

## Review Essay

### “All Things to All People”: The Expanding Role of Writing Centers

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Babcock, Rebecca Day, and Terese Thonus. *Researching the Writing Center: Towards an Evidence-Based Practice*. New York: Peter Lang, 2012. 214 pages.

Geller, Anne Ellen, and Michele Eodice, eds. *Working with Faculty Writers*. Logan: Utah State UP, 2013. 320 pages.

Grutsch McKinney, Jackie. *Peripheral Visions for Writing Centers*. Logan: Utah State UP, 2013. 174 pages.

Lee, Sohui, and Russell Carpenter, eds. *The Routledge Reader on Writing Centers & New Media*. New York: Routledge, 2013. 304 pages.

Writing centers are vital to contemporary college writing cultures.<sup>1</sup> As such, writing centers are well-positioned to support writers in ways not easily accomplished in other campus spaces or units: acting as language and literacy mediators (Grimm), modeling for faculty best practices in responding to student writing (Harris), counteracting micro-acts of language discrimination or racism (Geller et al., Greenfield and Rowan), revealing the power of conversation to support rigorous and creative thinking, and more. Many writing program and writing center administrators believe the writing center to be a place that provides a “very crucial aspect of what writers need—tutorial interaction,” in which writers “gain kinds of knowledge about their writing and about themselves that are not possible in other institutionalized settings” (Harris 27). As Harry Denny claims in *Facing the Center*, “Writing centers are sites *par excellence*” for making “local, material and individual all the larger forces at play that confound, impede, and make possible education in institutions” (6). But this unique role in campus learning—

individualized, collaborative, extra-instructional—also opens a realm of responsibilities for all things centrally, or tangentially, related to writers.

Four new books in writing program administration suggest an expanding understanding of writing centers' role on college campuses. The books describe an increasing range of activities for supporting a wider variety of writers with an expanded view of what writing is. Each book calls for this change while exploring, to a greater or lesser extent, the evolving administrative work that accompanies it. As Chris Anson notes in *Working with Faculty Writers*, such an "expansion of services" may move writing program administrators "into less charted territories where new dangers lurk beyond the edges of prior experience" (26). For many writing program and writing center administrators, this danger is not new. But this image of the contemporary writing center raises questions about whose territories should be charted with what experience. Is it writing centers that should be doing this work? Do these expanding roles dilute the day-to-day tutoring sessions that Muriel Harris suggests are writing centers' most important contribution? Perhaps administrators should consider not which program should support faculty writers, conduct original research, or explore new media, but which of these tasks programs are already doing and why. Local contexts will determine whether or not these expanding roles are appropriate for writing centers. These books help writing program and writing center administrators think harder about these evolving contexts and the new roles they demand.

#### WRITING CENTERS AS FACULTY SUPPORT

*Working with Faculty Writers* reimagines college faculty as writers who need support, suggesting that writing centers should, in collaboration with others, assume this role. As Robert Boice notes in the Foreword, the collection's sixteen chapters show, through the "up-close observations" of practitioners (vii), what faculty writing support might look like. Editors Anne Ellen Geller and Michele Eodice highlight the broad scope of faculty writing programs, including voices from centers for teaching and learning, writing centers, and WAC programs at research- and teaching-intensive colleges, showing how faculty writing support directly contributes to a larger culture of writing on campuses (2, 293). Geller and Eodice argue that both universities and faculty themselves need to acknowledge the writerly identities of faculty and recognize writing labor as supportable work—recognizing faculty as workers who "write to earn" (7, 296). The collection's chapters are in service of this argument, reminding readers that faculty writing programs cannot be motivated by designations of remediation (failed faculty), but

must instead be planned with “a commitment to what many of our mission statements promise and value: lifelong learning” (293).

Thus, Geller and Eodice have constructed a collection that follows the long-time writing center dictum that all writers need readers. A broadened understanding of who these writers and readers are is presented in three parts: 1) “Leadership and Locations,” which explores who should do this work and where it should happen; 2) “Writing Groups/Retreats/Residencies,” which describes the forms faculty writing support can take; and 3) “Issues and Authors,” which explores how faculty writing identities can be reimagined. Varying points of view—from writing program administrators, teaching and learning center directors, and faculty writers themselves—are spread across the three parts so that each reveals a cross-section of a writing culture that values faculty writing.

Part 1 contains Chris Anson’s critical historical review of WAC programs that attend to faculty writing, UMass Amherst’s Center for Teaching and Faculty Development’s description of faculty programs that support faculty writing on a continuum (rather than in one-shot retreats or workshops), and Lori Salem and Jennifer Follett’s research-based proposal for starting a faculty writing center. Though Anson’s chapter focuses specifically on supporting faculty writing through WAC programs, he addresses two pressing concerns for writing centers’ role in faculty writing support. First, he calls “largely unexplored and theoretically questionable” the claim that supporting faculty writing leads to improved student writing support (22). Though many of *Working with Faculty Writers*’ chapters ground their arguments in the connection between writing support as teaching support (e.g., Michelle Cox and Ann Brunjes’ chapter), Anson calls this connection an assumption. He also questions writing centers’ and WAC’s place on the “sophistication continuum” of disciplinary-specific knowledge (25). As others have argued (Kiedaisch and Dinitz), Anson wonders if generalist writing centers have the expertise to guide cross-disciplinary faculty through the writing support that is the most meaningful to them—complex, discipline-specific critique of the kind they will receive from their field’s manuscript reviewers. Anson provides an important critical dimension to the collection, reminding readers that faculty need support not for “general rhetorical concerns” but for the “sophisticated concepts, research findings, and phenomena” that create rhetorical contexts for disciplinary professionals (28). Writing centers are perhaps best positioned then, to facilitate what Anson believes to be the most effective processes to improve a piece of writing—“having other disciplinary professionals read and respond to it” (28).

