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Kairos & Stasis in Writing Center Administration

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This article extends previous research completed for her PhD dissertation.

Abstract

Writing centers often have little control over their budgets or institutional standing; some function within a constant state of precarious survival. This paper braids together *kairos* and *stasis* theory and creates a communicative methodology for writing centers. Current and future writing center administrators can employ this framework to discover contextualized ways of reaching *stasis* while seeking and taking advantage of *kairotic* moments; informing rhetorical action in this way presents a potential pathway towards writing center sustainability.

Introduction

Rhetorical theory concerning *kairos* and *stasis* provides a general yet generative framework on which to build a communicative heuristic for writing center staff and administrators that will serve useful in arguing for viability. Current and future writing center administrators and staff can employ *kairos* and *stasis* theory as theoretical frameworks to inform their rhetorical action within the institution. This methodology of communication implies a sense of rhetorical savvy and institutional knowledge or acumen, a firm foundation in writing center pedagogy, and a vibrant view of the future of the writing center. Clear communicative goals of reaching *stasis* while taking advantage of *kairotic* moments is one way writing centers can address issues of sustainability, such as acting before writing centers face a crisis, and during moments of institutional strategic planning.

This particular approach takes into account the challenge with specifying an all-encompassing solution for writing centers and instead allows for writing centers to adapt the framework according to institutional context. I first outline historic and contemporary definitions of *kairos* and *stasis* theory and situate these two rhetorical concepts within writing center contexts; after weaving them together, I offer pragmatic, adaptable approaches to enacting these concepts in the form of a five-question heuristic.

Dwindling state support, growing student loan debt, and higher tuition costs have become a crisis in the US, prompting national conversations on student performance and the cost of higher education. However, whether this is an old or new crisis, a manufactured or real crisis, writing centers and other student support services often find their viability under question during times

of change. The constant state of surviving precariously on the edge of closing means writing centers must find ways to be proactive in a crisis and become their own change agents. Getting in front of the narrative, whether that be the higher education narratives writ large or more local writing center-specific narratives, serves as one way to stabilize writing centers during moments of institutional change (see Adler-Kassner). When faced with larger crises or catalysts for change, writing centers need to consider what means they have in order to get in front of the change and work proactively rather than reactively. Employed together, *kairos* and *stasis* theory can inform writing centers' rhetorical practices in proactive ways. Guiding the discourse between writing centers and students, faculty, and upper administration can result in increased agency in institutional narratives surrounding writing centers; this agency underscores writing center identity, especially concerning epistemology and perceptions of success.

Kairos

Savvy or acumen incorporates a sense of the rhetorical situation, and this is where *kairos* is particularly useful. Within the context of writing center communication, *kairos* also extends to working both horizontally and vertically throughout the institution. The Sophists argue that *kairos* implies consideration of the context surrounding the argument and adjusting the argument accordingly, or even waiting for a more opportune moment. It is the context surrounding the argument that will present the best ways forward in communication, and one must be continually aware and ready for the best ways to present themselves. In addition, in *Against the Sophists*, Isocrates argues “to choose from these elements those which should be employed for each subject, to join them together, to arrange them properly, and also, *not to miss what the occasion demands...*” (173). Isocrates focuses, in what could be considered a sort of warning, on awareness to the demands of the occasion.

Cynthia Miecznikowski Sheard extends the sophistic definition and argues *kairos* is the “sum total” of the contexts surrounding and influencing the rhetorical situation (291). Sheard explains:

Kairos encompasses the occasion itself, the historical circumstances that brought it about, the generic conventions of the form (oral or written) required by that occasion, the manner of delivery the audience expects at that time and place, their attitudes toward the speaker (or writer) and the occasion, even their assumptions about the world around them, and so on. (291-92)

Sheard's definition addresses the dialectical nature of *kairos*, one in which contexts work in concert to provide a method for engaging or communicating. Further, Sheard's definition highlights the connection between *kairos* and discursive practices surrounding the rhetorical situation, which is key to writing center communication. Discursive practices are bound to what Foucault describes as “the rules of formation,” and serve as ways to define knowledge, and are then supported through the knowledge created. (*Archeology of Knowledge* 38). Therefore there is a connection, a symbiotic relationship, between *kairos*, the discursive practices of a rhetorical situation, and knowledge-making. Sheard further argues that “through *kairos*... human beings participate in the development of knowledge and thus in the “social construction,” we might say, of reality” (306). *Kairos* is much more than appropriateness or opportunity, and when viewed broadly as such can inform discursive practices, including writing center communicative acts.

