moving forward and doing “good work” because we have “good intentions” (remembering Nancy Grimm’s [1999] warning for all of us in writing centers), PAR provides us with tools and a critical lens for viewing the work of the SIG, and more broadly, our writing center organizations, local efforts, and one-with-one conferencing. Both organizing and PAR offer a dialectic approach and the following concrete guidelines for planning and assessing our everyday work:

- developing both immediate and long-term approaches to antiracist social change,
- attending to both local/contextual and general/systematic inequalities,
- valuing individual and group well-being for both personal and social transformation.
Rather than all of us following the same step-by-step movements, PAR suggests we attend to local contexts and engage in dialectic thinking in partnership with all those influenced by our institutional spaces (i.e., campus and community writing centers). PAR embraces action and reflection, dissolves distinctions between expert and novice, and asks us to reimagine the relationship between research and justice, thereby challenging us to thinking dialectically.

As we consider undertaking PAR within the SIG, we ask the following questions: Who produces knowledge and for whose interests? How can we redefine expertise so that it is shared and leveraged toward action? What PAR projects are important not only to those of us in writing centers but also to our community and campus partners? What work might, could, or must be done independently, and what must be done collectively? As the research method perhaps most closely aligned with social movements, PAR can provide us with knowledge needed as the SIG moves forward with not only direct action but especially dialectic organizing toward antiracism. As with organizing, the processes of participatory research are neither easy nor comfortable, but others have gone before us in doing such work. By focusing on PAR as participation, action, and knowledge for the sake of doing, we are better able to work toward solutions to the complex problem of racism.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

PAR is both learning and action. So is organizing. And so is writing center work: one-with-one conferencing, mentoring, planning, and directing. All of us in writing centers bear responsibility for enacting change; we are leaders in shaping the world around us, as it is and as it ought to be (Branch 2007). We acknowledge that we are always already organizing as we talk with writers, facilitate workshops, promote writing across the curriculum, and plan staff education. We are organizing in our everyday lives in and out of writing centers, but we must ask ourselves toward what ends and through what means. To invoke educator-activists Myles Horton and Paulo Freire (1990), who themselves draw on Latin American author Antonio Machado: "We make the road by walking." We learn the work of antiracism by doing it. What this means for us in writing centers is that we need to seek socially just ways of knowing, talking, and writing together. We can learn from direct action, a balance of strategies and tactics, and certainly a dialectic approach to organizing. We can also use PAR to challenge conventional knowledge production and
to take action while learning. While these frameworks can help us move forward, we must take the risk of moving into discomfort and welcoming change, especially the kind that cannot be predicted by an instruction or training manual. Dialectic ways of knowing, learning, and building relationships will help us amplify the noise of racial oppression only if we recognize the tensions and leakages that can become sites of systemic and educational transformation.

Organizing for antiracism in writing centers is a complex process, but we are reminded of the flying geese and the strength they gain from shared leadership and collective action. When working together, the action involved in antiracism becomes invigorating; we find that the more we throw ourselves into organizing, the more we are inspired to continue this work. We learn to see new ways of acting that change not only our organizational approaches to antiracism, but also our lived, everyday interactions in and out of the writing center. Through enacting socially just means, we can learn to be in relation with others in more equitable and genuine ways, thereby becoming the change we want to see in the world. After all, organizing is not just about making social and political change; it is also about helping people, organizations, and communities reach our full human potential.

REFERENCES