Salem and Follett’s smart chapter explores the process of building a faculty writing center by analyzing university policy documents for

“implicit beliefs concerning faculty literacy that animate university policies” to “recruit those ideas to our cause” (55). Salem and Follett ground their analysis first in an institutional rather than individual understanding of writing struggle—the university’s role in producing the writers it relies on writing centers to “fix” (53)—and second, in the shifting institutional environment for faculty writing—part-time faculty, English-only academic journals, journal ranking (54). The three themes that arise from their analysis—1) faculty do “research” and students “write”; 2) faculty writing (on or off research tracks) is individual evaluation; 3) faculty and universities want collaborative work—not only provide openings to argue for a faculty writing center, but also to reassign value to student writing centers. Salem and Follett say their first step would be to insist that “the central mission and message of a faculty writing center should echo that of student writing centers: that a place where writing can be transparently discussed and regularly practiced is good for everyone in the university” (66). They argue that a faculty writing center can succeed if directors “consciously build a rationale . . . based on ideas that the university *already sponsors*, but [select] ideas that allow us to circumvent the idea of fixing poor writers” (55, emphasis added). Salem and Follett’s savvy administrative strategy inserts a new program into writing work that already exists.

Part 2 of *Working with Faculty Writers* reviews the broad landscape of writing groups, retreats, and residencies that create essential faculty writing communities on campuses. Tara Gray, A. Jane Birch, and Laura Madson’s chapter explores the unique cross-disciplinary capacity of teaching centers to support faculty writers, arguing, along with Jessie L. Moore, Peter Felten, and Michael Strickland’s chapter on faculty writing residencies, that faculty writing support aligned with teaching programs brings about the added benefit of improved teaching of writing. Angela Clark-Oats and Lisa Cahill describe faculty writing groups as “a new space for engaging in literacy events within the academy,” a discursive opportunity “to address the alternative and competing discourses of the university” (112–13). Ellen Schendel, Susan Callaway, Violet Dutcher, and Claudine Griggs provide four institutional lenses on the same phenomenon of the writing retreat, finding that their follow-up assessments reveal both immediate and lasting impacts on participants: participants report feeling “more productive, more engaged in their work, more receptive to feedback, [and] happy that they’ve met colleagues from other departments” (160). Part 2 concludes with two case studies of faculty writing groups, both reflecting on how writing groups build unique cross-disciplinary practices and relationships.

Finally, the chapters in Part 3 move across the variety of writing identities taken up by faculty and soon-to-be faculty (graduate) writers. Cox and

Brunjes, directors of a WAC and Office of Teaching and Learning program respectively, show how faculty at teaching-mission institutions can take on simultaneous writer/teacher roles when supported in this endeavor by intentional WAC programming. They take their cue from the National Writing Project mission that values a “clear linkage between the depth of a faculty member’s writing practice, his or her reflection upon that practice, and the effectiveness of that faculty member as a writing teacher” (192–93). William P. Banks and Kerri B. Flinchbaugh’s chapter explores identities most explicitly, explaining that their WAC workshops did not increase faculty writing productivity until they focused explicitly on how faculty identified as writers themselves rather than those who taught with writing (229). The two programs they describe—consultation sessions for faculty in the school of medicine and a WAC Academy—are “up front” about what they say is a shifted ethos, engaging faculty in conversations about “why they do or do not see themselves as writers” (231). Letizia Guglielmo and Lynce Lewis Gaillet consider the complex writing role of contingent faculty who often publish without departmental support and thus write under unique pressures.

Part 3 importantly includes first person narratives of the faculty writing experience. William Duffy and John Pell echo the ethos proposed by Banks and Flinchbaugh, suggesting that their experience of “phased collaboration” is a productive orientation to co-authorship that helps faculty writers reflect on their writing practices while getting work done. They offer phased collaboration as a conceptual framework for “genuine collaboration” that guides writers to “discover ideas and compose texts” writers cannot necessarily produce on their own (247). Michigan State graduate students Elena Marie-Adkins Garcia, Seung hee Eum, and Lorna Watt describe weekly multidisciplinary writing groups that allow graduate students to practice the professional roles of specialists through regularly and sustained cross-disciplinary conversation. And Carmen Werder argues that a self-authorship theoretical model can encourage faculty writers to take on a role that best sustains a sense of writerly self (288).

*Working with Faculty Writers* is intended not just for writing center audiences, but for all writing program administrators, as well as for centers for teaching and learning and faculty writers themselves. In the introduction, Geller does, however, highlight writing centers’ role in supporting faculty writers, saying that centers “have always sought—and have often found—a larger institutional role influencing academic culture” with various writing initiatives like WAC and WID programs tending to “coalesce around writing centers as sites for universal writing support” (9). Thus, while requests or demands to support faculty writers may indeed feel to directors like yet

another set of responsibilities, Geller and Eodice show that faculty are not new writers to be attended to: they have been there all along. And since writing centers believe that all writers need readers, centers are already, in a way, doing this work.

#### WRITING CENTERS AS NEW MEDIA CENTERS

*The Routledge Reader on Writing Centers & New Media* presents nineteen chapters published between 1996 to 2010 that illustrate the critical role for new media in the future of writing centers. Editors Sohui Lee and Russell Carpenter hope their reader will motivate writing centers to incorporate new media theory, following models of writing centers such as Eastern Kentucky's Noel Studio for Academic Creativity that, as Andrea Lunsford says in the Foreword, "mark a key moment in writing center history, as writing becomes multimodal, multimedia, multilingual, and multivocal and as writing centers move to adapt to students' shifting communicative needs" (xii). The editors offer the reader a "shared reference point of scholarship" that improves the writing center field's understanding of new media by revisiting theory about new media from rhetoric and composition as well as from other fields (xvi). For the purposes of their book, they define new media as "the cultural objects that . . . use digital technologies for distribution of information, communication, and data . . . from video to application (apps) on cell phones" (xvii).

