Embracing the Challenges of Conventional Practices, Program Inquiry, and New Media in Writing Center Theory and Research

Peripheral Visions for Writing Centers, by Jackie Grutsch McKinney. Logan: Utah State UP, 2013. 150 pp.

Building Writing Center Assessments that Matter, by Ellen Schendel and William J. Macauley, Jr. Logan: Utah State UP, 2012. 207 pp.

The Routledge Reader on Writing Centers and New Media, edited by Sohui Lee and Russell Carpenter. New York: Routledge, 2014. 297 pp.

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All three of us utilize different lenses to perceive the world. We enter spaces as gendered, sexualized, racialized, and nationalized people, yet too often those identities are not foregrounded in the everyday work we do in writing centers. As a result, our everyday becomes easily hegemonic, unchallenged. For us, questioning the pedagogy and process of how we operate in sessions should be just as ubiquitous as the stories we share and the practices we employ in writing centers. Three recent books in writing center studies—Jackie Grutsch McKinney's *Peripheral Visions for Writing Centers*, Sohui Lee and Russell Carpenter's *The Routledge Reader on Writing Centers and New Media*, and Ellen Schendel and William J. Macauley Jr.'s *Building Writing Center Assessments that Matter*—offer theoretical frameworks, technological innovation and program inquiry to re-imagine and critically explore how we think and practice in the ordinary (sometimes exceptional) spaces where one-to-one mentoring happens. We approach this review attuned to the distinct standpoints from which we look. Too often scholarship for/on writing centers flattens its audience, rarely addressing the intellectual demands necessary for participating in disciplinary conversations or the process for a diverse range of interlocutors to join these communities of practice.

Harry approaches these texts as a faculty administrator and researcher of writing centers; Cara as a recent graduate student and current professional writing center consultant; and Michael as a second-year doctoral candidate in writing center and composition studies. Our orientations to these texts reflect different degrees of experience—as purveyors of stories of writing centers (the good, the bad, and others), as tutors struggling with (and through) new media to collaborate with writers, and as scholars engaged in everyday and formalized assessment of our mentoring practices. The texts under review speak directly

to our experiences and our needs, and they also speak past us, presuming a sort of exteriority that makes us wish they each had a better sense of us as their audience. Harry's scholarship has focused on a deep awareness of how writing centers promote domination but create spaces for opposition and activism and how assessment offers promise to transform and devastate programs. He is just recently beginning to embrace new media as an arena through which to produce and disseminate research. Cara and Michael, however, live in fully digital worlds—academic, writing center, and otherwise. They too often have been excluded from conversations about assessment and grand narratives about writing centers. Although consultants/tutors/coaches are central agents in program reflection, development, and inquiry, more often than not, they are the objects, not viewed as collaborators.

In Jackie Grutsch McKinney's *Peripheral Visions for Writing Centers,* we see that the stories told about writing centers by directors, consultants, and others revolve around a central story or, as McKinney refers to it, a grand narrative: "[W]riting centers are comfortable, iconoclastic places where all students go to get one-to-one tutoring on their writing" (3). She produces this argument about the grand narrative using well-known writing center lore and an online survey filled out by writing center professionals—the participants' answers are located in the appendix. One problem for McKinney is that this grand narrative does not reflect the actual complex work performed by consultants and directors alike. Deconstructing it, she focuses chapters on the narrative's constituent elements that come to signify writing centers as "cozy homes," "iconoclastic," and inclusive (3). In her chapter on debunking the narrative that writing centers are "cozy homes," McKinney argues that the decor of writing centers, although typically filled with plants and open space to parallel with the "cozy home" aesthetic, curtains the more complicated narrative about writing centers (20). As writing center professionals challenge colleagues, the students they work with, and themselves, the notion of "cozy home" fades because thinking critically, questioning, and revising—all important elements of writing center work—are not "cozy." After complicating the oversimplified "cozy homes" myth, McKinney tackles the notion that writing centers are "iconoclastic," or a marginalized space separated from institutional values and expectations (35). The problem with marking the writing center as marginalized is it implies "victimhood;" McKinney believes writing center work has moved past that notion, yet this marginalization may be used as a subversive tactic to be critical of writing center work and scholarship. McKinney also argues that the claim of marginalization undervalues and under-complicates the navigation that writing center directors do; she claims, "writing centers and the institutions they are found in are always both—marginal and not marginal, emancipatory and regulatory" (54). Finally, McKinney challenges the third part of the grand

