

Review Essay

Reaching (for) the Future: Writing Center Studies Expands

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Denny, Harry C., Robert Mundy, Liliana M. Naydan, Richard Severe, and Anna Sicari, editors. *Out in the Center: Public Controversies and Private Struggles*. Utah State UP, 2019. 280 pages.

Greenfield, Laura. *Radical Writing Center Praxis: A Paradigm for Ethical Political Engagement*. UP of Colorado, 2019. 181 pages.

Lawrence, Susan, and Terry Myers Zawacki, editors. *Re/Writing the Center: Approaches to Supporting Graduate Students in the Writing Center*. Utah State UP, 2019. 288 pages.

Sabatino, Lindsay A., and Brian Fallon, editors. *Multimodal Composing: Strategies for Twenty-First-Century Writing Consultations*. UP of Colorado, 2019. 238 pages.

I once read *How the Universe Got its Spots*, a book about the big questions about the universe by cosmologist Jenna Levin. It was a fascinating read—though trying to wrap my head around string theory was a bit rough—I do remember learning though that the universe was expanding in all directions at roughly the same pace. The same is not true, of course, for academic disciplines. Disciplines expand, contract, merge, fade, and explode in no coherent or entirely predictable way. At one point, writing center studies was a quaint little blip on the map of composition studies. At that time, writing center scholars were expected to know all about composition studies, but the reverse wasn't true. To wit, not one of 103 chapters and 1,750 pages in the *Norton Guide to Composition Studies* is on writing centers.

Yet now, both composition studies and writing center studies exist under a larger disciplinary umbrella of writing studies, and suddenly there's all this space for writing center studies. Composition studies focused on undergraduate students in particular courses, but writing studies is more broadly concerned with writing in all its forms, processes, locations, technologies, mediums, and contexts. Whereas writing centers were once imagined to be a small, contained way to support composition students, writing center professionals now have a vantage point to understand writing much more broadly as many writers use writing centers across K–12 schools, colleges in the US and abroad, graduate schools, and within community writing centers. Writing center professionals see writers in process, dealing with complex writing tasks in environments with and without good instruction and feedback. They see day in and day out how talk about writing and writing technologies influence the writing and the writer. Writing center professionals cannot go to composition studies to find all the answers to the questions that now emerge for them in their new expanding roles. In fact, composition scholars may now increasingly turn to writing center scholarship to understand writers and writing outside of their classrooms.

However, fundamental writing center pedagogies and ideologies were shaped during the former period, when the discipline occupied a small area within composition studies and in a time when composition studies largely promoted process and expressivist pedagogies. When writing centers boomed in the 1980s, populations of college students and professors were even more homogenous than today: mostly white, mostly middle-class, mostly monolingual. Students used typewriters, sometimes, or wrote by hand. So much about writing, writing in college even, has radically changed since the 1980s. The question facing writing center scholars now is how loyal do we stay to the original conception of a writing center? Given the disciplinary space which has opened up and the desire to answer new questions related to our new roles, should our current centers function as they did forty or fifty years ago? As I write this, I'm picturing a person with one foot on "writing center of yore" and stretching as if playing Twister to reach a distant spot. Outside of the game of Twister, obviously, it doesn't always make sense to stretch to the point of falling.

In the last decade or so, writing center scholarship has expanded as scholars embrace different methodologies and push for different ways of doing writing center work that are more in line with contemporary social and learning theories and support the writers in our current contexts. Much of the scholarship has moved away even if just marginally from the original conceptions of writing centers found in the early writing center scholarship. Four recently published writing center books are adding to this new