Six of the nineteen chapters were originally published about writing centers or for writing center audiences, and the other thirteen are Lee and Carpenter's determination of key readings in new media studies. Chapters are presented chronologically rather than thematically for readers to "identify intersections, overlaps, gaps, and opportunities" themselves (xv). Lee and Carpenter's introduction includes a useful "Reading Connections" section that presents six thematic chapter groupings, like "Communities of Practice" and "New Media Tutor Training," to guide these intersections. These landmark essays, together with writing center readings, accomplish three important goals: a reintroduction of often taken-for-granted new media terms, a dialogue about what is or is not new in new media tutoring, and an argument to move beyond programmatic description.

#### *Recontextualizing Terms*

The balance of the collection leans heavily toward theoretical or research-based pieces not originally intended only for writing center audiences. This balance brings about a recontextualization of many new media terms in current usage—*design*, *maker*, *multimodal*, *remediation*, *digital*—as well as

terms that have origins in composition, rhetoric, or literacy studies but have relevance to new media—*audience, collaboration, multiliteracy*. The collection sets these terms in the context of writing programs, and specifically writing centers, reminding readers of the terms' long histories and implying that these histories should matter to those making choices about whether or not to work with new media composition.

For example, the New London Group's groundbreaking article on "Multiliteracies," originally published in the *Harvard Educational Review* in 1996, resonates still. The New London Group chose "multiliteracies" to "describe two important arguments we might have with the emerging cultural, institutional, and global order: the multiplicity of communications channels and media, and the increasing saliency of cultural and linguistic diversity" (32). In elaborating this umbrella idea, the group introduces their "key concept" of design, in which all writers inherit and make meaning, arguing that those involved in literacy education must be "active designers—makers—of social futures" (33). They stress that designing is both "founded on historically and culturally received patterns of meaning" as well as a "unique product of human agency: a transformed meaning... a new meaning-making resource" (43). The influence of this definitional work is profound, and reverberates through later chapters in the collection, most clearly in "Design" by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen and "Mediation and Remediation" by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, and across nearly all later chapters as well. But "Multiliteracies" is also an important reminder to those interested in writing centers that multiliterate practice is more than strategies for supporting writers composing among multiple languages or modes. According to the New London Group, multiliteracy reframes both tutor and tutee as designers/makers of social change, and this is a motivating reminder indeed.

But for writing center studies, as a field grounded firmly in theories of collaboration, Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede's chapter, "Among the Audience," is probably the most immediately relevant theoretical reminder. Lunsford and Ede explain that after engaging with the new media literature, as it was in 2009, they understood that "what we thought of as two separate strands of our scholarly work—one on collaboration, the other on audience—have in fact become one" (196). Lunsford and Ede take pains to acknowledge that online composing environments allow writers to "merge and shift places...participating in both brief and extended collaborations" reminding us "that writers seldom, if ever, write alone" (196). Their fusion of audience and collaboration leads them to reject neither the term "audience" nor their theory of "audience invoked/audience addressed", but instead begin to pry apart the term's overdetermined quality to get at

the core of what they believe their theory still helps us understand—how to write to audiences who are “there all the time” and thus necessitate even more practice understanding the “multiple reciprocal responsibilities entailed in writer-audience relationships” (203, 206). If writing centers do anything consistently, it is to give practice in responsible audience awareness. Thus, Lunsford and Ede’s revisiting of the term reminds writing centers of the ever-rising responsibility to audience necessitated by new media compositions.

*What Is or Is Not New in New Media Tutoring*

Lee and Carpenter’s chapter choices also enact a dialogue about the novelty of new media, multimodal, digital, or multiliterate tutoring. Is multiliteracy tutoring simply a continuation of what tutors have always done across new genres or modes, or is working with new media a wholly different enterprise that necessitates reimagined tutor training and development? Many of the chapter’s conclusions may seem, to a skeptical writing center professional, very familiar: multiliteracy tutors should begin a session “by developing a rich profile of their rhetorical situations” (Sheridan 281); new media tutors “engage the writer in conversations about their ideas” and use “a range of non-directive and directive strategies” (Lee and Carpenter xix). David Sheridan describes what he calls the “I just want to scan” nightmare (272): “a reductive model for our WC that we daily labor against, a model that reduces us to something even worse than a grammar lab: a tech lab, mindless technical procedures with a skills and drill nightmare replaced by a “point-and-click one” (271). Michael Pemberton notes that many could argue that the challenges of multimodal compositions for tutors are “essentially no different from the problems posed by any other texts, regardless of genre or discipline” (110), and in fact Lee and Carpenter themselves say that the pedagogical principles of multimodal tutoring are “similar to practices in composition studies” and “print-based” tutoring (xviii, xix). This similarity of the supposed new to the old, along with the always “incipient threat” of computer-aided or -mediated tutoring as educational efficiency (Pemberton 107), may render new media ideas shrug worthy to writing program administrators.

But the chapters speak back to this mindset. Authors argue that digital texts’ rhetoricity does necessitate change: tutors must watch or listen rather than read students’ videos and presentations (Lee and Carpenter xviii); centers need new supplies like larger paper for website mockups (Sheridan). In her chapter in the *Routledge Reader*, Grutsch McKinney suggests that tutors must learn to “look at” and “see” student writing, asking what the point is



of reading aloud a website when tutor and tutee could more profitably talk about it (248).

In fact, the NLG work from 1996 helps us remember that “multiliteracies also creates a different kind of pedagogy, one in which language and other modes of meaning are dynamic representational resources, constantly being remade by their users as they work to achieve their various cultural purposes” (32). In her chapter in the *Routledge Reader*, Grutsch McKinney acknowledges the parallels of the old with the new, but does not let writing center studies stay stagnant in that reality. She argues that it is because new media tutoring is so similar to what “we have always done, just in new forms, genres, and media” that “it is not another thing” (245). In other words, because the new is old, because “new media texts are texts,” writing centers should hesitate even less to support them (247).