narrative about how writing centers are for "all students" (57). In this chapter, she turns to her data set—the survey answers—to show how writing center professionals view their work. The grand narrative suggests inclusivity, but McKinney argues that the narratives writing center professionals create about "normal and abnormal tutoring sessions" suggest an anxiety about working with a diverse student body (70). She concludes by emphasizing the importance of looking past the grand narrative: "Peripheral vision," or "trac[ing] the. . . negative space to see the actual dimensions of writing center work and operational beliefs" combats the generalized—often incorrect—story told about writing center work (84). McKinney calls on scholarship to celebrate and learn from individual stories, techniques, and ideologies.

As an undergraduate when she first read McKinney, Cara began to critically examine her own writing center and its reliance on creating a "cozy home" for students. Cara noticed how she and other consultants foregrounded values of comfort and inclusivity for the students they worked with, yet what was lost in that mindset was an interrogation of how and why making space for discomfort might be productive. The "cozy home" thinking was dangerous and seductive because it became a stock, even easy, formula for approaching every student in every context rather than the more complicated dynamic of engaging with students where they were intellectually and emotionally, as part of the students' own journey of learning to write and express themselves. Working from similar instances invoked in her research, McKinney points to the reliance on comfortable and already-known narratives that can stifle challenge in everyday thinking. We had hoped for a more comprehensive exploration of the individual experiences and interpretations writing center professionals share, perhaps seeing her dig further into what her survey data reflected as opposed to the extended analysis of lore. For example, we are interested in the comparisons and insight that might be made from the responses to her questions about work definitions and the positioning of writing centers within institutions. Although McKinney demonstrates the necessity of challenging the grand narrative and celebrating individual writing center stories, we wonder how this critical analysis translates to the everyday work between consultants and clients. We thought *Peripheral Visions* begged the question of the "micro" narratives that consultants and clients might share, not just the more abstract or grand versions that directors circulate. By exploring what McKinney names as "negative space," that discursive domain beyond the grand narrative, she challenges us to imagine stories that take/make space for interrogating social justice and identity politics activism that writing center work can transform, whether through individual interaction or institutional challenge. This spurring toward more and sustained critical inquiry in writing centers makes *Peripheral Visions* useful for a variety of audiences because such believing and doubting

(as well as research projects that take up such intellectual questioning) need to be integrated into the practices of directors, graduate students, and peer consultants alike, wherever they find themselves mentoring and learning.

Like the questioning and challenging of writing center hegemony in *Peripheral Visions*, Ellen Schendel and William Macauley's *Building Writing Center Assessments that Matter* argues that effective assessment protocol begins with introspection and turns outward, bridging assessment insights to larger institutional goals. Such reflection integrates and complicates the role writing centers play in executing and challenging systemic forces. Assessment, Schendel and Macauley suggest, can promote greater understanding of writing center practices beyond the usual stakeholders of staff and clients. As Macauley advises, "writing centers don't work in a vacuum; centers live and breathe within institutions, in relation to other academic entities. . . . [I]t behooves writing center directors to acknowledge this reality and work with it" (57). *Building Writing Center Assessments'* first of six chapters orients readers to writing center assessment through a comprehensive literature review of wider scholarship in composition studies and provides a structure for developing local assessment protocol. Over the subsequent chapters, Schendel and Macauley suggest writing centers document their own local values and goals, from which measurable outcomes can be shaped for eventual data gathering (39-51). Institutional documents, like mission statements or accreditation reports and self-study documents, should guide writing center assessment thinking and practices. Such linking work bridges gulfs between the everyday work of writing centers and the various stakeholders, making the links more concrete and tangible and expanding the scope of potential audiences for the work specific to writing centers, which can provide meaningful assessment strategies that link back to the institution (59). In addition to mining from and integrating local institutional values and statements for individual assessment protocol, Schendel and Macauley note that professional associations, like the MLA, CWPA, and NCTE, have policy documents and position papers that can further guide or nuance assessment principles and practices. To capstone the linking of center and institution, the end of the first section highlights the reach of writing assessment reports to larger audiences beyond those who work at writing centers. The authors describe how this process of integration can educate institutions on the role writing centers play in operationalizing shared goals (83). Neal Lerner's interchapter, "Of Numbers and Stories," provides a historical and conceptual overview of empirical research methods in a writing center context. The true goal of such scholarship, in Lerner's view, is to capture, map and understand observable dynamics as well as to "understand significance and meaning from the participants' perspectives and their social actions" (111). The last two chapters document Schendel and Macauley's experiences with research

