

Book Reviews

On the Ethical Mainstreaming of Writing Center Administration and Practice: Reflections on Recent Scholarship in Writing Center Studies

Partners in Literacy: A Writing Center Manual for Civic Engagement, by Allen Brizee and Jaclyn M. Wells. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016. 165 pp.

Talk About Writing: The Tutoring Strategies of Experienced Writing Center Tutors, by Jo Mackiewicz and Isabelle Kramer Thompson. New York: Routledge, 2015. 216 pp.

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Writing center practitioners have long embraced an iconoclastic identity, presenting writing centers as “marginal spaces” that contrast with what is perceived as a typical classroom experience (Boquet; Brannon and North; Gardner and Ramsey; Mahala). Whereas classrooms are frequently depicted as tightly controlled and top-down, writing centers are just as frequently characterized as decentralized and student centered. In an increasingly austere academic climate, however, marginality is becoming less tenable. In *Peripheral Visions for the Writing Center*, Jackie Grutsch McKinney worries that “the narrative of writing center professionals and research as iconoclastic does not account for how writing center professionals suffer from this categorization” (7). To this, I would add that a dedication to iconoclasm can harm the viability of writing centers, preventing them from obtaining or maintaining funding and status within their institutions, and forcing tutors and student writers to work in reaction to the concerns of pedagogical ideologues within writing studies—concerns that may not account for their real needs and expectations.

In the past decade, scholars have focused on helping to mainstream writing centers so as to enhance or preserve their institutional viability. The majority of these works have dealt with mainstreaming in the abstract, attempting to reconcile the material and political realities of writing center practice and administration with the established best practices of writing center and composition scholarship. After all, the field’s iconoclasm was developed in response to real and pressing concerns regarding the ethics of tutoring and the institutional placement of writing centers. The question is, how can we continue to provide our essential services if we’re not bucking the pedagogical norm, at least to some degree?

In this essay, I look at a pair of recently published books that help answer this question in direct, concrete terms. The first, Allen Brizee and Jaclyn M. Wells' *Partners in Literacy*, outlines the development, implementation, and assessment of a community outreach project involving Purdue's Online Writing Lab (OWL). The second, Jo Mackiewicz and Isabelle Kramer Thompson's *Talk About Writing*, details a study that empirically describes the successful practices of veteran tutors during one-to-one consultations. While the two books may appear to cover very different areas, each demonstrates how writing center practitioners can begin moving away from the institutional periphery and into the mainstream, and can do so while continuing to provide ethical and effective services. Taken together, the books demonstrate that a mainstreaming of writing centers may well be achieved without compromising the integrity of the services provided by centers—so long as such processes are undertaken in an attentive and savvy manner and documented with care.

Partners in Literacy describes the long process of creating the Community Writing and Education (CWEST) section of the Purdue OWL. CWEST attempts to bridge the “town/gown” gap of the Lafayette-West Lafayette metropolitan area in Indiana, where Purdue University is located. The project was meant as an expansion of the popular OWL, which previously had been aimed toward writers working only in high school, post-secondary, and professional settings. The authors set out to create electronic resources for adult learners, particularly prisoners and people studying for Indiana's high school equivalency exam. The book starts with a grounding in civil engagement methodology; moves to in-depth, anecdotal descriptions of the development and implementation of their project; describes the process of verifying the usability of CWEST resources; and ends with an enlightening discussion of key takeaways. This is an exhaustive work, one clearly produced by writing center practitioners whose approach to academic administration is as politically savvy as it is ethically engaged.

Community outreach has long been a focus of writing center and composition studies. If done well, outreach efforts can increase the visibility of writing centers while improving relations with the communities surrounding our campuses. The authors note, however, that “engaging the community often seems more like an occasional ‘special project’ instead of a sustained commitment” (2). Promising projects are often abandoned once the students who facilitated them graduate, and there is often little professional incentive for tenured or tenure line professors to continue them. Additionally, the authors stress the immensity of the cultural divide that can exist between a

campus and its community and discuss the need to pursue outreach despite its potential pitfalls. Along with the obvious ethical benefits associated with community projects, outreach can reap political benefits, as well, helping to heal the sometimes rancorous divide between universities and the statehouses that control much of our budgets.