### *Moving Beyond Description*

Finally, Lee and Carpenter’s collection also moves new media conversations in writing center studies beyond descriptions of programs that do or don’t work. A few chapters do this important descriptive work—Michael Pemberton’s and John Trimbur’s chapters describe textual changes that necessitate increased attention to media; Russell Carpenter, Grutsch McKinney, Jennifer Sheppard, and Sheridan’s chapters describe training, evaluation, and outreach initiatives—but they generally avoid evaluating the merit of OWLs or online tutoring systems. Instead the chapters move on to ask bigger questions about the motivations for, or implications of, practical changes.

For example, Sheridan motivates his practical descriptions by foregrounding materiality, saying “the material dimensions of composing” are “crucial to the concerns of communicators in a digital age” (274). He argues that recognizing the paper and process of new media composition brings about a “collapse in the division of labor”—a “new kind of rhetor” who is doing it all, controlling “a dizzying variety of semiotic resources (words, graphs, music, photographs, video clips, colors, interactive components)” and becoming responsible not only for these resources’ composition, but also their *reproduction* and *distribution* (275, original emphasis). According to Sheridan, this labor collapse “involves a critique of traditional hierarchies that privilege the symbolic expression of words over the material labor of production” (274). Sheridan uses a material frame to propose three fundamental literacies new media tutors, or “superconsultants” as he calls them, must know in a tutoring context that supports the full material process of production, reproduction, and distribution: 1) the material forms and mate-

rial contexts (circulation) of rhetorical compositions; 2) the material processes of production and distribution (publish); and 3) pedagogical literacies (276–77). Pedagogical literacies are not peripheral for new media tutors because they are not simply tech lab workers—they are also generalists who are trained “alongside their ‘analog’ peers” (277).

In the end, the social, material, and pedagogical imperatives to incorporate new media into everyday writing center work prove compelling. In the context of writing center studies’ history, the collection does miss an opportunity to interrogate the strange double life of the word “remediation”: the introduction encourages writing centers to take risks by “‘remediating’ tutoring practices” and be inspired by “the spaces they inhabit in terms of ‘remediation’” (xvi) even as Bolter and Grusin note their proposed term is “used by educators as a euphemism for the task of bringing lagging students up to an expected level of performance and by environmental engineers for ‘restoring’ a damaged ecosystem” (61), and Pemberton reminds us that historically, writing labs were “sites where . . . remediation took place, and the focus of this remediation work was largely restricted to grammar, mechanics, and other easily-quantifiable matters of surface structure” (107). It is no wonder writing center professionals hesitate to embrace the remediation of texts when their spaces have hosted the remediation of people for quite some time. Perhaps this issue could spur conversations of the kind directed by the introduction’s “Reading Connections”.

While the *New Media Reader* is convincing in its call for writing centers to attend to new media studies, writing center readers might see it as yet one more thing to add to a bursting training or professional development schedule. Echoing Pemberton’s note of caution, Sheridan says that the “hard truth of the matter” is that new media tutors “*are* asked to be ‘all things to all people,’”: “photographers, graphic designers, illustrators, web coders, technicians, programmers. . . teachers and meaning makers” (276), as well as those who “contribute to faculty development through workshops on integrating new media into the writing-intensive classroom and through one-on-one support” (273). Lee and Carpenter leave it up to readers to decide whether or not new media writing is already part of the teaching, tutoring, and administrative work of writing programs, or whether it is truly new work that necessitates new responsibilities.

## WRITING CENTERS AS RESEARCH SITES

*Researching the Writing Center: Towards an Evidence-Based Practice* is “the first book-length treatment of the research base for academic writing tutoring” (1). Rebecca Day Babcock and Terese Thonus aim to motivate those

involved in writing centers to broaden the field's scholarly practices and, consequently, its disciplinary profile and academic status by conducting "RAD research"—replicable, aggregable, data-supported scholarship produced with qualitative or quantitative methods—on all aspects of writing center work (3). The authors synthesize RAD research from scholarship in writing center studies and related disciplines, notably composition and education, and identify guidelines for best practices as well as opportunities for future empirical research. These outcomes complement the book's primary purpose, which is to help readers reconceptualize what constitutes research in writing center studies and recognize the disciplinary implications of failing to incorporate scientific and humanistic research methods. Citing Richard Haswell's polemic on the decline of RAD research in the journals of NCTE/CCCC along with Muriel Harris's admonition for writing center scholars to do "some serious thinking and testing and researching" (2), Babcock and Thonus argue that writing center scholarship can and must be informed by humanistic and scientific methods and by relevant scholarship from other disciplines (3). While acknowledging the vital role of theoretical exploration and anecdotal experience in creating a foundation for writing center professionals to mediate theory and practice, the authors assert that empirical research offers a more "credible link between the two" (3). The credibility of this link transcends best practices in writing center work by raising the disciplinary profile of that work, which in turn positions the discipline to earn greater academic legitimacy and broader influence. *Researching the Center*, then, casts writing centers as research sites and, as such, the locus for the field's disciplinary development.

In chapter 1, Babcock and Thonus frame their review of writing center scholarship by making an important distinction between research and assessment. Both are central to writing center work and should be seen as scholarly activities based in empirical data and involving systematic inquiry (4). However, assessment should be understood as a precursor to but not a substitute for research because assessment is concerned primarily with making judgments that apply to a local context, whereas research entails "open[ing] inquiry beyond the local context . . . to global contexts and applications" (4). The challenge for program directors is to turn assessments of local, specific contexts "into research questions and RAD inquiry that can benefit the entire field" (59), and the authors highlight examples of how empirical research in writing center scholarship models this transition from local to global contexts. The authors also survey edited volumes and anthologies—the "canonical collections" (8)—in writing center scholarship to highlight a growing receptiveness towards but consistent dearth of empirical research. In the field's three most popular anthologies, for

instance, only five articles “meet the criteria for empirical [data-driven] research” (13). While acknowledging the intellectual work and influence of individuals employing primarily humanistic approaches in defining a developing field, Babcock and Thonus underscore the absence of empirical research in early scholarship, imprecise uses of the term research, as in labeling narratives, detailed descriptions, or anecdotal accounts “case studies,” and a reliance on lore or application of theories from other fields to determine writing center practice. Even now, despite growing awareness of the value of empirical research and a handful of recently completed RAD studies in writing center scholarship, Babcock and Thonus note that “output remains scarce” (21)—a conclusion that provides a strong rationale for the timeliness and value of their book.

