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THE ROAD TO HELL:
GOOD INTENTIONS
AND THEIR UNINTENDED EFFECTS


Two recent books challenge us to rethink our high-minded assumptions about the literacy work that occurs in two important pedagogical sites, the writing center and the teacher-student writing conference. In *Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times*, Nancy Maloney Grimm identifies and then “nibbles” away at the contradictions—the writing center’s call to fulfill the university’s expectation that it “manage” difference by assimilating students into dominant academic literacy practices and its own liberatory intention to respect difference and “work toward more socially just practices of literacy education” (xvii). Similarly, Laurel Johnson Black, in *Between Talk and Teaching: Reconsidering the Writing Conference*, exposes the contradictions between teachers’ idealized representations of teacher-student conferences as student-centered “conversations” and actual teacher-dominated sessions that can be more aptly characterized as private lessons. While each text combines theory, student example,
and personal experience to make its argument, Grimm’s text relies more heavily on theory and deductive argument while Black’s text relies more heavily on empirical evidence and inductive argument. Both, however, succeed in making readers, or at least this reader, uncomfortable about current well-intentioned practices and beliefs.

“Theorizing,” claims Grimm in her introduction, offers “the conceptual language” needed “to articulate the understandings arising from working in a contact zone” (x). Each chapter that follows deploys critical theory to understand and rethink a particular conflict entailed in writing center work—the disjuncture between traditional educational paradigms and the postmodern realities of multicultural difference and rapid technological change (Chapter 1); the contradiction between prevailing notions of literacy as autonomous and neutral and postmodern understandings of literacy as ideological (Chapter 2); the disparity between the traditional academic identities called for in most writing assignments and the multiple and conflicting subjectivities and non-mainstream cultural logics students bring to their writing (Chapter 3); the pull between the need for the writing center to reposition itself politically to become an agent for change and its tendency to remain stuck in a subordinate service identity (Chapter 4); and the variance between the discourse about fair practice and the reality of “unjust structural oppression” (Chapter 5). The book concludes with the reflections of Nancy Barron, who describes how these various conflicts and contradictions have affected her lived experience as an under-represented student.

What sets Grimm’s theorizing apart from much other scholarly theorizing is her use of metaphor, personal experience, student examples, and “low” as well as “high” theory to ground and illuminate her analysis. In Chapter 1, for example, Grimm’s experience of driving blind in a winter storm in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan becomes an extended metaphor for the disorienting clash between the modernist beliefs that shape the academy and the postmodern realities encountered in writing centers. Once introduced, metaphors such as this one recur throughout the text, stitching together disparate ideas and experiences. Also threaded throughout the text are stories—of Grimm’s Irish working class family, of her own experiences being marked as different due to class, and of students such as Joe, Mary, Patty, Hajji, and Rebecca, with whom Grimm has worked in the writing center. Grimm challenges traditional ways of theorizing in her mix of “low” and “high” theory. For example, in Chapter 4, “Getting Unstuck: Rearticulating the Nodal
Points,” Grimm couples insights from pop psychologist Harriet Goldhor Lerner with those of political theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe to explain how writing center workers might reconnect with and learn from “sticky” past issues, forge new identities as active contributors to the ongoing dialogue in the university about literacy and difference, and move strategically to articulate their interests with others in the academic community at large.

Like Grimm, Black draws extensively on her personal experiences as both student and teacher to enrich her study of writing-conference practices. And like Grimm, her passionate dedication to students who are marginalized by academic culture is rooted in her own experiences as a working class student: “I sat silently in my classes and my conferences, aware that if I opened my mouth I would reveal something ‘wrong’ about myself. . . . I remember clearly making the decision to say to a professor, ‘Really?’ instead of the more ‘colorful’ and, to me, natural ‘Get outta heayah?’” (6). However, Black’s use of theory and student examples differs significantly from Grimm’s. Whereas Grimm foregrounds theory and uses examples or evidence to illustrate a deductively-made point, Black foregrounds examples and empirical evidence as the basis for drawing conclusions and invoking theory. Indeed, it was Black’s “horror” in analyzing transcripts of her own writing conferences that fueled further study and eventually her book. As the title suggests, her interest in this text is not on the effect conferencing has on student writing, but rather the effect conferencing talk has on students’ sense of agency in their own literacy learning. The exigence that drives her study is this question: “What occurs between the best of intentions that we begin with and the often ineffective or even negative outcomes that students and teachers report?”

