

# Southern Discourse in the Center

A Journal of Multiliteracy and Innovation

---

TITLE: Fostering Collaboration, Creativity, and Connection: Writing Center Spaces as Exhibit Areas

AUTHOR(S): Jeffrey Howard

VOLUME/ISSUE: *SDC* 26(1)

PAGES: 36–57

PUBLISHED: Spring, 2022

---



*Southern Discourse in the Center: A Journal of Multiliteracy and Innovation* (*SDC*) is a peer-reviewed scholarly journal published twice per year by the [Southeastern Writing Center Association](http://www.southeasternwritingcenter.org) (SWCA, [www.southeasternwritingcenter.org](http://www.southeasternwritingcenter.org)). As a forum for practitioners in writing centers, speaking centers, digital centers, and multiliteracy centers, *SDC* publishes articles from administrators, consultants, and other scholars concerned with issues related to training, consulting, labor, administration, theory, and innovative practices.

Feel free to send queries, ideas, and proposals to us at [southerndiscoursejournal@gmail.com](mailto:southerndiscoursejournal@gmail.com).

© by Southeastern Writing Center Association (SWCA). You are free to make copies of and distribute this file for research, teaching, and training purposes as long as you keep this cover page attached.

## Fostering Collaboration, Creativity, and Connection: Writing Center Spaces as Exhibit Areas

–Jeffrey Howard

**Keywords:** exhibits, space, collaboration, creativity, display

Writing centers exist as spaces in which consultants and clients engage in linguistic activities ultimately intended to help clients improve as communicators (North 438). The spaces in which these interactions occur can be physical, like the “unused classrooms, old barracks, and basements...on the fringes of the academy” that Warnock and Warnock mention (23) and that have in many instances housed writing centers in the past. They can also include writing centers with more resources,

prestige, and administrative control because of greater “institutional status and power” (Singh-Corcoran and Emika). Writing centers can also exist as digital spaces in which consultants and clients meet synchronously or asynchronously via email, chatrooms, Skype, Google Hangouts, BlueJeans, or Piazza. Because of our evolving practices and mindsets and the accessibility afforded by technologies (as well as our heavy reliance upon such technologies during the COVID-19 pandemic), consulting in digital environments continues to influence critical conversations about writing centers as spaces. The scope of this article, however, deals primarily with the



**Figure 1.** A marketing poster from the CommLab's exhibit on cinematic history and optical toys.

writing center as a physical space and the ways we interact with and utilize that space to perform the essential work of supporting student success. To that end, I ask how we can reimagine, modify, or “revise” a space to advance our organizational goals and mission. In other words, in our hands what can a space become and what else can we make it do? In this article, I will demonstrate how writing center administrators and their consultants can use exhibits, curation, and collaboration to reimagine a space that serves client’ needs, contributes to the professionalization of our consultants, and promotes engaging perspectives on language, communication, literacies, and many other topics related to the work of the center and its relationships with diverse student populations.

## **Background**

The writing center, whether physical or digital, is a repository that houses resources, like humans, handouts, and technology, but the space itself can also serve as a resource. Spatial components like structure, layout, and interior design have a great capacity for influencing the individuals who inhabit spaces. Spaces promote states of being through color or décor, and layout, furnishings, or technology can cultivate optimal conditions for creativity and community-building. Space and its effects have been and should be a key concern in the design of an educational space like a writing center, but the actual task of creating a space that facilitates learning in the most effective way can be daunting. While it is natural to have more questions than answers at the outset of any such project, for many administrators, finding the right questions to ask might itself be the first and greatest challenge to overcome. Leslie Hadfield et al. writes, “Learning can take place anywhere, from storefront buildings of a tribal college to a grassy quad during the springtime,” but “if the opportunity presents itself to enhance or build an ideal learning space—in this case, an ideal writing center—what are the considerations? What are the needed resources? To whom do we turn for consultation?” (167) These are just some of the questions one might have in conceptualizing and making material a welcoming learning space with a unified purpose and identity.

Fortunately, many campuses possess the resources to craft effective learning spaces by drawing on the expertise of “campus planners, support staff, and design faculty” (Hadfield et al. 167). When

approaching the monumental task of creating or optimizing a learning space, writing center administrators, whose expertise lies in specialized communication research and methodologies—not structural design or feng shui—should feel free to partner with architectural, engineering, and design experts. Such professionals may be able to sketch out a rough blueprint in seconds or calculate, force, mass, and volume, but knowing little to nothing of the writing center’s mission or praxis, they require some consultation. Together these experts can work with writing center administrators to produce a physical space that fits with what is known about learning optimization and writing center best practices within the context of specific student population needs and university culture.