In chapter 2, the authors describe how evidence-based practice (EBP), an orientation to empirical research in fields with “strong ‘practice’ components” such as medicine and education (22), can strengthen writing center scholarship. EBP stipulates that judgments and decisions about practices should be informed by the best available evidence retrieved from current research, which is made available through research syntheses and meta-analyses. The appeal of EPB is two-fold: first, it allows practitioners to focus equally on “theory, research, and practice” while working with clients, thus preventing practice-focused fields from becoming disconnected from theory or research (30); second, it compels a research community to determine *what* counts as evidence and *who* gets to decide (32). Applied to a writing center context, EPB would illustrate how “disciplinary decision-makers,” those who review publications and presentations, determine evidence, and it would raise the profile of data as a desired form of evidence in conjunction with lore and anecdote (32). Data are defined as quantitative or qualitative information available to researchers and others that has been “collected to answer a specific research question” (32). This chapter also includes a general overview of research concepts and techniques, ranging from research ethics to data-gathering techniques, with illustrative examples of these concepts and practices drawn from inside and outside writing center scholarship. Although the authors do not describe this section as a research guide, this chapter and the two appendices—a research information statement/consent form from the KU Writing Center and an Institutional Review Board (IRB) application from the University of Texas of the Permian Basin—reflect that purpose and are informative, especially for readers unfamiliar with social science research.

Chapters 3 through 7, which constitute two-thirds of the book, contain syntheses of empirical research conducted on a range of topics and sub-topics relevant to writing center practice. Chapter 3 examines “institutional

contexts of academic writing centers” and includes research on surveys of writing centers, peer tutor methods and models, and certification and accreditation. Chapter 4 reviews research on tutoring “different” populations such as basic writers, writers with disabilities, second-language writers, and graduate students. Chapter 5 surveys research on tutoring activities categorized according to language skill (reading, writing, speaking, listening). Chapter 6 details research on writing center interaction. To illustrate the level of specificity that periodically emerges throughout these chapters, consider the following example from a review of research on the function of suggestions in tutoring sessions:

Ritter (2002) coded suggestion types according to illocutionary force, which is related to the pragmatic directiveness of the suggestion. Ritter’s types were *indirect suggestion* (‘It’s a little confusing.’), *interrogative* (‘Does this paragraph kind of repeat some information?’), *first-person modal* (‘I’d put an S on checklists.’), *second-person modal* (‘You wanna make that plural.’), *repair* (‘During these years, instead of *at* these years.’), and *imperative* (‘Just put a period there.’)” (Babcock and Thonus 132, emphasis in original)

Readers who are less familiar or comfortable with social science research may find such details disorienting, perhaps even overwhelming, whereas others may find inspiration to generate related research questions or projects.

Interspersed throughout these chapters are six sections called “Recommendations for Practice” which include, in total, 50 brief summaries and accompanying citations derived from research synthesized in the previous section/chapter. These lists illustrate the value of engaging in empirical research in writing center scholarship with an “evidence-based practice” orientation: they constitute readily accessible and clearly applicable guidelines, or practices, for writing center work. Some challenge writing center conventions, frequently based in lore: “Rethink the stricture against required visits (Gordon, 2008)” (85); “Don’t assume a collaborative frame (Kim, 2009). Be flexible, as the tutee may have other ideas for how the tutorial should proceed.” (142). “Group tutoring or ‘desk-side consultations’ may prove more effective than one-on-one tutoring for students from some cultures (Moser, 2002)” (105). Others provide specific direction: “With basic writers, tutors should assume the roles of Interested Reader/Listener, Supportive Evaluator, and Partner in Writing (Beaumont, 1978)” (92); “It cannot be stressed enough that tutors must listen carefully to tutees (Cardenas, 2000; Brown, 2008; Fallon, 2010)” (120). All stem from empirical research, which means they can be generalized across locations and shared by the field.

The later chapters include content aimed at illustrating empirical research at work and providing examples of possible research questions and projects. They also include moments where the authors are more explicit in their critique of the limitations of current research in writing center studies. Chapter 7 illustrates the strength of empirical data to answer basic questions about writing centers. To address the question, What is a successful tutorial?, Babcock and Thonus contrast the tacit knowledge in generic responses from typical writing center directors with the scope and depth afforded by RAD research on general academic tutoring from scholarship in developmental and peer education. The authors criticize writing center scholarship for “running approximately 20 years behind” other disciplines in producing empirical evidence to support, in this case, its most central practice: peer tutoring (147). The authors also question why studies on peer tutoring, which abound in the fields of education and cognitive science, are absent from writing center publications (151). Babcock and Thonus contrast the “largely descriptive accounts of what constitutes success” in writing center scholarship with several possible definitions of success that stem from empirical research to demonstrate how such an approach to research creates an ongoing research agenda that can sustain rigorous inquiry and, in turn, strengthen a discipline (171). Chapter 8, titled “An Agenda for Writing Center Research,” provides a list of research questions “yet to be investigated” that were generated by the research syntheses in the previous chapters (170). For each chapter heading, research questions are raised, followed by suggestions for possible research approaches and methodologies. In addition to the research questions in this chapter, throughout the book the authors refer to several potential research projects related to tutoring, some of which include studying politeness (53), the use of writing as a tutoring technique (118), the influence of gender (125), and the reliability and validity of web-based peer-response computer programs in specific educational contexts (151). In their conclusion, Babcock and Thonus envision empirical research as “becom[ing] so much a part of the fabric of writing center work that all administrative and pedagogical decisions will be founded upon it,” and they are convinced empirical research will inform and advance writing center theory and practice “in ways that anecdote and lore simply cannot” (169). They also take heart in the growing amount of empirical research on writing centers conducted by graduate students (four master theses and 70 dissertations appear in the references) and invite members of the field to make such work increasingly visible and accessible.

