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***Windows in the writing centre: students' physical orientation toward or away from natural light is determined by genre***

Abstract:

Drawing from an ethnographic study, this project reveals a relationship between genre and the role of natural light in a writing centre. Using observation, interviews, and analysis, the author discovers that students prefer to face natural light during formative writing and sit with their backs to natural light during summative writing or while leading a writing consultation. This revelation about the role of light with respect to the type of writing presents questions about writing centre design and the implications of space created for creative and intellectual pursuits.

Biographical note:

Anna Cairney earned her Ph.D. in English from St. John's University with a concentrated study in Composition and Rhetoric. Prior to academia, she worked in trade publishing at Writers House. Her most recent position is the Visiting Assistant Professor of English at Marist College. In addition to teaching, she also serves as the Director of the Writing Centre.

Keywords:

Writing centre design, natural light, genre, ethnography, formative writing, summative writing.

**Introduction**

Often in literature, light sources are employed as powerful symbols, metaphors, or devices to convey themes, and emotions, and to express the human experience. Several authors have discussed the importance of light as a metaphorical element in their works or even in their writing process. Virginia Woolf, in *To the Lighthouse*, explores the significance of light as a symbol of clarity, understanding, and the search for meaning. The lighthouse in the novel represents a source of illumination and insight, both literal and metaphorical (Stewart, 1977).

Italian writer Italo Calvino investigates the theme of light in various ways in his imaginative works. In *Invisible Cities*, he presents a collection of fantastical cities, each with its own unique light source and ambiance, representing different aspects of human existence and perception (Gomez & Harguindey, n.d.). American author Eudora Welty often wrote about the transformative power of light in her stories. She paid careful attention to the play of light and shadow, believing that light could reveal the essence of a character or a scene. In an interview, Welty spoke about the importance of visual imagery and the way light can illuminate the emotions and truths of her characters (Claxton, n.d.). The late Toni Morrison frequently employed light imagery in her novels to convey emotional and spiritual significance. In *Beloved*, she uses light to symbolise hope, rebirth, and the haunting presence of memory. Morrison's writing often engages with the interplay of light and darkness, employing it as a metaphorical tool to explore themes of identity, history, and human connection (Wyatt, 1993). Morrison in particular felt the power of light in her fiction and in her lived experience as a writer.

For Morrison and many others, writing is so much more than getting the words down. Writing becomes a sort of physical act that can be very time and place based. In 1983 when Morrison was writing *Beloved*, she “realized that I was clearer headed, more confident and generally more intelligent in the morning. The habit of getting up early, which I had formed when the children were young, now became my choice” (Morrison, 1993, as cited in Chappell & Lacour, 2023). Expanding from her work as a writer, in the role of editor, Morrison would speak with the authors she edits about their ‘rituals’ as they are drafting; asking what/where/how does the writing begin? Morrison’s own ritual was to rise before the sun, drink a cup of coffee, and wait for the light to appear as her signal to begin. She said in an interview for *The Paris Review*:

this ritual comprises my preparation to enter a space that I can only call nonsecular...writers all devise ways to approach that place where they expect to make the contact, where they become the conduit, or where they engage in this mysterious process. For me, light is the signal in the transition. It’s not being *in* the light; it’s being there *before it arrives*. (Morrison, 1993, as cited in Chappell & Lacour, 2023)

Morrison encourages the writers she guides to consider when they are at their best creatively and what steps they need to take to release their imagination. For her, the physical light of dawn inspires and motivates the waiting text.