Part of the answer is revealed in Chapter 1, in which Black discusses the “conflicting paradigms” for writing conferences found in composition literature—text-centered versus student-centered—and the conflicting speech genres entailed in writing conferences—the genre of conversation and that of teacher talk. A review of sociolinguist literature on conversations and classroom discourse reveals, not surprisingly, striking differences between the two in terms of control and negotiation of meaning. Black urges readers to think of conferences as a kind of special speech genre that both teachers and students need to learn: “For conferencing is not a genre of speech that we are familiar with; it is something that must be learned” (28). In subsequent chapters, Black addresses heretofore unexamined aspects of writing conferences by
using critical discourse analysis to interpret conference transcripts. Specifically, she considers the reproduction of asymmetrical power relationships in conference talk in Chapter 2, the perpetuation of gender roles in Chapter 3, the silencing and miscommunication that occurs in cross-cultural conferences in Chapter 4, and teachers' failure to attend to the emotional dimension of writing conferences in Chapter 5. The final chapter connects the insights gleaned from her critical discourse analyses of conferences to the goals of critical pedagogy to suggest new approaches, "a third-generation" paradigm for conferences (148). Perhaps one of her most trenchant observations is that if the power dynamics of conferences are to become more equitable, "the asymmetry of the classroom must shift as well" (54).

As suggested earlier, reading these two texts together inevitably invites comparisons. While both texts use theory to interrogate practice and practice to interrogate theory, Grimm's text foregrounds the former and Black's text the latter, thus allowing us to see the strengths and limitations of each approach. In Grimm's text, we see the potential of theory for allowing us to reframe old issues and imagine new possibilities. For example, Grimm uses pop psychological theories about "family of origin work" and Gramscian political theory about the importance of critical reflection to urge writing center workers to reconsider their efforts to distance themselves from their past association with remediation: "Engaging with the sticky history of remediation in positive ways that emphasize the value of understanding difference, rather than reacting to it, can position writing centers to achieve their potential as rich sites of research" (86-88). At the same time, we occasionally see in Grimm's work the limitations of theorizing when, for example, a construct like "academic literacy" is represented in flat, monolithic terms rather than in nuanced terms that acknowledge this construct's complexity, variability, and even empowering potential (30-34).

Alternatively, Black's work demonstrates for us the powerful insights available through close analysis of empirical data. The transcript of Erin's conference with her teacher Eric, for example, dramatizes the subtle power plays by which teachers enlist students' cooperation and agreement in a way that abstract generalization or theory could not. Though it is clear that Black has selected the transcript excerpts to which we are privy, we have the sense that we are witnessing firsthand Eric's engineering of Erin’s agreement through his creation of an "other" that opposes his position—those students in the class who are
unsympathetic to a particular literary character—and then his “marginaliz[ation of] that other” (49). Yet, in this text, too, we can see liabilities in this approach when a long excerpt, laden with notations, is difficult or tedious to follow (71-72) or when the data before us suggests alternative interpretations. For example, Black interprets a comment made by a student named Rick as follows: “[Rick’s] frustrated exclamation that he doesn’t belong here seems to imply not just this conference about this poet and poem, but ‘here’ in the university generally” (125). Yet, given the joking between teacher and student that precedes this comment in which both admit to not knowing a word, we might interpret Rick’s statement—“I shouldn’t be here, what am I doing here”—as playful and sarcastic rather than as frustrated and indicative of deep insecurity.

Just as the differences between these two texts in terms of methodology are instructive, so, too, are their similarities in rhetorical approach. Each manages to establish a trustworthy ethos and a collegial rapport with readers that works to forestall defensive reactions to their penetrating critiques. They accomplish this ethical sleight-of-hand by demonstrating their intimate knowledge of the practices under critique and by revealing their own complicity in the practices they are critiquing.

