2005

Falling off the Tightrope: One Student’s Epistemological Adventure

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FALLING OFF THE TIGHTROPE:
ONE STUDENT'S EPISTEMOLOGICAL ADVENTURE

Cast
(in order of appearance)

Narrator…………………………………………………………………………………………….Marje Treff
Ty Trope ........................................................................................................................Nicole Frazier
Student #1 .......................................................................................................................Colin Brown
Student #2 .....................................................................................................................Nathan Somers
Student #3 .....................................................................................................................Barbara Frank
Anita Reeder .....................................................................................................................Shari Bochard
Writing Center Director ................................................................................................Colin Brown
Adele Text ......................................................................................................................Mary Arnold Schwartz
Receptionist ....................................................................................................................Barbara Frank
Luke Within .....................................................................................................................Colin Brown
Consultant #1 ................................................................................................................Barbara Frank
Consultant #2 ................................................................................................................Mary Arnold Schwartz
Consultant #3 ................................................................................................................Nathan Somers
Consultant #4 ................................................................................................................Colin Brown
True Spirit of the Writing Center .....................................................................................Mary Arnold Schwartz

For the readings:
Players all stand in a line across the back of the stage. As each scene begins, the actors in a particular scene step forward, then retreat to the line at the end of the scene (or when the character leaves the scene). Prop instructions are also given at the beginning of each scene; these should be set during the narrator’s first monologue.
Act I, Scene I  The Learn University Writing Center
Players: Narrator, Student #1, Student #2, Student #3, Director, Ty, Anita

(Ty and Anita should set two chairs off to the side facing the audience. Anita will sit on one of the chairs. Anita should have a copy of the St. Martin’s Handbook to clutch in this scene. Ty should have a three-ring binder to carry throughout the show.)

NARRATOR: It is three o'clock in the afternoon on a typical school day at Learn University. A fresh-faced student named Ty Trope approaches the Learn University Writing Center hoping to find assistance assembling his Freshman Composition writing portfolio. But as Ty approaches the center, he sees hordes of anxious students milling around in the hallway outside the writing center door. As he walks into the center, he hears the students lamenting the abrupt closing of the Learn U Writing Center and sees the writing center director packing folders in boxes. He also notices one of his favorite consultants, Anita Reeder, sitting alone and staring blankly into the distance.

STUDENT #1: (Angry, talking to self) What's happening to the world when a person can't get help with a rhetorical analysis? I don't even know what it is! What is rhetorical? How am I supposed to analyze it? This is madness, I tell you, MADNESS! (Stomps offstage in a huff)

STUDENT #2: (Obviously in shock) MLA, APA, CBE...it's all just alphabet soup to me... (Dazed, walks offstage)

STUDENT #3: (Crying) Why, oh, WHY did this have to happen two weeks before my annotated bibliography is due? Oh, the humanity! Aaaaaaagh! (Runs offstage wildly)

TY: (Entering the center clutching his portfolio) Hello? Anybody in here? It's Ty Trope – I have an appointment today. What is going on out there? Why are all those students hanging out in the hallway outside your door?

DIRECTOR: (Sigh) Hi, Ty. The school had to cut our funding. We're closing down. Worst of all, we had to cancel all of our appointments right when the students are working on their final papers. If you are here for an appointment, I am sorry; we are closed until further notice.
TY: The center is closing?!! There must be something wrong with the universe! *(Dramatic pause followed by a sigh.)* Oh well, I guess there's nothing you can do about it. I am really sad, though. The writing center really helped me out this semester. If it makes you feel any better, you should know that all the consultants I worked with were great! They were all really helpful. And, I liked how flexible they were about working with me on my papers.

DIRECTOR: Thanks, I really appreciate that. We worked very hard to give each student help that was tailored to their needs. *(Melodramatically)* Now, it's all over. It's as if the world has spun off its axis or something. What are we to do? *(Flinging her arm over her eyes)*

TY: *(Pointing to Anita)* What's wrong with Anita Reeder?

DIRECTOR: Have you worked with her before? She's a great consultant, but she is in shock about the closing. Since she heard the news, she just sits there rocking and hugging that St. Martin's Handbook. She won't even leave the cubicle!