### **Background Information**

Often light is described by writers as a physical and metaphorical tool. Researching terms like “light” and “writing” almost always leads to light as a metaphor more than an actual electromagnetic spectrum of gamma rays or however science defines a source of light. It is the actual, literal light source that illuminates and allows us to see that this project builds on, specifically when it comes to the ways we write. Physical writing spaces, and more specifically their sources of light, can be an overlooked factor in designing writing spaces. In addition to illumination, does a light source influence a writer’s goal? Is there a relationship

between the direction of the light source and the genre of writing? Physical endeavours often require a specific type of space. Mountain climbers and skiers both need slopes, one to ascend and one to descend. A variety of sports require a track, trail, arena, or court. Ample time and attention are given to the study and design of the physical space for physical activity. But what about the physical space for intellectual activity? Where and in what surroundings is the best way to think? If writing is thinking made visible, then the places where writing occurs should be designed and suited to the writing process and desired genre.

Deborah Brandt is a prominent scholar in the field of literacy studies and education. She is known for her research and contributions to understanding literacy practices, particularly in the context of education and society. Brandt's work emphasises the importance of writing in shaping individuals' lives and the broader society. In her book, *The Rise of Writing*, Brandt argues that more than any time in human history, writing is the method by which humans communicate. She recognises that writing is not merely a functional skill but a crucial form of literacy that plays a significant role in various aspects of the human experience.

Researchers at The University of Sheffield School of Education compiled a report on attitudes towards reading and writing from 1914 to 2014. A part of their work reveals the need for effective reading and writing skills and success in employment; “being able to read and write puts individuals in a position where they are more likely to be included in communities and society more widely (Levy et al. 2014, p. 3). Writing allows individuals to participate in various communities, convey their thoughts, and negotiate their roles within society. Drawing from Brandt, writing contributes to the construction of personal and social identities. It empowers individuals to express their perspectives and experiences, thereby influencing how they are perceived and how they perceive themselves. Writing is not only vital to self-identity but is an essential skill for economic success and mobility in contemporary society. With such potential outcomes, one would think the study of effective writing spaces would be ubiquitous at institutes of higher education.

The ability to write effectively is often tied to job opportunities and professional advancement, as written communication is a fundamental aspect of many professions. Therefore, educators, policymakers, and researchers need to recognise the significance of writing in people's lives and support equitable access to writing opportunities, resources, and perhaps physical space. One of the reasons students seek a post-secondary education is to gain access to a professional community through a job. In college, it is often written work that determines a student's grade. Many classes use a piece of summative writing to measure the knowledge gained through the course. Other courses use writing as a part of knowledge formation to allow the student to expand their thinking. This time engaged in formative writing is like having a conversation with one's own mind. As writing is such a pivotal aspect of the learning experience, it makes sense that universities would have developed, created and promoted their own writing spaces. These spaces influence the way students write, which contributes to their success in achieving their goals.

Yet, there is minimal scholarship on the environment needed to produce effective writing. The systematic literature review on creative space by Thoring et al provides a groundwork for

the available scholarship on the intentional design of settings that support creative work processes, but not spaces specific to fostering writing. Additionally, the authors acknowledge, “the research about the specifics of creative spaces is still in its beginnings” (2019, p. 300). Another impactful source of research is a dissertation by Amanda Bemer, *The Rhetoric of Space in The Design of Academic Computer Writing Locations*. Bemer’s chapter on writing centre design reveals scholarship focused on how the space makes a user feel before shifting the study’s focus to online writing (2010, p. 115). Bemer’s study references Hadfield et al’s (2003) assertion that “the environment where interaction between and among people occurs is crucial as it affects the way people feel and, therefore, the way people interact” (p. 175). Still, classrooms, which are far more ubiquitous than writing centres, often have baffling, dated design choices for collaboration in a modern academy. Collaboration occurs across the humanities, however in my experience, chairs are often bolted to the floor, or the students sit in graduated rows like a stadium. While most likely these spaces were originally designed for lectures where students remain static, the physical space creates a barrier to learning. Why any classroom is windowless is equally confounding. The importance of light to mood and thought is well known. Physical spaces for intellectual pursuits need the same attention given to physical spaces for physical pursuits.