*Researching the Center* is a landmark text for the field, encouraging widespread reorientation to research and practice in ways that subordinates lore and local contexts to data and disciplinary identity. Babcock and Thonus

compel writing center researchers and practitioners to remake their “community of practice” in light of empirical methods and evidence-based practices. But the question remains, how likely is such change, or under what conditions can writing centers function as research sites? Perhaps we need an empirical study to determine how many writing center administrators are able or willing to conduct empirical research, especially in light of issues related to writing center directors’ professional identities and working conditions that Babcock and Thonus mention in chapter 1. Citing survey data, the authors reported that half of writing center directors viewed their positions as temporary, and half identified professionally with writing center work but not necessarily writing center research (7–8). The authors also note that “the majority of our colleagues lack training in research methodologies, be they qualitative or quantitative” (8), a condition exacerbated by the absence of empirical research in the “canonical” scholarship which Babcock and Thonus described as “essential reading for prospective and current writing center professionals” (11). Further, few writing center directors have institutional support or access to resources needed to develop and sustain a scholarly research agenda, many writing center directors and staff are not required or expected to publish scholarship, and funding pressures and institutional mandates constantly compel administrators to do “more (local) assessment, not more (generalizable) research” (20). Equally problematic are the implications of research that suggests a general lack of awareness of the discipline of writing centers and a corresponding “inability to conceptualize the writing center as a research site,” even among writing center practitioners (19). *Researching the Center* clearly corrects that misconception, but can it inspire research in sites where research is not promoted or rewarded?

Babcock and Thonus also raise a related challenge: the tendency for many directors and practitioners to view writing centers as “unique,” to distance their centers from the “nomenclature” and “research practices” of other disciplines, and to simultaneously celebrate and lament the resulting marginalization of writing centers in the academy. The authors critique this kind of separatist stance because it “delegitimize[s] writing center studies as a research discipline” and “marginalize[s] writing center scholarship” that could inform the research and practice of other fields (31). How appealing is the prospect of conducting empirical research to such individuals? How practical is such an appeal? Further, if the institutional status of many writing center directors does not provide access to material conditions or resources required to produce empirical research, which in turn is needed to legitimize the field, will the burden of labor continue to fall on graduate

students? Will the subsequent burden of legitimizing the field as a scholarly discipline follow, making writing centers as research sites exploitative?

These questions should not detract from the significance of *Researching the Center* or its value to all members of the field. The book both addresses and advances the conversation among writing center scholars about the necessity of producing “more evidence to validate our practices” (Driscoll and Perdue 11). Babcock and Thonus have presented an exhaustive account that urges and enables readers to conduct empirical research that will promote best practices and increase the disciplinary status of writing centers. They’ve also demonstrated how a rising generation of writing center scholars has forged ahead and is already doing this work.

#### WHAT WRITING CENTERS ARE NOT

*Peripheral Visions for Writing Centers* challenges members of the writing center community to expand their collective vision and stories of what constitutes writing center work. Jackie Grutsch McKinney prefaces her provocative argument with a list of twenty-five tasks that typify the work of a writing center director, from training tutors and attending conferences to writing reports and ordering supplies. (For directors who are also faculty, the list continues in paragraph form.) Yet the complexity and scope of such work, Grutsch McKinney argues, is not reflected in the “story” about writing center work that nearly everyone—scholars, directors, tutors, even program administrators—tends to tell. That story, which Grutsch McKinney characterizes as a “writing center grand narrative,” is this: “*writing centers are comfortable, iconoclastic places where all students go to get one-on-one tutoring on their writing*” (3, emphasis in original). Certainly this statement will strike many readers familiar with writing center discourse and practice as accurate, if not incontrovertible: how else, they may wonder, could writing centers be identified or their work characterized? Some may even feel uncomfortable with questioning a universal and unifying description of writing center work, especially one as hard-won as this: what else, they may ask, can foster professional identity and community across local and, in many cases, isolated contexts? Some may take offense at a perceived insensitivity to a description that represents the culmination of years of struggle to legitimize the nature of writing center work by rendering it visible and valuable, for those inside and outside the profession: why, they may question, would you critique the core of what writing centers do?

Grutsch McKinney is acutely aware of these perspectives, but to some extent they all underscore the validity of her claim, which is that this grand narrative has become the central feature of writing center discourse, a trans-



parent, taken-for-granted Truth that misrepresents writing center work and restricts the field's ability to grow. Indeed, Grutsch McKinney anticipates readers feeling increasingly uncomfortable as they progress through the book only to see their "most naturalized and cherished common-place assumptions about writing center work" subject to open critique (4). Given its continuous circulation in the field's professional discourse, the writing center grand narrative has resulted in a kind of "collective tunnel vision" that prevents insiders and outsiders alike from seeing the complexities of writing center work, narrating its multiple dimensions, or imagining how it might, or must, evolve for future contexts, purposes, and audiences (5–6). Grutsch McKinney's purpose in troubling this grand narrative is to decenter it from writing center discourse and thereby open narrative space for "other representations of writing center work" to receive notice and legitimacy (9). Revising this received narrative is a crucial step to reshaping the field's discourse about what writing centers do, which will in turn provide a broader, more representative vision of that work for everyone associated with writing centers (18).