methods for gathering info for assessment by already fitting it into the work that writing centers do (126-131) and with writing effective reports rooted in audience awareness that will invite ongoing conversation (140). Brian Huot and Nicole Caswell point out in their afterward that the intellectual labor of writing center assessment can grow the disciplinary profile of the field and can nuance the discourse of the community. Schendel and Macauley's coda reminds readers that assessment is an iterative and recursive process (171-72).

While they share experiences with assessment through concrete examples from their institutions, the local nature of Schendel and Macauley's lessons makes generalizing to other contexts difficult. How might writing center assessment be inherently different (or similar) in a research-intensive university, a regional comprehensive, or a small liberal arts college? If writing center assessment is to matter, we were left wondering for whom and to what end, and the authors leave us with too little to latch on to. Harry wondered how the samples exclusive to Schendel and Macauley's local institutions foster cross-institutional scholarship or dialogue between peer and aspirant institutions. When he was on faculty at St. John's University, the writing center produced volumes of the sorts of data for which *Building Writing Center Assessments* advocates, but he found no mechanisms or networks of mutual support to compare data sets with other large Catholic or similar peer institutions. Likewise, Michael and Cara have struggled to parlay their own individual assessment research projects to larger conversations that cut across institutions; instead, they feel confined to the anecdotal. Michael wondered about the assumption in the book that the coordination of values and goals between larger institutions and writing centers must happen and how those "shared" values might, in practice, operate at cross purposes with one another. What happens when common ground between the writing center and the institution cannot be found so easily or is illusive? In their advocacy of appropriation of institutional values for assessment purposes, Schendel and Macauley implicitly advocate a subversive mindset that does not address the complicated politics of institutions or the differential positioning of professionals directing writing centers (lacking security of employment or tenure). By coordinating (even accommodating) institutional values with the writing center's, assessment can be made to matter and resonate with the culture of power in the institution, but it still does not displace power differentials between stakeholders that can lead many writing center professionals to adopt a bunker mentality, endlessly staving off threats to their leadership and unit autonomy or tirelessly bending to institutional currents. Regardless, the lesson from *Building Writing Center Assessments* remains especially critical for new directors or graduate students learning about the field: Effective program evaluation requires a careful reading and understanding of institutional systems.

McKinney, Schendel, and Macauley offer useful lenses through which we review our final text, which argues that writing center practices need to adapt to a changing rhetorical and technological landscape where students and other writers seek support with genres and media. In *The Routledge Reader on Writing Centers and New Media*, editors Sohui Lee and Russell Carpenter reprint a set of foundational and historical essays on multimedia, multiliteracy, and multimodality. The nineteen chapters build awareness of and provide tools for tutors and directors alike to address contemporary literacy demands and innovative outlets through which writers can express themselves. Tutors and administrators no longer exist in a world of academic expression where thesis-driven essays are the norm and where hard copy printouts of term papers dominate; instead, consultants and students are likely to encounter blogs, digital portfolios, multimedia, or multilingual projects in everyday sessions. Lee and Carpenter's thesis across their anthology is that we require a more complicated sense of the history, theory, and discursive conventions and possibilities that "traditional" writing center practice does not provide. The chapters from the New London Group and John Trimbur are critical for re-imagining the place of media and literacies, especially in the contexts of the one-to-one mentoring that happens in writing centers. Michael Pemberton's essay on hypertextuality calls for writing centers to break from the mindset and practices confined to an exclusively textual, non-linked world of writing and to embrace an environment where communication is inherently multimodal. Jackie Grutsch McKinney sounds a similar call in her chapter, pushing for writing centers to explicitly train staff on the unique experience of tutoring for new media and digital document design; quite simply, pedagogical practices rooted in another era ill-equip tutors and poorly serve their clients. Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede's chapter complicates notions of audience in a digital age influenced by the presence of social media, while Cynthia Selfe makes a case for the rhetorical impact of hearing and listening in multimodality.