Prior to pursuing a Ph.D. and working in higher education, I worked in trade publishing, an industry whose central purpose is producing writing. The literary agency where I worked most often received completed manuscripts. I was not privy to the formative stage of the initial finished draft. Naturally, there were rounds of revisions and rewriting, but the bulk of writing products to be shaped were “done” when they arrived. Enthralled with the way narrative is produced, I chose to expand my knowledge to the scholarship of formative writing. To that end, I pursued doctoral programs that would allow me to work in a writing centre. The school I chose, and that chose me, had a well-appointed writing centre with plenty of desirable attributes.

### **Methodology**

The writing centre at St. John’s University in Queens, New York is large and impressive. The physical space was designed and built to reflect the vision of the former director, Dr. Derek Owens. As an artist as well as a scholar, he had a deep understanding of how light, space and design affect creativity and production. Dr. Owens talked about the space as part classroom, part coffee shop, part studio, part library, a place that is collective and collaborative. The constructed, physical manifestation of his vision is impressive, a stop on the campus tour circuit. There are large windows that run along the entirety of one wall. These windows let in ample light. When I would arrive first thing in the morning, sometimes I would forget to turn on the overhead lights, as the natural illumination from the windows nearly made the space bright enough. Under the windows are six large wood tables, each seating eight comfortably. The chairs are moveable. Additionally, the space has three living room-like set-ups to work from and its own library of writing scholarship and supportive resources. There were overhead lights, but there were also table lamps that created a softer glow down the centreline of the tables.

The director of the writing centre was also the director of the first-year writing program and used this duality to influence the first-year writing faculty to visit the centre with their classes. The students learned that the space was open and available to them. The space was available for any type of writing in any subject. The only requirement was that a student be working on writing. In other words, a student couldn't just use the space to socialise, they needed to be engaged with a written project. But it could be any project, any subject, school-sponsored, or self-driven. As such, the space was well-utilised by the student population during the years I was on campus.

This writing centre was where I did the fieldwork for an ethnographic study on writing space. There were four populations that used the centre. One: the students who used the space to work on writing. Two: the students who used the space for more formal, scheduled writing consultations. Three: the students who acted as writing coaches and led the consultations, and Four: the tutors who occupied the space when they weren't working. I was often the first one to arrive in the morning. As a mother of young children, my day began long before the typical resident undergraduate student. Having this first-on-the-scene vantage allowed me to record the way the centre filled up, and who sat where. I observed all of them, recording where they sat, how long they stayed, and their time writing versus thinking or talking.

One of the initial patterns to emerge from my field notes was the seat selected by the students who arrived first in the morning. Often the first arriving student was a consultant. They would either sit at the head or the foot of one of the six long tables directly under the windows. People are creatures of habit, writing consultants are no different. Very often the same consultant would sit at the same place each day. If the usual seat they sat in was occupied, they would find a parallel seat at another table. In other words, if they sat at the "head" of a certain table, but that seat was taken, then they would move to an adjacent table at sit at the "head" there. Generally speaking, the opposite seating choice was made by students coming in to write on their own projects. Again, as habitual beings, students who did not have a writing appointment scheduled would come in and sit at the "foot" of the tables. My early assumption was that each student, writing consultant or student client, simply chose to sit apart from a group to which they didn't belong. This assumption made sense although I continued the practice of logging seating patterns in my observations.

## **Findings**

My a-ha moment occurred on a day when the usual pattern was disrupted. One of the consultants who normally sat at the "foot" of a table arrived and selected to sit at the "head." Why this caught my attention was that her usual seat was open; I couldn't see/hear/sense any reason that her preferred seat was not appealing. Shortly after she arrived, she went to meet a client and they returned to her position at the "head" of the table. The writing consultant was covering another consultant's shift. She wasn't there to do her own writing but to work with another's text. I began to consider how a person's reason for being in the centre affected their seating choice.

One of the practices of the centre is for a consultant to ask the client where they prefer to sit.