In “Designing Multiliteracy Centers: A Zoning Approach,” however, James A. Inman provides a word of caution regarding the way some administrators approach the design of a writing center, saying, “Many centers appear to have been designed around furnishings and technologies, rather than what clients will actually be doing. This approach poses a problem because any center exists to provide effective services for clients, not to have the grandest furnishing and technologies” (20). Inman’s critique illustrates a valuable principle. In designing or configuring a writing center space, form should follow function. A student- and service-oriented design that facilitates client learning should be a priority. A writing center is more than things to sit on and work at and on. The most important part of a writing center are the conversations consultants have with clients, and they just happen to have these interactions in a room beneath a ceiling while sitting on chairs at tables while looking at computers, tablets, or smart boards. While furniture matters a great deal for our comfort, writing center spaces are more about relationships than furniture. Human interaction and idea exchange are a large part of what make the writing center a space at all. Exhibits, as will be discussed later, are a simple means for promoting productive interactions and idea exchange by exposing students to interesting artifacts, hands-on activities, and spatial arrangements that are conducive to conversation.

The human element is a powerful component of the form, identity, and meaning of a space. Because of the fluidity of space, even if we are not a part of a team that originally conceives the space or contributes directly to its materialization (“I want this wall over here, my office goes here, the front desk should go here, and we need tables all around...”), as

inhabitants of the space we can still contribute to its evolution at any point. In fact, evolution is one of the constants of space, as Ann Gardiner writes, “Space itself, I have come to realize, is always a work in progress” (“Democratizing Space in the Writing Center”). The writing center changes depending on who comes into it and how they use it. For example, some clients act like serious professionals when they come in, put their backpacks on the floor, pull out their laptops, and prepare for a session; other clients might pull up a comfortable bean bag chair in the corner and lie back for a minute or three. These sets of actions are both allowable within the versatile center, but they are very different actions that represent very different attitudes in the way they approach and give meaning to the space. With the number of clients who use our services and the amount of consultant turnover that most writing centers experience, our spaces undergo constant change or adaptation in the way the space is used, what it can do, and what it can mean to those who use it. The center in the fall will be different from the center in the spring. For administrators, who generally are more permanent than peer consultants and clients, embracing the space as a perpetual “work in progress” is a real opportunity to use space to impact the lives of consultants and clients.

There are as many ways of reimagining or revising a space to attain this level of impact as there are people who enter the writing center’s doors. In the Naugle CommLab at Georgia Tech, one initiative we have undertaken involves the repurposing of underutilized space in the center for the construction and display of communication-themed, multimodal, and interactive exhibits to create a space that aligns with the educational and social needs of students and staff members. Like many centers, the Naugle CommLab is a space intentionally designed around the needs of student communicators and the concept of communication as a process. According to a 2011 Georgia Tech news bulletin, the CommLab, which includes meeting areas, computer workstations and rehearsal studios....is designed for different types of work or project phases, with faculty available to advise students each step of the way....It is equipped to take students from conception to completion of a project, enabling them to draft, edit, revise and compose written or other types of work all in one room (“Communication Center Opens”).

This intentional design has been a part of the center since its conception. As mentioned previously, however, spaces are dynamic “works in progress,” constantly changing to meet the needs and reflect the personalities, goals, and cultures of the people who inhabit them. The Naugle CommLab already functions well at what it was designed to do, namely helping our students foster their own communication skills and their understanding of communication as a process. Surveying the space, however, I had to ask myself: What else could the space become and do, and how could I and my colleagues influence the space and increase its impact on those who inhabit it? As I asked myself that question, I noticed one part of the CommLab that was being used for nothing except piling bean bag chairs. It had plenty of wall surface and a TV that was rarely on. For the next year, that space would become our exhibit area.



**Figure 2.** The layout of the CommLab's multimodal exhibit on comics and literacy.

### **Exhibits in the Writing Center**

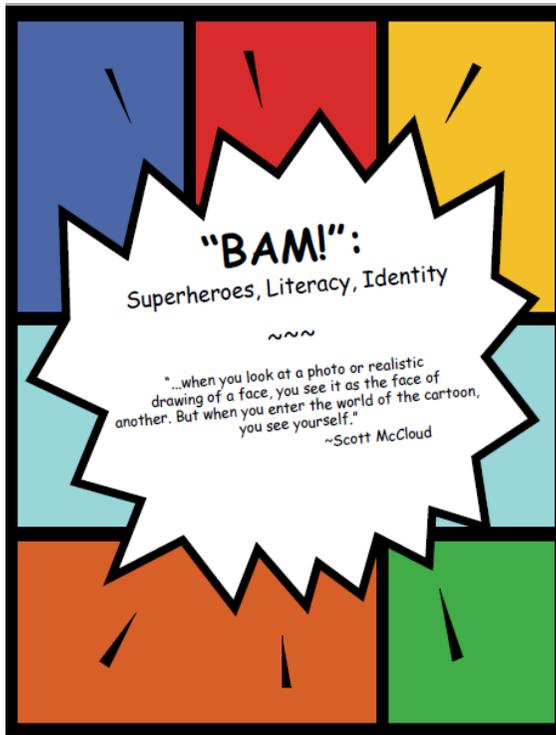
Writing centers have great potential to become exhibit areas, and our center is not the first to incorporate exhibits into their space. According to Margaret J. Marshall, writing centers in general are spaces “for intellectual projects involving literacy, discourse practices, teacher education, and institutional policy, to name but a few of the possibilities” (Marshall 75). Exhibits are a rigorous form of intellectual work that require the designers to find a central question or theme and curate artifacts that connect to and complicate that question or theme. Geoffrey Middlebrook, for example, writes about a collaborative art display project he undertook in 2015 to commission original student art for display in USC’s writing center. The purpose of this project was to create a space that was more welcoming to the students the writing center is