tradition. Two of these, *Re/Writing the Center* edited by Susan Lawrence and Terry Myers Zawacki and *Multimodal Composing* edited by Lindsay A. Sabatino and Brian Fallon, outline strategies of updating the writing center for present realities. *Re/Writing the Center* addresses the gap in writing center studies related to supporting graduate student writers, with some contributors noting that graduate student writers might need something different than (peer) tutoring. The contributors to *Multimodal Composing* outline strategies for giving feedback on multimodal texts, different genres, and in mediums that mostly didn't exist when writing centers were formalized. The other two books move further from the original conception of writing centers. *Out of the Center*, edited by Harry C. Denny, Robert Mundy, Lili-ana M. Naydan, Richard Severe, and Anna Sicari, contains stories by contributors working in writing centers who reveal how their (public) identities are of consequence to their work, and in *Radical Writing Center Praxis*, Laura Greenfield suggests letting go completely of the traditional approach and rebuilding the writing center from the ground up to decisively part with the conservative and liberal foundations in writing center practices.

Re/Writing the Center: Approaches to Supporting Graduate Students in the Writing Center brings much needed attention to working with graduate student writers in the writing center. Though traditional composition studies scholarship often gave attention to graduate students, it was almost always in their roles as teaching assistants and not as writers. Yet, obviously, what typically stands between a graduate student completing a degree is a long, high stakes writing task. Writing is important and central to graduate students' work. Lawrence and Zawacki acknowledge that writing center practitioners have had to evolve on this; most writing centers began with the intention to serve undergraduates and many of the key practices and programming common to writing centers were shaped with undergraduate writers and writing tasks in mind. They ask in their introduction, "How would these resources need to be reconfigured, reinvented, or augmented to better meet the [graduate] students' needs?" (8).

The tension throughout the collection rests on this premise. Are graduate student writers that different from undergraduate writers? Does the typical feedback session offered in writing centers help graduate students? Overall, the contributors to the collection think "no" or "not exactly." The editors state:

Collectively, the chapters in this volume suggest that advanced graduate student writers present an exigence for writing centers that differs from that presented by undergraduate writers, and that responding to this exigence has given writing centers the occasion to reconsider many of the principles and practices that have emerged from

our work with undergraduate writers. This kind of reconsideration, we propose, not only benefits graduate writers but also writing centers as we identify and pursue new possibilities for inquiry and practice. (22–23)

The exigency here is packed with an assumption that the writing center is the natural site for helping graduate student writers; I suspect that is because on many of our campuses, the message that the writing center is the hub of all things writing has landed. There is a smidgen of attention in this collection given to graduate faculty advisors and how they might better help graduate writers, but otherwise the onus falls squarely on writing centers.

The collection has a preface by Paula Gillespie, an introduction by the editors, and an epilogue from Sherry Wynn Perdue. The remaining twelve chapters, largely written by former and current writing center directors, are organized into three parts: revising our core assumptions, reshaping our pedagogies and practices, and expanding the center. However, the division between sections is not precise, as most chapters could fit under two or three of these headings, which seems to be common in edited collections.

If the central question of the collection is how do writing centers “recenter” for graduate student writers?, the contributors’ answers vary. Suggestions include: separate writing centers for graduate students (Summers), intake consultations (Lawrence, Tetreault, and Deans), teaching signposting and noticing (Cox), staffing “expert” tutors for disciplinary enculturation (Pemberton), hybrid consultations where graduate students send a draft in advance and meet in person (Kallestinova), teaching comparative genre analysis (Reineke, Glaven, Phillips, and Wolfe), using genre-specific heuristics during tutoring sessions (Brady, Singh-Cocoran, and Holsinger), and hosting writing retreats (Smith, Lamsal, Robinson, and Williams; Gray). A few chapters were more focused on what writing center professionals ought not do: do not concede to the demand from students and faculty for proofreading or “cultural sanitization” (Turner 101), and do not participate in the neoliberal fantasy (my words) of rapid productivity by making the writing center a site of production over a site of practice (Lenaghan).