Drawing on narrative theory informed by the work of Jerome Bruner, Kristie Fleckenstein, and Nancy Grimm, Grutsch McKinney interrogates three key ideas invoked by the writing center grand narrative—namely, that writing centers are "cozy homes," iconoclastic, and that they tutor all students—in corresponding chapters. The first idea, Grutsch McKinney believes, is "perhaps most firmly entrenched": that writing centers should be "a cozy, homey, comfortable, family-like place" (20). In this chapter, a version of which appeared in *The Writing Center Journal* in 2005, the writing-center-as-home metaphor is documented in exchanges on the WCenter listserv and in journal articles; common topics that emerge in these venues include identifying essential objects, ranging from couches and bookcases to coffee pots and art, to designing and arranging the physical space. Noting the intention of writing center professionals to create friendly and inviting spaces that function as alternatives to traditional classroom and remedial laboratories, Grutsch McKinney claims that the dominance of a cozy-home metaphor invokes a culturally-specific conception of home reflected in a director's or tutor's (typically white) race and (typically upper or middle) class. Further, appealing to students' sense of comfort may undermine expectations to be intellectually engaged and challenged while at the writing center. Most importantly, spatial metaphors may detract writing center directors from what the material realities of writing centers reveal about how physical space is actually experienced and used. While Grutsch McKinney is not critiquing the intent to create a welcoming space, she is highlighting how that aim, and the prescribed means for achieving that

aim, have become so pervasive as to overshadow other ways of understanding, designing, and using writing center space. Consequently, attending to peripheral visions—that which we can't or won't see—will necessarily broaden our view of the multiple uses and experiences that occur within writing centers, which in turn allows us to convey such multiplicity to others.

The second key term in the grand narrative is that of iconoclasm, which Grutsch McKinney discusses in relation to the perennial issue of marginalization in writing centers. Here Grutsch McKinney explores the nature and consequences of how writing center professionals have situated and storied themselves as “outsiders on the inside” (36). In her review of published scholarship on the relationship between writing centers and academic institutions, Grutsch McKinney notes a tendency among writing center scholars to celebrate their “outsider positions,” given their non-traditional approach to teaching in comparison with traditional approaches that characterize typical forms of institution-sponsored instruction. Grutsch McKinney claims that the frequency by which this perspective is reinforced puts pressure on others in the field to replicate and perpetuate it. Grutsch McKinney offers an interesting interpretation of the field's relationship to the term marginal; she sees a “persistent tendency . . . to re-story the marginal label into something else” (40). While some refuse the marginal label, others embrace it in ways that resist or subvert the institutional integration of writing centers; this latter move is what strikes Grutsch McKinney as iconoclastic and gives her grounding to make iconoclasm a central part of the writing center grand narrative, though the accuracy of the term is questionable because the connection between iconoclasm and marginal is somewhat strained. But, similar to Babcock and Thonus's argument in *Researching the Center*, Grutsch McKinney critiques this subversive stance as hampering the professionalization of writing center programs and its academic and disciplinary status. To highlight this point, Grutsch McKinney refers to survey research which demonstrates that “hundreds of writing center directors begin with no graduate coursework in writing center or writing program administration,” they have no coursework or background in teaching writing and remain disconnected from relevant professional fields, and their positions are mostly non-tenure-track and typically do not support or permit opportunities for professionalization (53). In light of these professional challenges, Grutsch McKinney admonishes the field to move beyond the marginal/not-marginal binary by eschewing the tendency towards privileging iconoclastic identities and practices in writing center work.

Grutsch McKinney's final chapter, in which she interrogates the notion that writing centers tutor all students, provides more specific and substan-

tial data (in the form of survey research) than in previous chapters. Grutsch McKinney asked survey respondents, most of whom worked in public or private colleges or universities, to explain what a writing center is (93). The data, which are documented in a 45-page appendix, includes responses from 117 individuals associated with writing centers, including writing tutors, writing center directors, undergraduate and graduate students, and faculty (92). Grutsch McKinney frames her survey data by reviewing recent literature in writing center studies to illustrate how writing center professionals understand and describe tutorials as primarily “one-to-one,” “peer-to-peer,” “non-directive,” and occurring in “set sessions” (60). She then highlights how nearly all survey respondents described writing center work in terms of tutoring all students; other types of work, such as offering workshops, were barely mentioned. This demonstrates how tutoring has become “the *sine qua non* of writing center work” (58). Grutsch McKinney notes that such a description makes writing center work comprehensible and quantifiable for ourselves and others. However, she emphasizes limitations, including perpetuating the perception of writing centers as remedial, reinforcing problematic assumptions about tutors (as white) and students (as other), and setting an unrealistic goal to work with “all” students when not everyone wants or needs tutoring. Most importantly, this part of the grand narrative precludes writing center professionals from recognizing and talking about the range of non-tutoring activities that are part of writing center work, including workshops for faculty and students, group tutoring, in-class presentations, outreach, assessment, and content development in the form of websites, videos, blogs, newsletters, and podcasts: “The existing literature rarely posits these other activities as alternatives to tutoring or something equally important” (76). Grutsch McKinney cites additional survey research that asked directors about non-tutoring activities. Responses included such various activities as keeping records, writing reports, providing handouts, evaluating tutors, writing tutor handbooks, working with faculty, and blogging. But these are seen as peripheral to writing center work. Grutsch McKinney closes this chapter by reiterating her appeal to question the grand narrative in order to prevent “the collective forgetting of the complexity of writing center work” (80).

As Grutsch McKinney concludes, she identifies a salient problem that limits the professional development of the field. While common ways of communicating are necessary for the formation of discourse communities, Grutsch McKinney notes that problems arise when the ways those communities communicate “are not expansive enough to allow members to change” (82). One particular challenge to changing the grand narrative is “the ever-beginner culture in writing center studies” (84). In light of notori-

ously high turnover of tutors and staff, the grand narrative provides coherence and enables approximation towards, if not entry into, the discourse community of writing centers studies. However, because insider positions aren't readily accessible to outsiders and because they require too much time and effort, initiates rely on imitating the discourse conventions of the community. As long as the professional discourse of writing center studies is dictated by this grand narrative, the field will be stunted in its development. Grutsch McKinney, again echoing Babcock and Thonus, argues that this has already happened at the level of research, noting an absence of "substantial theoretical and empirical research on aspects of writing center work beyond tutoring" (85).