supposed to serve. Middlebrook writes, “If...centers prudently pursue collaborative campus relationships and wisely leverage their assets, the outcome may well be a combination of refined appearance, raised profile, increased traffic and, most significantly, improved service to students” (“Writing Center Topographies”). Essentially, Middlebrook is claiming that the aesthetics of space and the function of space are deeply connected, and exhibit areas, whether they involve walls, pedestals, tables, cases, or all of the above, can capitalize on that intersection in ways that directly support the center’s mission.

Middlebrook also suggests that exhibits are not just about affecting people once they are in our space; properly leveraged or publicized, they also possess the potential for drawing into the space people who might not otherwise seek out our services or even know who we are and what we do. Megan Lotts agrees with that sentiment and describes how the art exhibit spaces at Rutgers University could function as a means for publicizing the library as a space and a resource and thereby draw people in (“Building Bridges”). However, using exhibits to draw people into the writing center space depends greatly on the reliability and reach of the systems of publicity (email, social media, digital and physical signage, etc.) being deployed. For our center, social media as a means of publicizing exhibits and events is not always as far-reaching as we hope it will be, and digital signage can easily be ignored. Mass emails sent through Institute Communications channels have a wide circulation, but, like digital signage, such messages are also easy to dismiss. Once such challenges are addressed, using exhibits to bring people into the space can be much more likely.

When I arrived at Georgia Tech in 2019, I, a former Special Collections archivist with experience in exhibit-building, found that exhibits were already a popular part of the academic culture of the university, particular in the Writing and Communication Program. Many English 1101 and 1102 instructors at Georgia Tech had been assigning their students the task of creating exhibits in the various permanent exhibit spaces on campus, the presence of these exhibit spaces themselves attesting to the place exhibits held in the institutional culture. In my first week of orientation at Georgia Tech, two different postdoctoral fellows described exhibit assignments, one on comics and civic engagement, the other on media archeology, their students had done recently. In the same orientation, I heard a story about Professor Hugh Crawford who had his

literature students build a replica of Henry David Thoreau's cabin, which was later exhibited in the library (Maddux 18). Finally, during that same



**Figure 3.** A marketing poster from the CommLab's exhibit on comics and literacy.

semester, I taught in the basement of the Clough Undergraduate Learning Commons where every day I passed, not without interest, a Harry Potter-themed book arts exhibit built by students in a previous English 1102 course. In the Naugle CommLab, I felt that the principles of exhibit-making that I had developed as an archivist could continue to find application in the fluidity of a writing center space. These exhibits were never intended to turn the writing center into a museum, but rather to create a more vibrant, engaging, and welcoming atmosphere for clients and staff members, promoting conversation and connections among those who entered our space seeking assistance and feedback from our consultants.

At the same time, exhibit-building is not just for our clients, but is also for our consultants and other staff members who inhabit the writing center space. As an exercise, exhibit creation requires many of the same intellectual moves as trying to construct a literature review or research paper, though in addition to finding relationships between opinions or ideas, an exhibit also re-imagines the relationships between configurations of material objects. This work requires designers to rethink what they know and learn new things, and that is a valuable activity for our consultants. As Anne Ellen Geller et al. writes, "Even working from the basic premise that students attending our schools are

building a more vibrant, engaging, and welcoming atmosphere for clients and staff members, promoting conversation and connections among those who entered our space seeking assistance and feedback from our consultants.

learners, we have to account for the kind of learning, the learning culture, if you will, that a writing center can provide” (48). “We,” of course refers to administrators, who are not simply hiring consultants, but should also be investing in them by providing them with opportunities to develop or acquire new skills and capabilities. Geller et al adds,

Writing centers can be sites for learning cultures that recognize and honor the multiple ways we work not just from what we already know, but from what we are learning in the moment. . . . In trying to devise ways to support these goals through our staff education, we want to design activities and intellectual challenges that get tutors to look at their everyday experiences differently. We want our tutors to step around or step outside of how they usually see. We want them to see connections. (48)