As the first edited collection focused on support and programming for graduate student writers, this book is an important contribution to an emerging conversation. Though the different chapters all outline different issues and solutions, as a whole, the collection doesn’t feel like it’s asking too much from readers. Most of the authors described the problems they faced, the solution they arrived at, named what resources and collaborations they had to secure, and gave some evidence of the effectiveness of their approach. (In this way, it reminds me of Anne Ellen Geller and Michele

Eodice's *Working with Faculty Writers*.) Most of the solutions to “recenter” were the size of tweaks not revolutions, and as I read the book, I thought about which of these ideas I might want to add to the repertoire at the writing center I direct. I also thought about what chapters I might want to share with other folks on campus who are interested in supporting graduate student writers; the collection is not too insider-y, so it seems absolutely readable by folks who do not have a writing studies background.

Additionally, as I read, I couldn't help but think about the ideas through the lens of universal design for learning. Many of the ideas suggested for solutions for graduate students would actually seem like they might be good for undergraduates, faculty, and whoever else the center supports. After all, the line between undergraduate and graduate students, and graduate students and faculty is quite thin and permeable. I'm not sure there were any ideas for “recentering” that would be wholly inappropriate to offer to all writers (though I concede allowing undergraduates or faculty to use a graduate student writing center would be silly). Chapters 8 and 9, in particular, with their focus on using comparative genre analysis and genre-specific heuristics struck me as the type of tools I'd like to see used in any feedback session as all writing is bound by genre conventions and expectations.

However, what this collection doesn't offer is a deep exploration of how “graduate students” and “graduate student writing” aren't homogenous. Most of the discussion circles around theses and dissertations, which are not requirements for every graduate student or the only kind of writing that graduate students face. Further, with the exception of discussion of L2 writers, there is almost no attention on issues of identity (e.g., race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, culture, or ability), the mental health crisis (Gray is an exception here), the financial pressures of graduate school, or graduate students in online programs. Such attention would be necessary as directors name problems and assess effectiveness: are we really identifying the needs of all of our graduate student writers? For these reasons, it might be best to read *Re/Writing the Center* alongside the 2016 special issue of *Praxis* on access and equity in graduate writing support edited by Shannon Madden and Michele Eodice.

Unlike the other three books, Sabatino and Fallon crafted their edited collection, *Multimodal Composing: Strategies for Twenty-First Century Writing Consultations*, primarily for writing tutors. They point to two other tutoring guides, Ben Rafoth's *A Tutor's Guide* and Lauren Fitzgerald and Melissa Ianetta's *The Oxford Guide for Writing Tutors*, as texts that they had in mind when they began. I can see similarities between *Multimodal Composing* and the aforementioned tutoring guides; however, what's different

about Sabatino and Fallon's text is that it is more narrowly focused only on multimodal tutoring, and it is an edited collection.

Sabatino and Fallon note that "Writing centers are increasingly becoming sites for feedback on multimodal projects" (3), but there has been little to help train consultants to work with specific genres. So, they craft the collection to achieve three aims: to "(1) build on and evolve tutoring practices and strategies for multimodal texts, (2) introduce consultants to important features and practices in a variety of multimodal texts, and (3) start a conversation about the relationship among rhetorical choices, design thinking, and technological awareness in the writing center" (x). Overall, they want the collection to be "instructive and practical," an aim the collection achieves.

The collection is optimistic and approachable, and readers looking for how to give feedback on multimodal texts will find answers here. (If you've read Cynthia Selfe's *Multimodal Composition*, you'll find *Multimodal Composing* to be similar and a nice update to Selfe's guide which was written for writing instructors.) However, if you're looking for why writing centers should offer feedback on multimodal texts or what multimodality or multi-literacies are, you'll want to look elsewhere (try Sheridan and Inman or Lee and Carpenter) as this collection takes as a starting point that readers will be convinced of the necessity of training tutors to give feedback on multimodal texts. I, for one, am glad of this as it signals a departure in writing center scholarship away from handwriting (e.g. should we work with multimodal texts?) and towards actual practice.