TY: *(Shaking head)* Too bad about her. She used that handbook to help me with my last paper. I was hoping she would help me with my final portfolio, but I guess that's out of the question now.

DIRECTOR: You know, if you want help, you might be in luck. *(Secretively looking around to make sure nobody is listening.)* Something very strange happened this morning when we got the news about the writing center's closure. Earlier, did you notice the swirling black clouds in the sky that created that strange strobe-like effect with the sun or the whirling winds that gushed through the trees raining pieces of paper all over campus?

TY: Yeah, but this is Indiana, so I guess I didn't think anything of it.

DIRECTOR: *(Conspiratorily)* Well, apparently when the writing center closed, the universe was thrown out of whack. I knew something was strange when none of the consultants even TOUCHED the donuts I brought in this morning. *(Squinting suspiciously)* The world is obviously altered somehow. If you really want help with your assignment, I think I can help you.

TY: Yes, I want help! I am desperate!
DIRECTOR: All you need to do is jump out the window.

TY: What?!! This is the third story! I'm desperate, but I'm not suicidal!

DIRECTOR: No harm will come to you! I know it sounds weird. To tell you the truth, I didn't believe it either. But I have heard about these mysterious writing center wormholes, and I think the closing of our center has opened a doorway into another writing center dimension! I thought that the wormholes were just writing center mythology, but it's true.

*(Anita seems to come out of her trance and begins to listen.)*

TY: *(Scared and unsure)* Wow. I don't know. My portfolio is due next Tuesday, and I'm not sure if I can face the home stretch alone. My whole grade depends on it! *(Hesitating)* All right, I'll do it. Are you sure I'll be safe?

ANITA: *(Placing the book on her chair and approaching Ty)* Don't be afraid, Ty. I'll go, too. I'll shadow you and protect you through the unknown. I was scheduled to work until six today anyway.

*(They turn to jump out of the window then FREEZE in place.)*

**Act I, Scene 2**  
The Storehouse Writing Center  
Players: Narrator, Ty, Anita, Adele Text

*(Ty places a single chair on the stage in a diagonal fashion, cheating toward the audience.)*

NARRATOR: Anita and Ty jumped out of the window and plummeted down a dark, swirling spiral until they had a surprisingly soft landing on a pile of Post it notes and paperback Roget's Thesauruses. As they looked around, they noticed that they were in a gigantic *warehouse* surrounded by conveyor belts, loading docks, forklifts and metal shelving that reached from floor to ceiling.

TY: *(Looking around)* Where are we? This doesn't look like the Learn U Writing Center.

ANITA: Yeah, where's the coffee?
ADELE: *(High-pitched and OVERLY cheerful – maybe even a little snooty)* Hellooo! Welcome to the Storehouse Writing Center. You must be a student from Learn U. Come on in! Have a seat.

*(Adele sits on a chair. Ty looks around, but since there are no other chairs, he sits on the floor.)*

ADELE: I am Adele Text. You must be Ty Trope. You’re in a first-year writing class, aren’t you?

TY: Right. I’m here to work on my final portfolio. I was having trouble with --

ADELE: *(Abruptly cutting him off)* Hand the portfolio to me, dear. I’ll look it over and decide what you need to work on.

*(Ty gives her the portfolio. She looks through the pages silently with an occasional wince.)*

ADELE: Hmm...*(Giggling)* Oh, no, no! Tsk, tsk, tsk! Well, I read through your memoir paper, and it looks to me like you have some deficiencies in organization and comma placement. I have just what you need. Give me a moment to place the requisition, and then you can follow me to the receiving dock.

TY: *(To Anita)* I thought my memoir was pretty good. It’s about a very traumatic experience I had as a little kid. I told it in chronological order, but who knows, maybe the organization IS all wrong. After all, she IS the expert.

ADELE: Come, come, now! I think Organization is located in row 472.

TY: *(To Anita)* I guess we follow her.

ANITA: Right behind you!

NARRATOR: Anita and Ty follow Adele down a series of corridors and into an even bigger warehouse past rows and rows of crates and boxes. Adele tells Anita and Ty to wait a moment as she jumps on a forklift and squeals the tires taking off for a row of pallets in the back.
ANITA: I don't know about this. I don't trust a writing center that just works like a big storehouse of information.