As might be expected, because Grutsch McKinney's primary purpose is to critique the grand narrative, she offers only general suggestions for addressing the problem. These suggestions include the need for heightened awareness of the existence and problems of the grand narrative, and the need to enable a greater number of members of the field to tell their stories, especially those that challenge or divert from the grand narrative. While these suggestions are somewhat unsatisfying, Grutsch McKinney offers two valuable strategies to help writing center professionals and others begin reenvisioning writing center work. The first is a technique used in drawing: when attempting to draw an object, an untrained artist will find that her mind often interferes with her eyes by supplying images of what it thinks it sees rather than what the eyes are actually registering. To counteract this interference, the artist is instructed to focus on seeing and drawing the "negative space" around the object (87–88). When applied to writing centers, this technique prompts writing center professionals to first capture "what writing centers are not" rather than "what we imagine is there . . . based on our communal habits of storying writing centers" (89). The second insight corresponds with the title of the book: replacing the field's collective tunnel vision with peripheral visions. This requires shifting focus away from the writing center as the center of intersecting fields and practices and instead seeing the various activities surrounding the center as part of that center (89). The purpose of both strategies is to produce more complex descriptions and nuanced stories that will "dislodge the writing center grand narrative" (90). Failure to change our vision, Grutsch McKinney warns, could result in the current writing center model fracturing under the pressure of two competing models: multiliteracy centers, which broaden the potential for feedback both through and across different media, and comprehensive writing centers, which have broader missions more aligned with WAC initiatives and activities (90). Grutsch McKinney does not signal an eagerness to reinvent writing centers in light of either of these pro-

posed models. Rather than changing the writing center, she wants readers to change their vision of, and their story about, the writing center.

But won't changing the story of writing centers also change the writing center? Why can't multiliteracy centers or comprehensive writing centers be seen as legitimate stories about writing center work? If the writing center grand narrative is inhibiting the growth of writing center studies and requires revision through "peripheral visions," will such visions and the stories they inspire privilege local contexts at the expense of a larger professional identity? Might peripheral visions promote a fragmented story of the field that will frustrate efforts to frame writing center studies as a coherent and legitimate academic discipline? These questions can't be addressed without expanding our vision of what writing centers might be, which validates Grutsch McKinney's argument. But they also signal the challenges that arise when attempting to broaden conceptions and stories about what writing center work is and should be.

#### WHAT ARE WRITING CENTERS?

These four books, taken together, offer a complex image of the contemporary writing center, a center with many roles, many of which are complementary or perhaps even simultaneous (one could research any of the other books' calls for change). But this image also implies the potential for mission creep. And writing center and writing program administrators seem to perceive this potential as a spectrum between danger and opportunity.

Michael Pemberton warns about new media tutoring, for example, that administrators "should stop and think carefully about how far we are willing to go down this path in our quest to create 'better' writing tutors," warning that if centers "diversify too widely and spread ourselves too thinly in an attempt to encompass too many different literacies, we may not be able to address any set of literate practices particularly well" (114). "Ultimately," he says, "we have to ask ourselves whether it is really the writing center's responsibility to be all things to all people" (114). Others have taken up this phrase, as does this review essay, to "think carefully" about the point of diminishing returns in expanding support for writers, or in expanding perspectives of what writing centers are or can do.

Other administrators see the expanding sites and services of writing center work as opportunities, and sometimes responsibilities. For example, in her chapter in the *Routledge Reader*, Grutsch McKinney sympathizes with "the impulse as a writing center director to say, 'Not one more thing! We do enough!'" but argues that administrators must evolve along with writing because "we are in the writing business" (255). Geller and Eodice hope

their book highlights “what can be done to promote and sustain all writing in the academy, whether that means student writing (undergraduate and graduate) or faculty writing” (2). They want to “embrace...how institutions commit to making the process and work of writing visible and valued” (2). In other words, they see a direct connection between supporting more writers and becoming even more central to the work of their institutions. So that even as writing center work seemingly expands, taking place nearly everywhere—“from teaching and learning centers to writing across the curriculum, and communication across the curriculum programs to writing centers” (9)—it actually closes in on the core of what the university does.

In fact, this synthesis of mission, in that writing center goals are already university goals, provides one way to navigate the opportunities and dangers proposed by these four books. In another wise turn, Anson suggests that “creating a ‘culture of writing’ at an institution is not so much a matter of offering more and more workshops and retreats” but of “viewing all participants on a campus—administrators, faculty, staff, and students—as part of an interrelated system” (35). As demonstrated in these books, writing centers have the breadth of expertise to support that system, rather than each of the system’s individual members in turn. In other words, this image reveals a contemporary writing center that creates connections among writers. This writing center facilitates links among writing communities and among multiple writerly identities. In the afterword to *Working with Faculty Writers*, Eodice states that her final call to action is for “faculty to turn toward each other...and [form] communities” in order to “consider some of the pressing questions of the coming years” (296–97). Writing centers, with their multiple roles, agendas, audiences, texts, spaces, and activities can support this turning toward, encouraging writers to turn toward each other to ask hard questions about writing. For writing centers this is not another thing to do or be; this is precisely what centers are already doing every day.



#### NOTE

1. According to Jill Gladstein, preliminary data from the WPA Census, which includes 925 respondents representing 734 four-year colleges and universities, show that only 6 respondents reported their school as “not” having a writing center or learning center with writing tutors. In other words, 99% of respondents report having a writing center on campus.

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