The authors stress the particular difficulty of discerning the needs of community partners, who are often separated by cultural as well as physical distances. Assumptions regarding the nature of these needs, as well as how to address them, cannot be made blithely. Instead, the authors realize that “the commonplace distance between universities and communities supports the idea that community engagement should be informed by research” at all steps (13). The question, then, is how to go about doing such research in a manner that will (1) have a positive impact upon university-community relations, (2) adhere to the established best practices of writing center and composition studies, (3) be respected by the university personnel who judge the worthiness of projects in regards to professional advancement, and (4) fit into institutional narratives that dictate viability of university services. This is a tall order, and the complexity and diversity of these concerns can only be addressed successfully through a variety of carefully cultivated methods.

As such, *Partners in Literacy* is not merely a book-length study, but an exhaustive and variegated collection of narratives, rationales, and theorizations that are strengthened by qualitative and quantitative studies. “Often,” Brizee and Wells note, “writing scholars omit the types of writing they must complete to engage in community-based work, an omission the authors hope to address here” (34). The point of including such writing, which includes departmental reports, IRB requests, and internal grant proposals, is that successful engagement projects cannot, and should not, be reduced to the output of a single study or a narrative regarding a single event. They should instead be conceived of as a web of many different projects and partnerships that all exist under a larger umbrella. Quantified data is key to making this umbrella project institutionally viable (see number four, above), while the careful consideration of research findings helps assure that the services actually work (number one), and an elucidation of the theory and pedagogy informing the project’s methods ensures that practices are ethical and appreciated by humanities faculty (numbers two and three). While the authors are mindful of each of these needs, they are careful not to prize one over the others. The result is a book where cohesion is at times hard to pinpoint, as its most important and illuminating moments are found in its many diversions.

There are too many such diversions to list here, so I will focus on one that I found particularly useful: early on, there’s an entire section recounting the authors’ difficulty obtaining IRB approval for a usability study (36). This may

seem superfluous in the abstract, but it highlights some very real challenges faced by those who wish to undertake research policies, outreach-based or otherwise, that reflect the established best practices of composition. Innovative research is not standardized, does not fit easily into pre-developed conceptual frames, and is therefore often quite difficult to get approved by review boards who are accustomed to the more traditional methods preferred by the hard and social sciences. These review systems are designed, after all, to protect research subjects from being exposed to the instances of severe mental and physical anguish that stain the disciplinary history of psychology and the social sciences. They are supposed to be cautious and conservative, and researchers must keep that in mind when engaging with them.

I can personally attest that writing center administrators can become easily frustrated with IRB protocol, especially with rules mandating, say, that survey data cannot be transmitted over email even when it's anonymous, or that all participant records must be shredded *and* incinerated after a set period of time. The fact of the matter is that, in many institutions, the IRB protocols that are still in place today were originally drafted on a Selectric, and as such they do not gel easily with non-standardized research methods. Here, writing center researchers must go the extra mile to ensure the successful adoption and implementation of their work. Ignoring IRB requirements means abandoning the research component of our work, and thereby harming its viability. Conversely, complying with IRB standards in a rote fashion requires adopting a compromised approach to research methods.

The authors “realized that part of what they were doing was educating IRB in a process that combined elements of teaching, research, and engagement” (38). This is a key takeaway, and direct evidence of how engagement and dialogue actually changes institutional systems, bringing them more in line with the values and best practices of writing center and composition scholarship. The authors are not just talking about the abstract need to enter into institutional discourse; they are actually doing it. And actually doing it is a messy and nonlinear process.

When conducting innovative research, my firm belief is that one cannot simply start with a premise, test that premise with a prefabricated research method, and then present findings proving or disproving that premise. Doing so would entail falling into rote or mechanized approaches, robbing writing centers of the dynamic flexibility necessary for successful and ethical outreach. Researchers must instead embed themselves into the situations in which writing and teaching will take place; listen carefully to the concerns of all partners and participants; develop, test, and revise the materials and methods that constitute outreach; and finally provide an assessment of the outreach project, all while explaining their project in terms of relevant theory and pedagogy.

The keys here, I feel, are flexibility and openness. Writing center scholars have long prided themselves as taking a dynamic and accessible approach to writing instruction. While the implementation of such practices is becoming more and more difficult in a data-driven educational climate that prizes standardization and efficiency, they can still be sustained so long as practitioners are rhetorically mindful of the narratives that envelop their institutions. The methodology discussed throughout *Partners in Literacy* is, in a word, unorthodox. Were it not presented deftly, it could easily have been dismissed by administration or even departmental colleagues—too subjective, not serious enough, not theoretical enough, and so forth. But the authors take care to describe the particular institutional conditions in which this work was conducted and to enunciate clearly their rationale for presenting their work to their colleagues in the manner in which they did. This approach is admittedly exhausting, but so is successful writing center administration. This is what the honest documentation of effective research looks like.