ADELE: (Hopping off the forklift) Oh, my! Well, I couldn't find the crates for organization -- somebody must have filed it incorrectly again. Nobody ever puts things back in the right place around here! But, I can help you with the commas, dear. (Pointing to a vat on the forklift) Here is a whole VAT of commas!

(The three walk over to the vat and look inside.)

TY: What are all those inky black things slithering around in there?

ADELE: (Laughing) Well, duh, silly! Those are the commas you need in your paper! Now, let ME tell you where they go.

TY: I really didn't want to talk about commas today. I just wanted to talk about my paper with you and see if I included enough detail and interesting stuff. Also, my teacher really looks at how we organize our information in the story.

ADELE: You'll have to wait for that. Until you've mastered the rules of commas -- not to mention organization -- you don't really have any business doing anything else.

ANITA: What?!! How can you address that stuff without considering higher order concerns first?

ADELE: (Snide, to Ty) You know, you shouldn't bring other people to your appointments here, dearie.

TY: (Backing up with Anita) I think I need to leave anyway.

ANITA: (Eyes wide, spoken to Ty) Just back away and don't make any sudden moves.

(They begin to back away and FREEZE mid-step.)
Act I, Scene 3       The Garret Writing Center
Players: Narrator, Ty, Anita, Receptionist, Luke Within

(Ty and Anita place two chairs facing toward each other in a diagonal fashion, cheating out toward the audience.)

NARRATOR: As Ty and Anita backed away from Adele, they accidentally fell into the vat of commas. Ty could feel the commas slithering around his face and into his nostrils. Anita thrashed around trying to keep the commas from creeping into her perfectly styled hair. The vat was much deeper than it looked, and the two began to sink quickly into the commas. When Ty's feet hit the bottom, he panicked and rocked the vat to one side until it tipped over, spilling both of them onto the floor. Coughing and choking, they looked around and saw that they were no longer in the Storehouse Writing Center. Now, they were in a lovely office lobby lined with burgundy leather armchairs, Tiffany-style lamps and artificial plants.

TY: (Spitting out commas) Yuck, punctuation! (Looking around) Where are we now? The set of Frasier?

ANITA: I don't know. (Pulling something out of her hair and looking at it) Hm -- look at that! A semicolon! (Flicks it to the side)

SECRETARY: (Soothing voice) Excuse me -- are you Ty Trope from Learn University? You're welcome to wait in a consultant's office over there. Have a seat on the couch if you like. The consultant will be right with you.

(Ty and Anita enter the room)

TY: (Sits) We're in yet another writing center. Boy, the universe really IS out of whack.

ANITA: I hope this consultation goes better than the last one.
LUKE: *(Enters and sits in the opposite chair)* Are you Ty? Welcome to the Garret Writing Center. I'm Luke Within. *(Brief dramatic pause)* Please feel free to make yourself comfortable. What would you like to talk about today? How can I help you to access your "inner writer?"

TY: Well, I brought along my final portfolio. I'd like to work on my reporting assignment first. We were supposed to write an "objective informative" paper on a scientific topic.

LUKE: Tell me, how do you feel about this paper?

TY: It's all right, I guess.

LUKE: What do you mean when you say that it's “all right?”

TY: Well, I need some help with my citations. My teacher said that I need to work on MLA format. Could you maybe give me some tips?

LUKE: How do you feel about MLA? Remember, the answers to your writing queries lie within you. I am simply here to help you access that information and apply it to your writing.

ANITA: What are you talking about?!!

TY: *(Confused and irritated)* Yeah! If ALL the answers were WITHIN me, I wouldn't have to ask YOU for guidance.

LUKE: Breathe deeply and focus. Did you have any experiences with citation when you were a child? Do you think that has anything to do with your current MLA difficulties?

TY: *(More irritated)* I never even heard of MLA until college. *(Sigh)* Do you at least have a reference book I can look at?

LUKE: Yes. There is one in the room somewhere. You must find it yourself. *(Pause)* How does that make you feel?

LUKE: Perhaps you can channel your anger into a reflective/reflexive journal about your feelings. If you look at this writing center experience rhetorically and analyze your thoughts….