Exhibit building, I would argue, can cultivate the kind of learning culture Geller writes about. Even though it does not directly involve consultants tutoring clients, some of our consultants in the Naugle CommLab have suggested that building an exhibit helped them re-examine communication as an idea and create cohesive narrative connections and arguments based on their re-imagining. According to Rocio Soto, who has worked in the CommLab as a center assistant and peer consultant for nearly four years, collaborating on exhibits with her fellow consultants proved useful in multiple ways. She says, “Working on these exhibits made me think critically about communication and how we define it and utilize that identity within the center. However, it also helped to create community among all of us. We had to work on the project together and that took learning what everybody’s strengths and areas of improvement [were]. And that was super helpful for understanding team dynamics, etc.” Such explorations can certainly affect their philosophy on consulting and approaches to communication more generally. Practically, exhibit-building provides opportunities to practice collaborative strategies and enrich relationships, learn or develop facility with new tools and technologies, and build community as we realize our ideas materially.

## Exhibits as Collaborative Opportunities

Exhibits provide ample opportunities for pursuing collaborative relationships and projects. Megan Lotts talks about exhibit spaces in terms of interpersonal connection and collaboration, calling them a means to “connect with the overall campus community” and “a way to promote cross-disciplinary collaboration” and build partnerships. All of the exhibits that have appeared in the Naugle CommLab have provided opportunities for collaboration and partnership as we sought to materialize our ideas. For the first exhibit we constructed in the Naugle CommLab, I collaborated with Dr. Chelsea Murdock, then assistant director of the CommLab, to produce an exhibit on the material and



**Figure 4.** The exhibit case for the CommLab's exhibit on cinematic history and optical toys.

digital lives of poetry. I secured artifacts and created a slide show that showed the different ways poetry exists digitally, in digital archives, online magazines, and even as e-poetry. Dr. Murdock coordinated the setup for the physical space and the technology to support this hybrid exhibit. We partnered with the Georgia Tech Special Collections and Archives who lent us a display case, and Kirk Henderson, who works in

Special Collections and Archives, helped us to set up the space and personally saw to the layout of the artifacts, complete with book cradles and Mylar wrappings. For our third exhibit, on optical toys and early cinema, we were able to revisit that partnership and joined forces with retroTECH, a division of Special Collections and Archives, who lent us antique optical toys, including a kaleidoscope and camera obscura, for the display.

While collaboration has prevailed in some form during each of these exhibits, it has not always involved campus partners. Sometimes it is simply people in the CommLab who want to contribute, and the collaboration takes place among people already in the center instead of people across units. For example, in our second exhibit, during the summer of 2019, we chose to display comic books, such as an early 1980s Frank Miller *Daredevil* issue, a reprint of *Superman #1*, and an anthology of Ms. Marvel comics, while showing superhero films on the television. Once again, I supplied the material artifacts for the display case, which is the part I like the most, but our former CommLab director, Dr. Brandy Blake, brought a number of films to show throughout the summer, lent her PlayStation so we could actually show the films, and even created a viewing schedule to post on the door so passing students knew what we were showing and at what time. Because it was summer, we wanted an exhibit that would engage people, create a relaxing atmosphere, and pull people into the center. While we had no formal assessment program for tracking the number of people the exhibits brought in, we did have multiple students who were able to sit in the exhibit area and enjoy the artifacts and media while they waited for their appointments, and the center did give away numerous bookmarks featuring information about the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) on one side and the CommLab's hours of operation on the other.

The most successful collaborations I have had in creating exhibits, though, have come by working with the CommLab's peer consultants. In the most recent exhibit in CommLab, "The Evolution of Expression," which examined intersections between language, genre, and technology, I observed as three peer consultants learned about and relied on individual strengths to support each other in working toward their shared goals for the exhibit (Soto). They all volunteered to work on the exhibit because they found the initiative interesting and inspiring and different. Once we began to work together, they essentially selected their own roles

and carried out the obligations and duties associated with those roles. Rocio was the primary logistical person in our first and second meetings, taking notes, making lists, and even budgeting and price-checking the items we wanted the CommLab to purchase for the exhibit. Another consultant, Elizabeth, was the main “idea person” in the group, producing a lot of material for us to consider and weigh in our meetings, both in terms of content and overall structure. Many of these ideas eventually became bone and flesh of the exhibit. Finally, the third peer consultant in our group, Sophia, was also adept at sharing ideas, as was particularly willing to take on the tasks that needed to be done most urgently. Over the course of putting this exhibit together, we practiced productive communication and collaboration strategies as we met in physical and digital spaces, divided tasks and set deadlines for ourselves, and finally came together for the assembly. Together, our collaboration provided plenty of opportunities for each of us to work on transferable professional skills (Soto).