The lessons gleaned from this book should reverberate well beyond outreach projects. Writing center scholars must strive to achieve a balance between the expectations of our departments and disciplines and those of our institutions and communities. These may at times appear irreconcilable. But if handled carefully and creatively, with an awareness of the needs of stakeholders and an eye toward reshaping the discourses and expectations of all parties involved, successful and viable practices can be implemented and justified. Achieving such a balance is not easy, and it requires an unorthodox approach, but it can definitely be done.

While *Partners in Literacy* serves as an excellent discussion of writing center outreach and administrative efforts, it doesn't provide much discussion of the nuts and bolts work of one-to-one tutoring. Such a discussion is badly needed, as many older writing center canards about the press for "minimalist" tutoring are rapidly losing currency within a political climate that prizes the sort of direct interventionism that lends itself to perceived efficiency. Jo Mackiewicz and Isabelle Kramer Thompson's *Talk About Writing* details a best practices-based method of both analyzing effective tutorial consultations and explaining the value of those consultations to people outside of writing centers or writing studies. The book is a culmination of nearly a decade of research for Mackiewicz and Thompson, work which has already spanned several essential articles and is herein contained in a definitive form. Their work breaks from the overt iconoclasm of those who seek to measure the success of tutorials in terms of how fully consultations achieve an abstract goal,

such as minimalism or collaboration. The authors manage instead to observe successful tutorials in terms of the presence of different categories of tutor-writer communication strategies. These strategies are defined broadly enough to allow for flexibility in their interpretation, yet are concrete enough to be observed and assessed in quantified terms.

Even as they strive to quantify the traits of a successful tutorial—thereby moving writing center documentation practices into an institutional mainstream that prizes hard data—the authors still view successful tutoring as a complex and multivariate process that cannot be meaningfully understood in any reductive sense. Rather than thinking of tutoring as a matter of providing or withholding instruction, or as a nebulous form of “collaboration,” the authors classify various tutoring strategies according to what those strategies attempt to achieve and where they reside along a continuum of directiveness. This approach “portrays learning as developing from a collaborative, context-dependent relationship between a student . . . and a teacher or tutor. The process of teaching begins with what the student currently knows or can do and moves forward toward mastery, the tutor’s support decreasing until the student can perform the task independently” (3).

Their classification system is built upon Vygotsky’s notions of cognitive and motivational scaffolding. These theories are quite well-established and serve as an excellent starting point for the articulation and assessment of tutoring policy: not only have they been tested, they have also been widely accepted. The genius of the study comes from melding these established theories with writing center best practices, and doing so in a manner that preserves the essential dynamism of consultations while still being able to generate data.

The authors describe scaffolding as “a metaphor for an instruction process in which the tutor enables a student to achieve a goal beyond his or her current capabilities” (17). Scaffolding is pointedly not directive but collaborative. Students are not “talked at,” nor are they made to follow an example. They are provided with space to develop their own voice, hone their own ideas, and express themselves, but that space consists of more than a blank canvas. “Learning,” the authors note, “occurs through the mediation of external support and leads to internal performance” (22). Dynamism and flexibility are essential to this process, as effective collaboration requires both student and tutor to immerse themselves in the many particularities of each consultation and act accordingly. Standardization, taking a routinized approach to each tutorial, would destroy their effectiveness. This understanding is, I feel, almost universally accepted among writing center professionals.

The trouble is, dynamic forces are very difficult to describe, let alone measure—pinning down a phenomenon of human interaction so as to generate data typically involves calcifying that phenomenon, as firm descriptions necessitate

clear boundaries. This helps to explain why the process of a tutorial is typically described in broad terms, rather than as a clearly defined set of steps. These difficulties might also explain a hesitance among some researchers toward a formal classification of the parts of a tutorial. Past methods of generating quantified data from the observation of tutorials, such as measuring the amount of words spoken during each session by both tutor and student writer, can provide *some* valuable information. However, in focusing upon a single, quantified output, researchers run the risk of simplification, of marking a session's success or failure based upon that output. Even naming a handful of factors that correlate with session success can lead to routinized practice. While Mackiewicz and Thompson's methodology is not framed explicitly as responding to this quandary, its deepest value is in its ability to help readers do so.