ANITA: *(Interrupting)* Let's get outta here. Quick -- the window!

TY: I am afraid to see where we'll end up next. Here goes!

*(Anita and Ty “jump” out the window and FREEZE in mid-air.)*

**Act I, Scene 4**  The Burkean Parlor Writing Center
Players: Narrator, Ty, Anita, Consultant #1, Consultant #2, Consultant #3, Consultant #4

*(Ty places one chair in the center of the room. The Consultants will be standing off to the far side of the chair.)*

NARRATOR: Once again Anita and Ty plunged into the unknown blackness of the writing center alternate universe. When they finally landed, they realized that they once again had been dropped into a writing center in a parallel world. Anita and Ty stood amazed in a long, unfamiliar corridor.

ANITA: This looks like a college dormitory. Look at all the rooms.

TY: I hear voices ahead. Let's check it out. It might be a student lounge or something. Maybe someone there can help me with my portfolio.

*(Anita and Ty walk into a room full of people.)*

CONSULTANT #1: Welcome! You're in the Burkean Parlor Writing Center lounge and juice bar. I bet you are here for a writing center consultation. Have a seat. We're all here to help you. We had some appointments no-show, so we are ALL here and ready to collaborate with you.

TY: *(Sitting down)* Thanks. Uh...I don't know about collaboration. I think I am supposed to do my own writing.
(The consultants surround the chair with two on each side. Anita stands off to the right observing.)

CONSULTANT #2: Nonsense. The writing you do is inevitably shaped by your social relationships. Your reality is determined by the community that --

CONSULTANT #3: (Interrupting) Shut up, everyone, let us hear what he has written. (To Ty) Go ahead and tell us about your paper.

TY: Um, well, I have an argumentative paper in my portfolio that needs some revision. I am arguing that Andrew Jackson’s Indian removal policy was seriously misguided and trying to look at other ways he could have handled the situation.

CONSULTANT #4: I think you need to change that argument. Everyone knows that Jackson didn’t have a choice. He had to go forward with his policy.

CONSULTANT #1: Good idea -- change your argument! I know when I took American History class, I learned that…

(Consultants begin to talk on top of each other…Gradually increasing the tempo.)

CONSULTANT #2: Nevermind that. I know! Why don’t you talk about it from the Native American point of view?

CONSULTANT #3: I mean, don't knock Old Hickory -- he's on our currency and all. Jackson had good intentions. Right?

CONSULTANT #4: Yeah! He meant well in the long run. I think you should explore that side of the story too.

CONSULTANT #2: It was the only thing he could have done. Too bad about the Indians, though. You know, I changed my mind. Maybe Jackson was a little misguided…maybe you should just change your topic altogether. How about Abraham Lincoln? His face is on our money, too!
TY: *(Looking back and forth with frustration)* Whoa! What about MY argument? MY voice? Shouldn't I decide on the content of my own paper? I appreciate your ideas, but …

CONSULTANT #4: *(Interrupting)* Voice, schmoice! The community has decided. You need to change your argument.

TY: No! Look, I've done the research and come to my own conclusions. We can talk about how I present my argument, how I organize my argument and how I support my argument with my sources. BUT, don't tell me what to do! *(Looking at Consultant #4)* Collaboration? SHMOLLABORATION! Now, if you'll excuse me. I am leaving.

ANITA: Good call, Ty. Let's get out of here -- fast!

*(Ty and Anita start to leave the room.)*

CONSULTANT #1: Where are you going?

CONSULTANT #3: Stop them! They have defied the community!

CONSULTANT #2: Don't leave! We have lots more ideas for you!

CONSULTANT #4: We must all work together! Don't you want some coffee or juice? We could just visit…

*Act I, Scene 5*  
The Learn University Writing Center

Players: Narrator, Ty, Anita, True Spirit of the Writing Center

*(Reset the chairs as in the first scene. A copy of the St. Martin’s Handbook should be on the same chair where Anita left it.)*

NARRATOR: Ty and Anita fled through the doorway back into the long hall. They ran until, breathless, they were exhausted and had to stop. When they paused to look around, they realized
that all of the dormitory doors had disappeared except one. Too tired to run any farther, they opened the door, stepped across the threshold and walked into a room they both recognized as the Learn U Writing Center.