While we applaud *The Routledge Reader* for its packaging of a critical collection of essays that potentially re-orient writing center practitioners, we wondered what different insights would have emerged if the collection had operated on the assumption that peer consultants, graduate students, and perhaps even writing center administrators and faculty are already well-immersed in the everyday practices of multiliteracy and multimodality. Instead, the editors seemed to write from a notion that writing centers are deficient and just now responding to the challenge of and integrating pedagogical practices to respond to new media: "most writing and learning centers are only recently considering how they will offer tutorials for students creating multimodal arguments" (xv). Neither the editors nor any of the contributors in the collection offer any empirical data or insight on any adoption of technology or

the prevalence of multimodal, multiliteracy tutoring in writing centers. In our own writing centers, we have been struck by how our colleagues and staff tap diffuse literacies and engage in numerous modalities in their personal lives beyond their writing center work, all the while being reluctant to embrace a more complicated, nuanced view of literacy, modality, and argument in typical tutoring sessions. Apart from raising consciousness and building theoretical and technical knowledge, *The Routledge Reader* does not help them (or enable us to train them) to transcend the disconnect between everyday practices and the teaching and learning that happens with students. Lee and Carpenter's introduction begs for a follow-up empirical study that documents and assesses the very questions the collection's essays hope to address: How and to what degree do writing centers address multimodality and multiliteracy? The editors do not offer an adequate survey of actual mindsets and practices of writing centers. As the editors acknowledge, writing centers are as diverse and locally contingent as is education within and beyond the United States. Reflecting our own local bias toward diversity, we were also struck by how the collection defines and portrays multiliteracy as primarily technological and media-driven, but does not take up how multiliteracy varies by discipline, by access to technology and media, and by linguistics. In addition to exploring different ways of arguing and writing through/with (new) media, we had hoped that a post-millennial discussion of literacy might take up what languages and Englishes are supported and marginalized, how disciplinary conventions and faculty development complicate writing center outreach and programming needs, and how different sorts of institutions embrace and presume student bodies with dramatically different access to technology. Like *Building Writing Center Assessments that Matter*, Lee and Carpenter's *Writing Centers and New Media* serves as an excellent primer for those new to the conversation and will spur more experienced professionals to seek out advanced or grounded literature on the debates surrounding literacy, new media, and peer-to-peer mentoring.

These texts testify to a difficult reality for our work: How do we transcend our impulse to tell stories, collect lore, and share recipes for best practices? Just as Dana Driscoll and Sherry Wynn Perdue have charged writing centers to take up Richard Haswell's now-famous call for replicable, aggregable, and data-driven (RAD) research, we wonder what significance these texts might have had if they were to share empirical data, results, or findings from qualitative and quantitative research. McKinney comes the closest to performing the very research discussion we hoped for, but we craved a more sustained discussion, a dialogue across these three books. Instead, she and the others end up returning to lore and story-telling, narrative reflection as an end to itself rather than as launching points to more generalizable, empirical research. For a field so self-aware of its own politics and political implications (like the efficacy of

our work and the populations that we reach/fail to reach), we had hoped for a more sustained challenge to the orthodoxy of how we circulate our research, our stories, our assessments.

However these texts fit in the field's broader disciplinary debates and evolution, they offer writing center studies promising research for practitioners to consider the importance of creating a new space for researching, innovating, and revising. Each writing center possesses unique narratives layered with the stories of participants, of the space and its institution, as well as the local and global sociopolitical dynamics. Both McKinney's and Schendel and Macauley's texts remind us to create space for individual stories and assessments to mold, support, and rethink our own writing center's role in relation to other writing centers, clients, and institutions. Lee and Carpenter's collection emphasizes the importance of creating a space for new media to take advantage of and celebrate the potential of technology—especially since the virtual world has become an integral part of this generation. As we create space for new media, narratives, and assessment, we think about how to borrow from other writers' texts and critically imagine in our exuberant (early) adoption whose stories become standard, how access is differential and too often reinscribes domination and oppression, and where and for whom possibilities exist for better understanding the efficacy of everyday practices. With each of these books, writing center studies continues down a promising path, where directors, consultants, and students have rich opportunities to continue dialogue through inquiry-based research that explores, experiments, interrogates, and challenges, especially what seems customary or inventive, wherever it happens.

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Works Cited

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