### **The Value of Interactivity**

Exhibits are not just an opportunity for us to make things; we also want to provide opportunities for visitors to make things. Interactivity as a concept is akin to a makerspace mentality, which we have sought to emphasize in some of our exhibits. Laura Fleming defines the makerspace a place in which to explore and “learn to use tools and materials, both physical and virtual. It should be envisaged and implemented as a concept that can adapt to a wide variety of uses, shaped not only by educational purposes defined by teachers or the school or the wider curriculum but also by students’ own creative goals and interests” (5). In other words, makerspaces have enough resources to facilitate creativity, but not so much structure that they inhibit creativity. That is not to say they are devoid of structure or constraint, as constraint can itself be as much a facilitator of creativity as is the freedom to discover.

While makerspaces and exhibits are not the same thing, there can certainly be overlap between them. For example, in a 1987 article, Bitgood and Patterson argue that, predictably, interactive exhibit elements increase engagement (4). We want exhibits that not only educate, “nurture respect for cultural differences and foster dialogue between groups,” to borrow a phrase from Simona Bodo regarding museum spaces (181), but also engage visitors by giving them both

something to do and something to look at. For example, in our poetry exhibit in 2019, we installed what we called an interactive “poetry wall.” We taped paper to the wall nearest the display case and put up a sign that invited people to write original poetry or their favorite poems by other people on the wall. By the time we took the exhibit down, the paper was covered with poetry, including excerpts from Mark Strand and Seamus Heaney and anonymous original haikus or limericks.

*For Admin Professionals Day*

Though I’m not an Atlantean [sic] native  
 I’m both professional and administrative  
 They gave me a day  
 And had so much to say  
 Because they’re all trying to be so creative.

In the CommLab’s “The Evolution of Expression” exhibit,” the three peer consultants who headed up the project decided that it would be essential to have interactive components in the display. The dynamism and evolution of communication over time is one of the core themes of the exhibit, as suggested by the title “The Evolution of Expression,” so they decided that magnetic poetry, which is as dynamic as it is ephemeral, created the kind of effect we wanted to evoke. Another interactive component of the exhibit is a dot wall, inspired by “The Obliteration Room” art installation by Yayoi Kusama, whose work appeared in the High Museum of Art in Atlanta in 2018–19. The idea was that CommLab clients would be invited to stick a single dot, selected from a range of available colors, on the papered wall after their appointments. However, because we provided no written direction, people began putting as many stickers as they felt like on the wall, even arranging them in patterns like flowers and spirals. The exhibit also ended up featuring a third interactive component, a space for displaying erasure poetry written by our peer and professional consultants. That element came together spontaneously after I had made my students do erasure poems as an in-class writing activity. When I came back to the CommLab with extra pages taken from *Consumer Reports*, *National Geographic*, *The Nation*, and *Rolling Stone*, multiple consultants asked if they could try their hand at writing erasure poems. Here are a couple of examples (shown with permission):

*On Mars, Of Jupiter (from Consumer Reports)*

...

Charlie Brown, Mars is genuine.

Starliner, Space X, Crew Dragon--future of human.

|

Still, let's return to Earth.

Paine said we could.

Believed lunar vacations, lifetime, no question, cost, air.

|

Today? Certainly possible;

Will come true, with this Space age 2.0.

|

Musk--who says--someday--he's pegged to land on Martian soil.

Projection wildly. Recklessly. Optimistic.

|

Government, man.

~ Maria Chappell

\*

\*

\*

*The Nation (from The Nation)*

"More than one in 16 women were raped the first time they had sex"

- Molly Minta

A thought flitted

across my mind while I was

waiting late on the American side. A big, jovial, plantation man was discussing

ordinary things. "Such fun, dancing on graves!"

I am legally owned by others— the carnal issue of a legal fiction. My mind drags.

This narrative protected, insulated, cautioned. They might own your body.

They can never own you.

I am safest.

I discipline myself.

It is a kind of magic,

raised both within and without to see oneself seeing.

The distance to surveil oneself from afar—

The man and his companion seemed like good people—happy and racially swaddled in bubble bliss, however radioactive.

~ Leah Misemer

Truly, this exhibit did not just display creative productions; it also invited and evoked creative productions such as these from the individuals who came into and used our space, transforming the space in the process. Furthermore, this creative collaboration mirrors the work we do in our appointments with clients as we ask questions and engage in conversations that invite them to envision/re-envision and revise their projects.

### **Building an Exhibit**

If writing center administrators, like Middlebrook, have a space that “suffers” from bare-white-wall syndrome, and they want the space to become more welcoming, more interesting, and more engaging, building an exhibit area, regardless of its size or method of display, can certainly contribute to that kind of desirable environment. In the following paragraphs, I will provide a list of questions that administrators and consultants can ask themselves as they begin thinking about what they can do to assemble an exhibit in their space.