Mackiewicz and Thompson's scaffolding-based model of tutorial observation is multi-faceted and leaves room for interpretation. It accounts not just for the frequency of speech or action, nor even just for the subject of what is being discussed. Importantly, the model shifts primary focus toward the *pedagogical intent* of the various communication strategies employed by tutors. These are classified into three groups, each of which is manifested in several different, measurable ways. The first group is direct instruction, in which student writers are told to do something ("you need a paragraph break here"). The second group consists of motivational scaffolding strategies, in which tutors seek to engage students in the session or put them at ease. The final, most complex group consists of cognitive scaffolding strategies, in which student writers are given questions or prompts that contain some degree of directiveness but are still allowed "to find their own solutions for composing or content problems" (33).

The authors found that successful consultations contain a surprising multitude of various strategies. Their findings show that

Tutors used 31.16 strategies per 10 minutes of conference interaction—or just over 3 strategies per minute. This general finding shows that the experienced tutors in these satisfactory conferences saturated their sessions with discourse moves that had the potential to facilitate student writers' learning by conveying information, moving student writers' thinking forward, and encouraging student writers' continued efforts at their writing task. (78-79)

This may seem intuitive to those of us who study composition or have worked as writing teachers or tutors. Indeed, the findings more or less back up the orthodoxy of writing center scholarship, which prizes fluidity, flexibility, and individualized instruction. Just over three strategies per minute signals an awful lot of twists and turns, after all. But the deepest value of this study

is how it puts these orthodox understandings into quantified terms, which could make for more convincing narratives to people who are less familiar with writing studies. While the study's thrust reflects understandings that are broadly held within writing theory and pedagogy, its quantification can make it appear less ideological and more objective, thereby making it easier to insert into the larger institutional narratives that prize quantitative data.

I have been long captivated by Mackiewicz and Thompson's scaffolding-based approach to tutoring, which appeals to me for two important reasons: first, it reflects my understanding of what effective tutoring actually entails, which has little to do with the dictates I have received mandating minimalist tutoring. Second, this approach is more concerned with actual practice than with adhering to some kind of dogma, the likes of which I find evident in extremist approaches to minimalist tutoring. I believe such dogmatic approaches are encapsulated canonically in Jeff Brooks' "Minimalist Tutoring: Making Students Do All the Work," in which the author argues that tutors face a moral imperative to provide student writers with as little instruction as possible. As anyone with a cursory knowledge of tutoring practice or scholarship can tell you, such an approach is all but impossible to put into practice.

While being respectful of the ethical concerns addressed by an adherence to minimalism, Mackiewicz and Thompson discuss how these minimalist approaches feed into "writing center lore [which] said tutors should ensure student writers do most of the talking and maintain ownership of their writing, and tutors should assist student writers in finding their own answers without being told, should avoid editing and proofreading for students, and should refuse to write on draft papers" (28). The authors note that these minimalist approaches stem from a preference for peer tutoring framed in opposition to classroom teaching, with the former being dynamic and free and the latter, regimented and standardized.

This understanding of the tutorial/classroom split is somewhat reductionist but reflects a valid interpretation of writing pedagogy. Nonetheless, the widespread adoption of minimalist dictates does little to address the concerns they are designed to fix, and leads instead to a sense of tutoring-as-purity, a conception of pedagogy marred by a reductivism that hampers the efficacy of consultations and can be a huge turn-off to uninitiated administrators and students.

Brooks' essay combined with Stephen M. North's "The Idea of a Writing Center" to launch a polemic corpus of writing center scholarship that was concerned primarily with the perceived and signaled morality of writing center work. While the ethical concerns underpinning these pieces are completely valid, the notion that they could be addressed through extreme minimalism was soon challenged, perhaps most prominently in Elizabeth Boquet and Neal

Lerner's "After the Idea of a Writing Center" and Irene Clark and Dave Healy's "Are Writing Centers Ethical?" North himself also adopted a self-conscious and tactical approach toward the marginality of writing centers. Nonetheless, I believe echoes of this dogmatism are still often felt in writing center practice and documentation, particularly in the resistance to the quantitative study of tutorials. I hope that Mackiewicz and Thompson's work, which is built on the realization that "notions of directiveness compose a continuum rather than absolutes" (29), will be seized upon by writing center scholars as an alternate frame for explaining and assessing the value of our services.

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