



Running Lean: Refactoring and the Multiliteracy Center

Benjamin Lauren

Michigan State University

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Abstract

This article addresses ways in which multiliteracy centers can be administratively structured to respond to change by encouraging stakeholder participation. To argue for the approach, the article draws from the computer programming concept of refactoring, which is a process software development teams use to share in the development of a system by cleaning up messy computer code. Used as a lens for thinking about the administration of a system like a multiliteracy center, refactoring provides Writing Center Professionals a method for responding to changing institutional contexts by using participatory methods. Further, to illustrate how refactoring as a concept is useful in multiliteracy centers, the article describes a framework for working with stakeholders to support a shared approach to assessment, particularly when considering ongoing revision of a center's policies, procedures, and tools. Finally, the article makes connections between refactoring and lean management principles such as a focus on outcomes, team discovery, shared understanding, failing successfully, and user-centeredness. Drawing from such principles, the article investigates methods of encouraging stakeholder expertise as a way to navigate change in multiliteracy centers, and to create environments that encourage collective engagement and action.

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“Writing centers unquestionably will continue to change. We must be careful to use the structure we have built as a way of detecting those changes, of evaluating them and of adjusting to the changes that represent improvement and working to prevent those we consider harmful.”

-Jeanne H. Simpson, “What Lies Ahead for Writing Centers: Position Statement on Professional Concerns”

1. Introduction

As the day-to-day manager of a digital studio in the English Department at Florida International University, I learned how quickly change could disrupt the environment. While change can certainly be positive, cultivating a shared vision for responding to it can prove challenging for many Writing Center Professionals (WCPs). Changes that regularly occur might, on the surface, appear relatively mundane (e.g., an instructor suddenly revising a deliverable for a multimodal assignment), but can require a WCP to make decisions about software adoption, consultant training,

E-mail address: blauren@msu.edu

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professional development activities, and so on. Large-scale structural changes, like extending client sessions online, can involve inventing and coordinating technologies, processes, and policies across an institution. Such decisions directly or indirectly affect many people that have a stake in the activities of a center. These stakeholders, depending on a center's context, can be made up of clients, consultants, WCPs, classroom instructors, institutional administrators, future employers, and/or other members of the community. Additionally, and perhaps with even higher risk or reward, response to change is often reflected in assessment results, which can be used to determine the value a center brings to an institution. And, as WCPs know too well, the results of assessment can be interpreted in unpredictable ways.

A WCP's response to ongoing change takes place among an array of seemingly chaotic administrative duties (recently detailed in overwhelming depth by Jackie Grutsch McKinney, 2013, pp. 1-2). Like many WCPs, I understood how important a strategic response to ongoing change was for the sustainability of the studio. As a result, I sought proactive methods for improving internal policies, tools, and procedures on a rolling basis by encouraging our stakeholders to participate in responding to change. In seeking a model for involving stakeholders, I discovered a computer programming technique called refactoring, which is a process used by teams to support the shared development of a system. This article discusses how the concept of refactoring can be applied to multiliteracy centers for cultivating a productive response to change in different institutional contexts. Additionally, the article describes how refactoring offers a framework for working with stakeholders to restructure and assess a center's policies, procedures, and tools. As applied here, refactoring also makes connections to lean management principles such as a focus on outcomes, team discovery, shared understanding, failing successfully, and user-centeredness. Lean principles suggest working together so “we can measure what works, learn, and adjust” (Gothelf and Seiden, 2013, p. 4). Drawing from such principles, this article addresses ways in which multiliteracy centers can be structured to respond to change by enlisting stakeholder participation. The topic of this article is important because it investigates methods of encouraging stakeholder expertise as a way to navigate administrative change in multiliteracy centers.

2. Managing Multiliteracy Centers

Multiliteracy centers can vary widely based on institutional context, which can make managing these unique environments challenging work. McKinney (2010) explains, “In Writing Center scholarship, there are two seemingly contradictory tropes used with some frequency: (a) every center is different and context changes everything, and (b) certain practices and theories are universal to all Writing Centers” (p. 207). A tradition of literature focusing on multiliteracy center administrative structures supports McKinney's conclusions. For example, Kinkead and Harris (1993) suggest, “Context, in terms of writing centers, is not a simple concept. In addition to the institutions in which they are situated, writing centers often have smaller contexts—specific programs or departments of which they are a part.” (p. xv). Institutional variance is certainly a challenge I faced when seeking common administrative techniques used by other WCPs. As a result, how WCPs respond to unique contexts has been well documented in writing center research (Kinkead & Harris, 1993; Murphy & Stay, 2006; Myers-Breslin, 1999), especially in relation to supporting digital literacies (Lee & Carpenter, 2013a, Lee & Carpenter, 2013b; Selfe, 2005; Sheridan & Inman, 2010). Nonetheless, there are important traits presented by each multiliteracy center that we can point to when discussing administrative models¹:

- Centers generally have some sort of institutional history attached to them;
- Centers also have stakeholders that exist across an institution and/or community;
- Centers generally perform some sort of consultation or intervention with these stakeholders, and this work is often assessed;
- Centers are designed spaces, either virtually and/or physically; and,
- Centers ascribe to a pedagogy summarized by North's (1984) oft-cited axiom, “We aim to make better writers, not necessarily—or immediately—better texts” (p. 441).

¹ I adapt these traits from Joan Mullins' (2009) “Issue Brief: Writing Centers” retrieved from <http://www.ncte.org/college/briefs/wc>

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