As the title of this work indicates, this CD-ROM collection of essays features presentations from the 2004 Watson Conference. The conference, which featured the theme of “Writing at the Center,” invited presenters to explore current trends and theories in writing center studies.” In their introduction, co-editors Jo Ann Griffin, Carol Mattingly, and Michele Eodice note that “trends such as WAC, WID, and the budgetary divides” have seated writing centers at the “institutional table, and definitely at the center—not always of writing—but certainly of some of the most contentious power debates” in recent university history (ii). Their words are even more pertinent now that a couple of years have passed since these presentations were shared with the writing community. The pieces in this compilation reflect what the editors describe as the “core values” of their work, which they see as “support[ing] student retention, writing as learning, and writing for empowerment” (ii). They also explore questions that relate to the re-situation of writing centers from once-marginal positions to various points of centrality: physical, intellectual, and institutional. What happens as a discipline or field of study becomes institutionalized? How does its underlying theory change? Does our listening change as the voices we hear move into the center? What are the opportunities for research in writing center studies? Such issues involve everyone who teaches writing, and the contributors to this compilation offer insightful, challenging, and complex explorations of these questions, even as they raise other openings for future study and research.

(Having this material available on an inexpensive CD—proceeds benefit the Writing Centers Research Project—benefits users in several ways. Not only are CDs portable and lightweight, accessible from either Apple or PC computers, but the format of this work makes it ideal for reading, teaching, and research, reminding us that that content and authorship, not binding or format, make a work scholarly. Linked bookmarks facilitate easy navigation between articles, which are printable for reference and research. The search feature makes it possible to find words and/or phrases easily, while the user-friendly zoom in/out feature increases or decreases font size with just a click of the mouse, easing eyestrain. These are just some of the advantages of having this collection on CD—readers are sure to find more.)

This collection opens with an innovative look at writing centers, using the lenses of noted writers from the past and blending humor and seriousness in order to explore the challenges and opportunities of modern writing centers. While Elizabeth Boquet ponders the questions of myth creation and the loss and/or challenges to faith that often follow normative acceptance and institutionalization, Michele Eodice’s fascinating presentation of “Roland Barthes Says So” invites readers to follow an active hyperlink to an imaginative webcast postulation of Barthes visiting New York City’s
Brooklyn College Writing Center. In this rest of this section, writing center scholars imagine what it might be like to encounter Bakhtin, read correspondence written by Amelia Bloomer—a well-known nineteenth-century newspaper editor—and listen to a rousing speech by Frances Willard, President of the nineteenth century Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), all of which are framed within writing centers. The entries in the section represent the sort of achievements possible when imagination, collaboration, research, and writing synergistically work together.

There is some good stuff in the next section, “Foundations and Futures.” I use the word “stuff” quite deliberately, contemplating David Russell’s discussion “How to Keep from Getting Stuffed: Dig Through Old Stuff, Count Stuff, Watch Stuff, Talk to People about Stuff” (91). Russell analyzes the value of implementing both qualitative and quantitative methods of research as he encourages writing center administrators to dig into their archives to contribute scholarship to the history and theory of writing centers. Russell’s article complements and follows writing center guru Neil Lerner’s call for continued research into writing center practice and theory, “Seeking Knowledge about Writing Centers in Numbers, Talk, and Archives.” The possibilities for research into the history of writing centers are, in many institutions, projects-in-waiting. Lerner’s article explores the ways in which the “barriers” to effective writing center research—lack of resources, reliance on “lore” for expertise, and a hesitancy to accept writing centers as “entities with accepted research methodologies, controlling theories, and an ever-renewing supply of graduate students” to extend research—can be overcome (54-55). This section weaves together the past, present, and future of writing centers, as does Beth Burmester when she encourages listeners to think of the unique “space” of the writing center. Drawing on Ray Oldenburg’s concept of “third place,” a more relaxed, communicative, and open space (115), Burmester invites us to “envision writing centers as public spaces with multiple uses” (122). She notes, “[T]he third place designates those locations where we choose to go and where we are free from the obligations or responsibilities that may hamper our ability to reflect or act as we desire in either the first or second places” (130). Completing this section, Kathryn Dobson and William FitzGerald move from conventional conversational spaces and practices of writing centers to a more focused examination of what happens when unconventional genres present themselves in tutor/student sessions.

The third section, “Conversations across Programs,” invites readers to consider some of the theoretical aspects of writing center studies. In “Toward a Theory of Structure,” Barbara Schneider portrays the dynamic nature of the writing center, reflecting “an array of structures that materially displays Robert Barnett’s discussion of the political relationships of writing centers: ‘[the] socialization patterns between writing centers and their institutions are as diverse as the very missions that drive each center’” (163). Schneider’s article precedes a three-part symposium discussing the positive outcomes of joining three distinct “voices”—“teachers in composition classrooms, writers in creative writing courses, and writing center administrators and tutors”—in writing center space (184). Other essays in this group analyze the rise and fall of a Writing Fellows Program, examine ways of encouraging dialogue between
writing centers and first-year composition programs, and explore the concept of an intellectual “third space” (284).

The final set of essays, “Voices in/from/of the Center,” integrates voices of central figures who are often taken for granted in writing center studies—those of past and present tutors; they represent what the editors describe as “represent[ing] the essence of writing centers” (xiv). In “Within the University and Beyond,” they speak of the ways in which their work has helped them to progress in their academic and professional lives; for example, Jennifer Meitl notes, “the learning that takes place in this diverse atmosphere is evident in the conversations that occur each day” (320). In “Mobilizing the Center, Centering the Conversation,” Beth Godbee considers the “interpersonal dynamics of conferencing,” and explores the ways in which elements she researched in home tutoring integrate into writing center methodology to expand and enhance the effectiveness of institutional tutoring sessions (320). Finally, in an enlightening and moving essay, Pam Childers shares “The Talk I Didn’t Give at The Thomas R. Watson Conference,” in which she examines “the difficulties for teens attempting to self-identify as writers and the role writing centers can play in fostering positive agency in this age group” (ix). It is enlightening to juxtapose the reading of her article with the earlier one by Dobson and FitzGerald. They address the increasing presence of the personal statement in writing center work, and Childers discusses the importance of helping high-school seniors write college application essays that effectively convey a sense of the real person behind the brief yet influential essay. Both genres move beyond the conventional, traditional genres of writing center praxis, requiring innovative approaches.

This compilation ends with “Humor Us,” a brief bookend, or frame, set against the opening section of “Five Authors.” With a deftly satiric touch, Brad Hughes imagines a reporter’s lens trained on the various facets of the work done in writing centers by both directors and tutors. Kathy Bartlett closes the collection with a series of comical vignettes drawn from writing center scenes that resonate with anyone familiar with the ins and outs of the everyday writer center world.

In this compilation, humorous pieces act as bookends to the other essays in this work, and humor is an effective tool when one turns the lens onto oneself. One of the best features of the collection is the willingness of the authors to open up the conversation to consider such challenges as fostering student agency, admitting unconventional genres into writing center conversations, the challenges of institutionalization, and the demands of helping students whose first language is not English. I think of Phillip Gardner’s and William Ramsey’s 2005 article in The Writing Center Journal in which they advocate an understanding and appreciation of the “polyvalent” aspect of the work of writing centers. The articles and contributions in Writing from the Center illuminate this polyvalence and inspire us to continue to listen to conversations in, from, and about the center.

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