TY: *(Cheering)* We're back!

ANITA: *(Relieved)* Thank goodness. That was a nightmare. I can't believe those other centers. That's not how we consulted here at Learn U. As a matter of fact, our Writing Center Director would freak out if she overheard us doing that stuff in a consultation from her makeshift office around the corner. Boy, we would all certainly see messages on our consultant listserv about THAT.

TY: *(Shaking his head)* Yeah. What was it with those writing center consultations? I just wanted some simple help -- someone to talk to about my papers, someone to read with me and encourage me. You know...give me advice on thesis statements, and how to develop my ideas or proofread my own papers. First, that forklift lady practically “runs over” me with advice. Then, that guy tries to psychoanalyze me. And collaboration? Hardly. That was just scary.

ANITA: Ty, you've got to understand that everything was thrown out of balance when the Learn U Writing Center closed. All of the approaches you've experienced can be helpful at times, but they were all taken to extremes in those other worlds. At Learn U, we've always tried to use a balanced approach in consultations. It's kind of like walking a tightrope -- lean a little too far to one side and off you go. *(Physically imitates walking on a tightrope)* Apparently, the Learn U Writing Center was keeping the rest of the writing center universe in balance, too.

TY: Too bad the Learn U Writing Center doesn't have enough funding to reopen. Then, the world could go back to normal, and I could finally get some practical advice on my papers.

ANITA: I know. I will really miss working with other students. You know, it's *(Emphasize the words)* all about the students anyway.

NARRATOR: Suddenly, the cloud-covered sky began to clear. Rays of golden sunlight soared from a blazing sky to the ground and through the windows of the Learn U Writing Center. Anita and Ty squinted but could faintly see the outline of what appeared to be some kind of supernatural being floating toward them.
TY: What is happening?

ANITA: *(Scared, grabbing the St. Martin’s Handbook to shield herself)* I don't know!

THE TRUE SPIRIT OF THE WRITING CENTER: *(Entering very melodramatically -- a cross between "Glenda the Good Witch" and that guy from the martial arts movies)* Don't be afraid. It's me, the True Spirit of the Writing Center.

ANITA: Huh?

TY: Who?

SPIRIT: The True Spirit of the Writing Center. I am the embodiment of the ultimate meaning behind all writing centers. Anita Reeder, with your words you have summoned me to help right the balance of the universe.

ANITA: Wow! Cool! *(Pausing then looking at Ty)* What'd I say?

SPIRIT: You said that writing centers are all about the students. This, young grasshopper, is the universal "Writing Center Truth." Writing centers everywhere strive to learn writing center theory and use this knowledge to improve their consulting skills. And, because of this stellar effort, it is the university students visiting the writing centers who benefit. It is most important to remember for whom the writing centers are created: the fine and noble student.

TY: *(To Anita)* Gosh, I'm flattered!

ANITA: Spirit, the Learn U Writing Center has been closed due to budget cuts. Is there anything you can do to help us?

SPIRIT: Do not worry. I will send the "Funding Fairy" to tamper with the Learn University computer systems. Funds for the writing center will magically appear in the university accounts by tomorrow morning. Never underestimate the power of technology in a writing center.
ANITA: Hooray! Thanks, Spirit!

TY: *(To the Spirit)* Hey, Spirit...is there anything you can magically do to my portfolio so I can get an good grade?

SPIRIT: Yes, my friend. Just close your eyes and repeat after me: *(Say like in the Wizard of Oz: “There’s no place like home.”)* There’s no substitute for revision.

TY *(Joins chanting with the Spirit):* There’s no substitute for revision.

ANITA *(Joins chanting with the other two):* There’s no substitute for revision. There’s no substitute for revision…

*(All fade out as narrator begins to talk.)*

NARRATOR: And so it was that the Learn U Writing Center magically received all needed funding and was able to reopen for business. They were even able to purchase a lifetime supply of mints for their candy bowl! And thus, the writing center universe was epistemologically in balance once again. The End.

*(Wild applause and cheering begins in the audience.)*