This question doesn't occur immediately, but in the waiting area after some small talk between the two to establish rapport. Occasionally a client has a strong opinion, but the most common answer defers to wherever the consultant wants to sit. Knowing this, most consultants choose the endcap of the table to put the client at an L sitting them along the long side. Sitting in a corner, or L-shape is preferred to sitting side-by-side or across from each other. Why did the consultant who normally sat at the "foot" switch to the "head" because she was working with another's writing and not her own? Was this a conscious choice?

Once I began to consider the writers' intent and purpose, new seating patterns began to emerge. The consultants were the easiest to track. Once seated, I would check the schedule and make a note if they were working or in the centre of their own accord. For the clients in the centre without an appointment, I watched and recorded their choices. However, that group did not have a singular seat choice; these students either faced the natural light outside or faced away from it. Thus, I couldn't determine a link between client and consultant and seat choice. The next phase of the project was to hold interviews. I interviewed consultants and undergraduate student clients. Interview questions included asking why they chose to write in the writing centre versus the library or their own room, or at the numerous dining spaces on campus. I also asked what type of writing the student and off-schedule consultant was working on. Answers included school assignments, personal writing to friends, or journaling. Some wrote poetry for fun; others were racing a deadline for a class or application.

Once the interviews were done, I coded the genre of writing along with their seating selection. The data revealed that genre was the driving factor in seat selection. The type of writing the writer intended to work on, regardless of whether they were a consultant or client, was the largest factor in determining which seat they selected. When pressed further, the interviewees revealed it was the seat's relationship to the world outside, to the natural light, that mattered most. Not the placement in the room, not the people already at the table, not the "head" or "foot," but the writer's ability to face the outside or put the outside behind them. Consistently, the students who were writing of their own accord, no summative assignment, no deadline, just writing for personal reasons or perhaps brainstorming, were the students who faced the windows and bathed in light. The students who sat with their backs to the windows were the ones who were there early to get an assignment done.

### **Analysis**

Was it really the light? Why not the view, or the activity on the great lawn outside? More study is needed, but what I am sure is natural light as a factor in relation to genre in the writing space. Remember, the centre had other seating options away from the windows. The decision regarding where to sit wasn't just a facing in or facing out choice, but I hypothesise it is the way the light revealed ideas. The realisation that the purpose of the writing is a key factor in determining the writer's physical position to natural light fascinates me. My study was limited. Limited to one semester, in one place, with a small sample size. But what are the implications of windows and natural light and writing production? Does natural light play a difference in other fields? Certainly for visual art, but I wonder about those working in applied or theoretical mathematics. When do the mathematicians look out the window while

they work and when do they look away from the windows?

As I began to search for scholarship, it became immediately apparent that within existing scholarship, “light” and “illumination” are largely treated as figurative elements. I tried switching the key terms to light sources in intellectual spaces. However, much of the literature on academic space design is focused on larger things like the building or schoolroom designed for learning. Even Thoring et al. excluded papers in their systematic review that, “were limited to one aspect of the creative environment (e.g., lighting...)” (2019, p. 300). Of Thoring et al’s seventy sources, twelve identified windows to nature as a concrete characteristic of a creative space. Although this may seem like a small amount to support the importance of natural light, only three other factors ranked higher, writable surfaces, visible materials, and technical infrastructure. There are 35 other identified concepts that rank lower. The focus of many articles is the classroom, not its connections to the outside world. I could not find any research on direct correlations between light and genre.