Other modern definitions of *kairos* also articulate a contextual, nuanced definition. James L. Kinneavy and Catherine Eskin conflate *kairos* with the “situational context,” which they see as a

more modern term (433). Further, Michael Harker argues that a more nuanced definition of *kairos* “recognizes that concerns of appropriateness and timing inter-animate each other in such a way that it is almost impossible to consider *kairos* outside of the most problematic philosophical and rhetorical realm, the realm of action, the realm of ethics” (82). The modern definitions focus on rhetorical action informed by the situation, while at the same time acknowledging the contextuality of *kairos*. Harker’s use of the term “inter-animate” also point to the actionable nature of *kairos*; that is to say that *kairos* is not just about the right time and the right place, but it is also about what happens when the right time and right occasion arrives. *Kairos* focuses on the awareness necessary to effectively communicate, and I use awareness and savvy interchangeably because both terms are rooted in knowledge – to know – and are both connected to insight or acumen.

Stasis

Stasis finds its roots in forensic rhetoric wherein interlocutors agree upon the terms of the argument at hand. The first step is to acknowledge that there is a disagreement, conflict, or basis for an argument. Then after, and only after agreeing upon the terms of the argument, interlocutors enter the argument. Without agreement on terms, definitions, or factual evidence used, the interlocutors cannot enter the argument. I work from a few definitions of *stasis*, relying on more contemporary interpretations rather than classical definitions that mainly reside within the realm of forensics. In one definition of contemporary *stasis*, Helen Foster draws from Michael Carter and Janice Lauer’s discussion on contemporary *stasis* when she argues that *stasis* “grows out of the conflict between opposing forces, occupying a space of both cause and effect, which implies action, since this is also the place where rhetoric begins” (Foster, par. 21). If facts, definitions, or terms of the disagreement are not agreed upon, action, or more specifically rhetoric, cannot begin.

Rationally, both sides must agree that they use the terms in the same way, or I argue, come to a compromise regarding the definitions of said terms. In addition, Sharon Crowley delineates two specific problems that arise from not reaching *stasis*:

Ethically speaking, if participants in a dispute do not formulate the position about which they disagree, the necessary respect for an other may not be in play, and neither the conduct nor the outcome of the argument may be just. Rhetorically speaking, if *stasis* is not achieved, each side may generate all the evidence in the world to support its claims and yet never engage in argument. (29)

Failure to reach *stasis* when communicating with those outside the writing center can prove to be the main roadblock to beginning a fruitful argument or dialogue. Mainly, the definition of terms, such as “knowledge-making,” or “literacy,” is but one of the obstacles in writing center communication, for definition of terms can create parameters around writing centers’ everyday practices and identity. Because of the differences in the usage of terms, writing center administrators and staff at times cannot even begin to enter a dialogue with others unless all interlocutors agree upon a definition of the terms used.

Bringing *Kairos* and *Stasis* Together

Writing center administrators and staff can and should consider these two concepts, *kairos* and *stasis*, as working in tangent with one another. Together, these concepts serve as one way forward in writing center communication and ultimately serve in sustainability efforts. Helen Foster argues that while “[k]airos provides the impetus for” the communicative moment and *stasis* provides “the situated negotiation of the situation,” it is the “unaddressed dissonance that temporally exists and for which the right word is required for negotiation of the dissonance. The right word, however, must be based on judgment and careful planning” (par. 20). To extend Foster’s argument and situate it within writing center concerns, writing center communication in general has the upper hand in deciding upon “the right word,” for writing centers move between student and teacher discourse, between faculty and administrative discourse. In other words, writing centers move in between and reside in a liminal space that is part of both or many discourses; therefore, writing centers know how interlocutors use the terms and define “the right word.” They have the knowledge that the other participants in the dialogue do not have. Writing center administrators and staff are strategically positioned to understand both how a term is defined in the field of writing center pedagogy and also how a term is defined by those outside of the field. Therefore, writing center administrators and staff are in the unique position to choose the “right” words at the right time during communicative acts, which underscores a position of power in arguing for resources.