After the preface (written by both editors) and introduction (written by Sabatino) on design principles, each of the remaining thirteen chapters have the same parts, yet different authors. Each chapter has an illustrative example, background information, consultation strategies, an activity, a conclusion, resources, research terms, and references. There are chapters on storyboards, artist statements, brochures, academic posters, presentations, infographics, eportfolios, websites, podcasts, video, public service announcements, and personal branding. The final chapter, though, differs a little as it is focused more broadly on copyright and citation issues for multimodal texts. As to be expected, this structure helps each chapter feel parallel, though sometimes parts in particular chapters feel forced or seem to hamstring the authors. That said, each chapter typically has illustrations or photos and many additional parts, so the authors expand and contract sections to fit their topics.

While reading, I could imagine using chapters or the whole book in a tutor education course or in ongoing staff development. (In fact, I already have.) The activity section of each chapter seems to imagine readers engag-

ing this text in one of those settings. The keywords and resources sections serve as a reminder to readers to look for more information beyond the chapters, which is also important for this audience. The tone, throughout, is neither phony nor pedantic, which can be difficult when writing for students. I suspect the editors organized the book by multimodal text rather than by multimodal element/principle in order to make each chapter viable on its own. If a director notices that a lot of students are bringing in podcasts, for instance, I can assign the team to read the chapter on podcasts. However, this organizing strategy is not without drawbacks. For one, there was some redundancy that surfaced from chapter to chapter as many multimodal texts rely on the same rhetorical, design, or multimodal principle. For another, the focus on specific multimodal texts might reify the idea that texts fall into a tidy binary: multimodal and not multimodal when, as many have said before, most texts today—even traditional essays and papers—have multimodal elements like figures, images, charts, and so forth. Of course, specific texts can move out of popularity quite quickly as well (e.g., the focus on Prezi in the presentation chapter already feels like its moment has passed).

As previously mentioned, early writing center scholarship and practices were built around handwritten or typewritten texts. It is certainly time that scholars in writing center studies produce a tutoring guide that deals specifically and in concrete details about how writing and feedback practices must evolve to address current-day writing practices. In that way, *Multimodal Composing* offers an important expansion of conceptions of writing center work. That said, it does suffer from the same oversight of *Re/Writing the Center* in that nearly no consideration was given to issues of identity or even politics. Of course, this is problematic when, among other things, composing platforms might reinforce cultural, gender, and racial stereotypes by design of available icons and artwork; accessibility can both be a challenge of some technologies for composing and an affordance of others; and representation functions differently in multimodal and text-only compositions. In addition, I was worried about how “academic” was used in a generic sense to discuss writing, often without discussion of how different academic disciplines have different conventions and expectations about (multimodal) texts. For instance, poster presentations in one field will look and do different things than poster presentations in another. Despite these shortcomings, this text will surely be an often-adopted text for many writing center courses at both the undergraduate and graduate level.

Out in the Center: Public Controversies and Private Struggles, in stark contrast to the first two books, is written under the premise that identity matters and isn’t something that can be kept “out” of the center. The editors

shaped the collection to show how there is no writing center work separate from public lives and controversies. The title is to remind readers of this: writing center professionals are not “in the center” or “out in the world”; they are instead, “out in the center,” which is also a double entendre on being “out” in terms of sexual identity. In a sense, *Out in the Center* feels a bit like an update to an older writing center edited collection *Stories from the Center* or a sequel to Harry Denny’s monograph, *Facing the Center*. In the latter, Denny looked at the writing center through a personal and cultural studies lens. Here, in *Out in the Center*, the ideas from *Facing the Center* are stretched to more authors with different experiences in writing centers and different identities. The variety of perspectives, the editors believe, will help readers engage in “critical dialogue” and, consequently, reimagine writing centers and tutor education by what they hear in the dialogue.