It is not a big revelation that natural light is beneficial. Spaces lit by the sun are aesthetically pleasing, so they naturally have a positive impact on a space designated for writing. Exposure to natural light, whether you are facing toward or away from it, is regularly linked to improved mood and increased overall well-being. Doctors from UCLA Health, Elizabeth Ko and Eve Glazier write that “decades of studies have shown that natural light has a powerful, and often positive, effect not only on mental health, but also on physical health and general well-being” (n.d.). Sunlight stimulates the production of serotonin which promotes feelings of happiness and relaxation. When students are exposed to natural light, they are more likely to feel awake, energized, and engaged in their writing tasks. When students have access to natural light, they may experience better concentration and comprehension, leading to more effective writing sessions. Students may feel more inspired, creative, and connected to their surroundings when they have access to natural light. But why does the behaviour change to face outward, toward the light, or face inward, with the light at their backs? How does genre fit into this choice?

## **Conclusion**

The vast majority of writing centre work occurs with formative writing. Formative writing is focused on providing feedback and guiding the learning process as it is happening. Unlike summative writing, which occurs at the end of a learning period to evaluate overall performance, formative writing takes place during the learning process to help students improve their understanding, skills, and performance in real time. It often involves multiple drafts and revisions requiring the student to actively engage with their own work, seeking ways to enhance their writing based on feedback and their own insights. Formative writing enables students to adjust, to learn from their mistakes, and to enhance their learning outcomes. During formative writing, the focus is more on looking inward than looking outward. Formative writing assessments are designed to help students reflect on their own understanding, progress, and writing skills. The emphasis is on self-assessment and self-improvement, rather than on evaluating external knowledge or content. Does facing outward toward the windows allow for internal gazing? While formative writing involves looking

inward, it's important to note that it doesn't mean disregarding external feedback or the influence of external resources. Instructors and peer feedback also play a crucial role in formative assessment, providing valuable guidance and perspectives to help students improve their writing skills.

By contrast, when students faced away from the windows, they were working on higher-stakes essays, applications and other summative assignments. Summative writing refers to a type of writing assessment that evaluates a student's overall comprehension, understanding, and performance at the end of a learning period or course. It is typically used to assess the knowledge and skills a student has acquired over a specific period, such as a semester, academic year, or a complete educational program. When the light was behind them, students were working on comprehensive essays that demonstrated their understanding of the course material, revealed their critical thinking skills and ability to articulate ideas effectively. Students who were working on a substantial project, such as a research paper, did not look toward the window. Instead, they sat with the natural light behind them. Ironically, summative writing is more focused on looking outward, particularly in terms of assessing a student's comprehension and understanding of external course material and subject matter.

The writing process can vary significantly from writer to writer and different writers may have different preferences or tendencies when it comes to looking inward or outward during their creative work. I tend to think that many writing centres, housed in basements, have never been in a position to consider the rhetoric of light for the space. Naturally, there is no one-size-fits-all answer to this question, as writing styles and approaches can be diverse and unique. In my project, the writers who needed to look to their internal selves were the writers who were looking out of the light of the large windows. Perhaps they were drawing inspiration to convey their own experiences, emotions, and introspective reflections on paper. Conversely, the writers who were producing summative, outward content, sat with the outside behind them. They were no longer focused on gaining knowledge but putting forth what they already knew. If the writing required inward development (formative), the writer looked out into the natural light. If the writing required an account of outward knowledge (summative), the writer looked into the room, away from the natural light.

In reality, most writers likely use a combination of both looking inward and outward, metaphorically and literally. The act of writing often involves a dynamic interplay between personal experiences, emotions, and external influences. A writer's unique voice emerges from their blend of inner reflections and external observations. Moreover, different writing projects may require different degrees of looking inward or outward. Ultimately, the creative process is a complex and individualised endeavour, and writers can find inspiration and material from both within themselves and the external world. The key is for writers to embrace their own strengths and preferences while being open to exploring new perspectives and sources of inspiration to enrich their work. In school spaces dedicated to writing, it would be ideal to create a setting that allowed writers to thrive. I am not oblivious to the limitations of such an ideal: space, budgets, privilege, and politics are steadfast barriers in this endeavour. Yet, if writing is to continue to be a stalwart in assessment, advancement, and



success, the spaces designated for writing should be purposively designed to augment critical thinking.

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