I propose that writing centers use this to their advantage and look for the ways in which the competing (or expanded upon) definitions overlap, look for the intersections between definitions and begin there. For example, if working on agreed upon definitions of “grammar,” writing centers can begin with something both sides agree upon: grammar implies established conventions. Just by starting at a point at which all participants agree moves the dialogue towards *stasis*. Conversations regarding writing centers begin with questions such as: what is the purpose of a writing center? Do we need a writing center at this institution? Why and for whom? How do we administer and fund a writing center? After these larger issues are addressed and agreed upon, then the conversation can move forward to local concerns: In what ways can writing centers supplement classroom instruction or faculty development? However, as Crowley points out, “unless stasis is reached, debate...cannot become an argument, and until argument begins, no nonviolent resolution can occur” (290). If the discussions surrounding writing centers never reaches *stasis*, at the right time I might add, then moving into the realm of action would be impossible for the interlocutors would be talking about two different concepts. Therefore, writing center staff and administrators should be thinking about their definition of terms as well as upper administration’s definitions in order to find the spaces where those definitions intersect.

Kairos and Stasis as Praxis

Taking the lead in defining the parameters around writing center everyday practices and position in the institution allows writing centers to have what Muriel Harris refers to as a place at the “head table.” In her 2000 prescient article “Preparing to Sit at the Head Table,” Harris focuses on two issues (then) facing institutions and thus writing centers: technology and multilingual students. She argues that writing centers need to get in front of the issues before they become crises, and encourages writing center administrators to critique their work, research student writing issues, and articulate their work, both in pragmatic and epistemological terms, more clearly for upper administration. Her article implores writing center administrators and staff to do the work that will further writing center identity and articulate the significance of writing centers

to the success of the institutions. In this way, writing centers can argue that they are viable, but more importantly, writing centers can convince stakeholders that they are “vital” (21).

My framework serves to help writing centers answer Harris’ call; *kairos* and *stasis* theory as a methodology helps writing centers rhetorically position their work and identity within their institutional home and also encourages them to become the public face of writing center work. Pragmatic examples include writing centers connecting with their institution’s public relations office or branding office to see where they fit into the larger branding image. Writing centers directors and staff can position themselves as the expert on writing issues on campus so that they are called upon when opinions on writing are called for. These suggestions all point to writing center directors and staff taking writing center discursive practices into the public realm. The result is that writing centers can begin to “own” their identity, their work, and their goals.

All of these actions begin with a reflection and inquiry, and I have drafted a few questions writing center directors, new or experienced, can ask themselves as they begin this process. This list is by no mean exhaustive, nor will it work with every writing center on every campus. They serve as general questions that can be revised to serve the local material conditions at specific writing centers.

1. Why does my institution have a Writing Center?
2. How does the funding for the Writing Center reflect the institutional perception of writing centers in general?
3. Where can I identify the intersections between the institution’s goals and the Writing Center’s goals?
4. Where can I form coalitions on the department level? The program level? The classroom level?
5. How can I increase my Writing Center’s visibility, institutionally and publically?

Question one is important for it has the potential to lead to a writing center’s origin story. If the exigency for the writing center was remediation, then writing center administration and staff need to work diligently to take hold of that narrative and work to change it. If the exigency lies with a particular program, then writing center administration and staff know they have an immediate ally and a potential funding source. Question two leads to another part of the origin story; how a writing center is funded has the potential to illuminate institutional perceptions of writing centers.

Questions three and four provoke a careful rhetorical analysis of the institution’s mission statement and departmental or programmatic mission statements; this analysis has the potential to uncover networks and help form effective coalitions throughout the community. For example, part of the institution’s strategic plan may be to increase online instruction within the next five years, particularly in the education department. Writing centers can connect with faculty and administrators in the education department to show how the writing center can be an integral part of meeting that strategic goal.

Finally, question five asks writing center administrators and staff to survey existing programs and events on campus and in the surrounding community and craft effective ways to participate in these events. The more connected a writing center is to various departments, programs, and

community coalitions, the more vocal advocates they can potentially obtain. These advocates may become useful when facing budget cuts.

Conclusion

The widespread crisis of funding in higher education combined with outdated perceptions of writing centers epistemological practices have material effects on writing center sustainability; therefore, enacting a communicative methodology informed by rhetorical concepts of *kairos* and *stasis* theory can help writing center administration recognize the signs of impending crises and thus begin to shore up resources and mobilize coalitions. Further, *kairos* and *stasis* theory can assist writing centers in articulating their inextricable value to the institution; the more woven in a writing center is in the day to day life of the student and faculty population, the harder it will be to defund the writing center. All of this leads to a more sustainable future for vital writing centers.

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