*What stories do you want to tell? How does that theme connect to your university and writing center context?* Exhibits display configurations of artifacts that tell a story. These stories should have some bearing on the immediate context of the exhibit. Part of that context is the writing center and its mission, so making sure the exhibit has something to do with the center, the people who work there, and the work they do is critical. The answer to the question, “Why is this exhibit here?” should be made clear. In our exhibits, we always tried to connect the theme of the exhibit writing, communication, genre, literacy, or some other associated theme. The other consideration is the university context. The students are a part of that, as are university departments, schools, or colleges. In reference to makerspaces, Fleming writes, “Understanding the needs, wants, and interests of your students and wider school community is an integral part in planning your space and ensures it will be a unique learning environment that will best serve your learners” (13). The same ideas

apply to exhibit-building in a writing center space. What do students need to know from us? That we are specialists in communication, with the skills to reach across disciplinary boundaries and help them improve, and that we care about their success. The stories our exhibits communicate can act as bridges between the writing center and other segments of the university. To achieve this objective, one method might be to build exhibits about the topics that many communication specialists care about, at least the ones coming from the humanities, social sciences, or liberal arts: people, literature, pop culture, art, cinema, international affairs, history, and so on. This approach celebrates us and shares that with the clients who come into the space.

Here is another idea: at a STEM-oriented institution like Georgia Tech, for example, finding ways to connect communication to the sciences is certainly another way to achieve connection and build a university network, so creating exhibits that incorporate STEM-related topics can also be effective. Let us say, for example, that you decide to assemble an exhibit, with purpose of attracting more engineers to the center so you can foster stronger relationships with that part of the institution. You really could choose any number of topics because there are so many kinds of engineers: biomedical, electrical, civil, mechanical, etc. Finally, after much deliberation you choose to focus your exhibit on aerospace engineering, specifically the history of aviation and its representations with an orientation toward communication.

*What resources do you have? What's your budget? What can you buy? What can you make? What do you need to tell the story you want to tell?* First, you need a space for display. Any space will do. If you have walls, you have enough space to curate even a small exhibit. If you have a hallway outside of the center, you might even be able to set up a display table. If you have access to a television or computer, you can further increase the possibilities for hybrid multimodal display by using the affordances of video or PowerPoint.

Second, you need exhibit components or artifacts, and you do not need to go very far outside of your budget to make something engaging. The amount of space you have will impact the number of artifacts you can display. Do you want artifacts that are authentic or rare or have an aura? How will you procure those? Are you content with copies or can you make facsimiles that maintain some of the aura of the original? When I

designed an exhibit about *Frankenstein* at a previous institution, my collaborator had his mind set on finding an early edition of *Frankenstein* to add to the display. Our library did not own one. In some cases, given enough time and planning, both of which were in short supply, one can borrow such materials from other libraries. Given the time constraints, I printed copies of pages from a digitized first edition in the database *Nineteenth Century Collections Online*, cut them to the size of a book



**Figure 5.** An artifact from the CommLab exhibit, "The Evolution of Expression."

page, and aged them using black tea and my wife's hair dryer. It was not the same as a book, but it was convenient and cheap, both of which were important considerations, and in the end, its appearance still achieved the goal of the exhibit. In our most recent exhibit in the CommLab, some of the artifacts in the case were a handwritten letter from John Keats to Fanny Brawne, an inkpot, and a quill. None of these artifacts was authentic, but Pinterest helped us achieve the appearance we wanted.

In the hypothetical case of the exhibit on the history and representations of aviation, we will

hypothesize that there is only enough room for three artifacts or artifacts sets that you will connect to the theme in different ways. For example, you might want a photograph of the Wright Brothers' and a diagram of their plane; can you talk about aviation and not mention them? Both of those artifacts can be found on the Internet, so you just need to print them off yourself on regular copy paper or you can use photo paper, which gives it a little nicer appearance. You decide to pair a model of a WWII biplane with a Peanuts comic book or strip featuring Snoopy "flying," the sides of his doghouse peppered with bullet holes courtesy of the Red

Baron. Once again, these artifacts are easy to find for free or cheaply online. Third, the history of aviation is not all about success and whimsy; it also involves its fair share of tragedy. To introduce this aspect into the exhibit, you display a magazine cover featuring the World Trade Center or the Boeing MAX 737. As you curate these artifacts with information cards, you being to construct a narrative that ties ideas about communication, media, and representation with the history of the safest way to travel, and you will have done it creatively and without spending a fortune. With our communication exhibit, I and a peer consultant both wrote text cards, which we then shared with each other to refine the language in preparation for the display.

*Who can you partner with? How can you use it to promote the writing center?* As I mentioned previously, cross-disciplinary partnerships can provide access to materials and expertise that might not otherwise be available for your exhibit. Libraries, too, and Special Collections make great partners. By seeking out partnerships for your exhibit, but also in general, you extend the reach of the center and its ability to help students who might not ordinarily come.