Anyone who has conducted writing conferences with students (that is, virtually all of us who have taught writing) cannot help but recognize Black’s deep familiarity and commitment to this practice. She shares our well-intentioned reasons for conferencing: “We conference because it is efficient. . . . We conference because we believe it is effective. . . . We conference because we believe it will help our students discover ‘things’ about themselves and the world around them” (13). She understands why we often dominate when we don’t intend to, why our desire to help often turns to impatience and inattentiveness due to time constraints, and why we often avoid personal and affective topics by transforming them into discourse topics (132). We squirm as we recognize ourselves in her discussions of failed conferences: “I place my conference with Felicia in my column of worsts: I am ashamed of using my power as teacher to silence Felicia and tell her, in ways subtle and not so subtle, that her feelings didn’t count, weren’t valid, didn’t even warrant acknowledgment” (122). Similarly, writing center workers, Grimm’s primary but not only audience, will readily recognize Grimm’s insider knowledge of writing center theory and practice. A long time leader in the writing center community nationally, Grimm is intimately acquainted with all of the “sticky” issues—the desire to distance writing
centers from remediation, shibboleths against directive tutoring in the writing center, and debates about proofreading, editing, and writing on the student’s paper (33). Like Black, Grimm constructs readers as colleagues whose experience she understands and shares. She knows how early idealism about tutoring can turn into disillusionment (101). She understands firsthand why writing center administrators sometimes compromise their ideals in order to represent writing center work in terms that administrators will understand: “The disjuncture between what I know from writing center experience and what is imagined about the writing center creates whiteout conditions. To keep the writing center funded for next year, I must be careful to stay on my side of the road” (7). In short, these writers’ ethos and ability to critique without judging make their appraisals of familiar practices not only palatable but also convincing and, more important, their recommendations for change compelling.

A final similarity between these two texts can be found in their proposals for “moving differently” (Grimm 92)—a new kind of collaborative work between students and teachers/writing center workers. Black’s vision for conferences that will better realize our good intentions for student empowerment begins in the classroom, where authority and goals are shared and negotiated: “When I accept that my students may have better ideas than I about how to reach my goals, then power begins to shift. And if I accept that their goals may be as valid as mine, then power continues to shift” (57). The practical implications of this shift include demystifying the ideological dimensions of literacy learning, including the speech genres of the classroom and conference, and creating participatory structures in the classroom that allow students a say in what they write and how that writing is evaluated. The practical implications for conferencing include grounding the conference in a “dialogue where teacher and student can interrogate practices,” share perspectives and personal stories, negotiate goals and agendas, and, in short, learn from one another (155-167).

Grimm’s vision calls for writing centers that are sites where writing center workers, both writing coaches and student writers, join together to conduct “participatory research into students’ literacy practices” and to create “knowledge about the way that discourse regulates who we are and who we can be” (xvi). Such a vision requires “authentic listening” on the part of writing center coaches (69); “asymmetrical reciprocity” in which power differentials are acknowledged but learning is regarded as mutual and transforming (113-114);
willingness to acknowledge and relinquish "cultural habits that deny membership" (115); and a commitment to collective action toward more socially just literacy education. While Grimm offers various practical suggestions for enacting this vision—for example, hiring tutors with diverse academic and cultural backgrounds, creating new policies regarding editing and proofreading—ultimately the achievement of "fair writing center practice" is not reducible to a set of practical suggestions. Rather, it is a way of working collaboratively with students that Grimm illustrates for us in her stories of students who have transformed her concept of writing center work and its possibilities. Time and again, she shows us what she has learned from students such as Rebecca, who taught her that "cultural expectations" rather than Rebecca's abilities were at the heart of Rebecca's problems with school, and who, later as writing coach herself, modeled for Grimm alternative ways of working with student writers (35-38).

Although Grimm is more explicit about it, both texts call for radical change in not only writing conference and writing center practice, but also in higher education generally. Indeed, the paradoxical literacy work that occurs in writing conferences and writing centers represents metonymically the paradoxical work of higher education generally. Grimm's identification of the writing center as a potential site for effecting profound and far-reaching cultural and political change might well have been made by Black about the writing conference:

Because writing centers are places where literacies come in contact with one another, they offer powerful educational opportunities for the social transformation that can occur when different ideologies interact. Granting membership to students means putting aside the missionary narrative of literacy, the modernist belief that we can all come together through a purified standard language. Rather, we come together when we alter our perspectives in order to perceive another world. (Grimm 119)

Although there may be no road to heaven, these texts teach us that the road to hell might be avoided if we dare to reflect critically on our best intentions and work collaboratively with our students to interrogate and understand their effects.

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