For our hypothetical aviation and communication exhibit, potential partnerships and connections might also originate within the center itself. For example, do you have a peer consultant who is interested in or is majoring in aerospace engineering? Do they personally know or know of a professor or researcher on campus who might be a good source of information as you assemble the exhibit? Perhaps they would have some ideas or perhaps even artifacts you might incorporate into the display. You might even consider holding a special event in the center in which you invite that person to speak on the theme of the exhibit, which in turn might attract students into the writing center space who might never have entered. Perhaps you could also supply a handout or pamphlet that talks about the value of communication in aerospace engineering and common genres that future professionals can expect to encounter in their careers. Make these available near the exhibit display as well, so that even people who do not attend the event can take one and be informed.

*How can you make an exhibit interactive?* I have nothing against exhibits that only provide a gallery of things to look at and read. Many exhibits achieve positive outcomes in this manner. I would reiterate what Bitgood and Patterson say about interactivity. Exhibits that encourage visitors to

interact with the exhibit extend and deepen their level of engagement. Engagement in turn leads to greater likelihood of learning something new or least creating a more lasting impression of the space. For our aviation and communication exhibit, you want to make sure it is properly engaging, so you could create an interactive component: a paper airplane building station. You know that many people know how to build a paper airplane, so you leave a stack of regular copy paper or card stock on the table with a sign that invites passing students to build an airplane. Next to the stack, you place a book you checked out from the library with numerous different designs and instructions. This book is for those who have never learned to make an airplane but will now use this opportunity to learn. After they build their airplanes, they can do whatever they want with them. The builders can take them away, and that will be the end of their engagement, or they can name their plane and turn it in at the writing center for a prize; they leave with their prize, and the writing center adds the plane to the display. At the end of the month, the peer consultants take the airplanes to the top floor of the building and fly them off the roof; the plane that flies the farthest will then be featured on social media. This is just one way of many to make an exhibit interactive, a true makerspace, and I have already shared some examples of how some of our exhibits have attempted this.

*How will this activity impact consultant development?* When we ask consultants to do projects, as mentioned previously, we ought to try to make sure they are getting something out of it, in addition to compensation. The kinds of skills our consultant Rocio identified as being developed by the project are exactly the kinds of skills that are not only useful in the context of working with students in one-on-one sessions and communication workshops, but also in the professional contexts that our consultants will find themselves in following graduation.

There are numerous questions and considerations to account for when building an exhibit, and these are just a few of the ones I believe to be among the most important to raise and consider. In the end, an exhibit should be a space for creative and collaborative story-telling that invokes a response from the audience. The questions we ask will determine how well we can tell the story and establish connections with and affect our intended audiences in a physical space.

## Embracing the “Work in Progress”

I would like to return to what I wrote earlier about the evolution or fluidity of space. If in the future, even the near future, CommLab’s exhibit area is no longer needed or becomes less effective and some other project or initiative better is better suited to client or staff needs, I can accept that. If it is no longer doing what is designed for, then it should certainly be replaced by whatever will make our space what it needs to be for the individuals we serve. That, too, is part of embracing the fluidity of our spaces, regardless of how we might feel about our personal or pet projects.

As someone who has been a part of this exhibit initiative from its outset, I hope it continues as long as it can remain efficacious because I believe in the power that exhibits can have in influencing the educational spaces we work in and impacting the consultants and clients we work with. Randell writes, “If we want anything from a long-term participation programme (as distinct from a shorter-term, one-off project)...we want it to keep working, to keep attracting citizens as contributors to the process...to be self-organizing and adaptive to changing external conditions” (146). How might this be achieved? First, involving multiple people to contribute to or participate in the construction of individual exhibits can help to entrench this initiative in the CommLab’s culture so it has a chance to remain. Second, consistently coming up with new ideas for engaging displays can also help to ensure its permanence.

For example, in the near future, I am hoping to collaborate with our peer consultants and faculty members in Georgia Tech’s School of Literature, Media, and Communication to assemble a literary exhibit called “Jane Austen Today.” This exhibit would focus on Austen’s influence on popular media and contemporary culture. We might want to show film adaptations of her novels and contemporary responses to her work, such as *The Jane Austen Book Club* by Karen Joy Fowler, *Longbourn* by Jo Baker, and *Death Comes to Pemberley* by P.D. James. The exhibit might also feature nonliterary artifacts such as Dierdre Le Faye’s and Maggie Black’s *The Jane Austen Cookbook*, Jane Austen-themed coloring books, and ten-pound notes from the United Kingdom featuring Austen’s likeness. We could have games of whist, commerce, loo, and speculation in our conversation social for English language learners or hold a social media giveaway involving Jane Austen memorabilia. Additionally,

knowing how deeply some of our consultants and our current center director feel about Jane Austen, I fully expect more ideas to arise from my future collaboration with them. My hope is that by continuing to work with peer consultants and faculty members outside of the center on interesting exhibit projects like this one, we can perpetuate the exhibit area as long as possible as part of the CommLab's space and continue to impact students' lives by creating a welcoming and engaging educational space that invites conversations and connections between our staff members and the students on our campus.

## Works Cited

- Bitgood, Stephen. "The Anatomy of an Exhibit." *Visitor Behavior*, vol. 7, no. 4, 1992, pp. 4–15. [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Stephen\\_Bitgood/publication/252512608\\_The\\_Anatomy\\_of\\_An\\_Exhibit/links/0deec53b4576362e8b000000.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Stephen_Bitgood/publication/252512608_The_Anatomy_of_An_Exhibit/links/0deec53b4576362e8b000000.pdf). Accessed 21 March 2020.
- Bitgood, Stephen, and Don Patterson. "Principles of Exhibit Design." *Visitor Behavior*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1987, pp. 4–6. [https://openexhibits.org/wp-content/uploads/papers/vsa-a0a2n2-a\\_5730.pdf](https://openexhibits.org/wp-content/uploads/papers/vsa-a0a2n2-a_5730.pdf). Accessed 21 March 2020.
- Bodo, Simona. "Museums as Intercultural Spaces." *Museums, Equality, and Social Justice*, edited by Richard Sandell and Eithne Nightingale, Routledge, 2012, pp. 181–91.
- Chappell, Maria. "On Mars, Of Jupiter." 2020. Microsoft Word file.
- "Communication Center Opens to Campus in Clough." *News Center*, Georgia Institute of Technology, 06 Oct. 2011, <https://www.news.gatech.edu/2011/10/06/communication-center-opens-campus-clough>. Accessed 21 March 2020.
- Fleming, Laura. *Worlds of Making: Best Practices for Establishing a Makerspace for Your School*. Corwin, 2015.
- Gardiner, Ann. "Democratizing Space in the Writing Center." *Connecting Writing Centers across Borders*, WLN, 01 Feb. 2017, <https://www.wlnjournal.org/blog/2017/02/democratizing-space-in-the-writing-center/>. Accessed 21 March 2020.
- Geller, Anne Ellen et al. *The Everyday Writing Center: A Community of Practice*. Utah State UP, 2007.
- Hadfield, Leslie et al. "An Ideal Writing Center: Re-imagining Space and Design." *The Center Will Hold: Critical Perspectives on Writing Center Scholarship*, edited by Michael A. Pemberton and Joyce Kinkead. Utah State UP, 2003, pp. 166–76.
- Inman, James A. "Designing Multiliteracy Centers: A Zoning Approach." *Multiliteracy Centers: Writing Center Work, New Media, and Multimodal Rhetoric*, edited by David M. Sheridan and James A. Inman, Hampton, 2010, pp. 19–32.

Lotts, Megan. "Building Bridges, Creating Partnerships, and Elevating the Arts: The Rutgers University Art Library Exhibition Spaces." *College & Research Libraries News* [Online], vol. 77, no. 5, 2016, pp. 226–30.

<https://crln.acrl.org/index.php/crlnews/article/view/9490/10768>. Accessed 21 March 2020.

Maddux, Rachel. "Tiny Houses, Big Lessons." *GT Alumni Magazine*, vol. 88, no. 2, 2018, p. 18.  
<https://issuu.com/gtalumni/docs/8802/18>. Accessed 17 November 2021.

Marshall, Margaret J. "Sites for (Invisible) Intellectual Work." *The Politics of Writing Centers*, edited by Jane Nelson and Kathy Evertz, Heinemann, 2001, pp. 74–84.

Middlebrook, Geoffrey. "Writing Center Topographies: Art, Space, and Stature." *Connecting Writing Centers across Borders*, WLN, 09 Dec. 2015. <https://www.wlnjournal.org/blog/2015/12/writing-center-topographies-art-space-and-stature/>. Accessed 21 March 2020.

Misemer, Leah. "The Nation." 2020. Microsoft Word file.

North, Stephen M. "The Idea of a Writing Center." *College English*, vol. 46, no. 5, 1984, pp. 433–446.

Randell, Mark. "Constructing Participation Spaces." *Community Development Journal*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2004, 144–55.

Singh-Corcoran, Nathalie, and Amin Emika. "Inhabiting the Writing Center: A Critical Review." *Kairos*, vol. 16, no. 3, 2012, n.p.  
[http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/16.3/reviews/singh-corcoran\\_emika/technology.html](http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/16.3/reviews/singh-corcoran_emika/technology.html). Accessed 21 March 2020/.

Soto, Rocio. Personal interview. 16 November 2021.

Warnock, Tilly, and Warnock, John. "Liberatory Writing Centers: Restoring Authority to Writers," *Writing Centers: Theory and Administration*, edited by Gary A. Olson, NCTE, 1984, pp. 16-23. *ERIC*, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED246483.pdf>. Accessed 21 March 2020.