The collection begins with an introduction written by the editors and then is organized into six parts by identity focus: race, multilingualism, gender/sexuality, religion, class, and ability. There are one to five contributor chapters in each part followed by a summary note from the editors in each section. The collection closes with a conclusion written by the editors and an epilogue by Michele Eodice. The contributors have all worked in writing centers—many with Denny at St. John’s University or at Purdue—in either tutor and/or administrative roles. Each contributor focuses on how their identities intersect and affect their writing center work; each chapter is expressly a personal narrative though many also make connections to theories and cite other scholarly works.

Overall, the contributors’ chapters, focused as they are on identity, together offer a meditation on the theme of isolation and disillusion, with small moments of connection. Each author feels frustration in the ways that the norms shaped for writing center work did not envision them. In that sense, the contributors write back to a tradition, showing the reader the distance between conceptions and lived realities for tutors and administrators. When Nancy Alvarez writes of a writing center where she worked, “I couldn’t stand being in that place” (85), readers understand that the contributors are not going to tiptoe around their frustrations. To this point, the chapters in part one on race are written by Black authors about their experiences working at primarily white institutions. Morrison writes of a session where an Asian international student writer brought a proposal to make money off of Black women’s haircare and the anger that surfaces for her as a Black woman. She couldn’t opt to keep her race out of the ensuing conversation as she writes, “my very personal self is part of the session, and not really on my terms” (26). Likewise, Richard Severe writes of the ways he felt obliged to control all emotions, so as not to have the writers he

works with perceive him as an “angry black man” (47). Abdullah-Matta, too, notes that white and immigrant students were not used to “having a Black person *teach* them something” (59, emphasis in original). These chapters call to mind Neisha-Anne Green’s 2017 IWCA keynote address, where she explores similar emotions.

Contributors in other sections echo the isolation and frustrations felt by authors in part one. Among these are Conard-Salvo who notes that writing center scholarship and practice gives a lot of lip service to race and multilingualism, but hardly any thought to multiracial, multicultural writing center professionals or writers. Sicari writes about misogyny she faces as a writing center administrator (from both men and women), and Mundy considers how his performance of masculinity cuts both ways as it protects him from the questioning of his decisions. Banat describes how his Muslim identity as a tutor is perceived differently in different countries where he works. Naydan writes astutely of the crisis of contingent labor conditions, which means those who are hired into roles only partially, loosely belong to their institutions and centers. In all, contributors present a much more nuanced and complex representation of writing center professionals’ identities than previously published in writing center scholarship.

A few of the editors’ decisions surprised me. For one, organizing the book by identity worked in opposition to the desired outcome to use intersectionality as theoretical frame. Related, having only Black authors in the race section plays into the trope that Romeo García has pointed out where race so often is used as shorthand for Black or that only people of color have a race. Additionally, the section conclusions written by the editors did the work of drawing theoretical and scholarly connections, which seemed, at times, heavy-handed or simply repetitive. I think I would have preferred the contributors to make these connections or not.

Still, as a whole, the book met its ends, including “to exchange uncomfortable stories about everyday struggles involving identity politics that might otherwise go unspoken” (239). None of the criticisms reduced the profoundness of the narratives within. Readers will hear from authors how being out while working in a writing center is complicated and not universally or invariably positive. The stories do the work of counternarratives—saying to fellow practitioners and scholars: Not so fast. Listen. The usefulness of these stories is in their ability to disrupt claims that the original conceptions of writing centers were neutral, good, fair, and just and thus worth maintaining. This collection is what you’ll hand to tutors who tell you they just want to focus on the tutoring.

Greenfield’s *Radical Writing Center Praxis: A Paradigm for Ethical Political Engagement* is my favorite among these titles and the book that

reaches the furthest. Greenfield uses a political frame, by which she means “the ways people interpret, exercise, and value power” (30), to reframe writing center practice and scholarship. Greenfield identifies three political ideologies functioning within writing centers—conservative, liberal, and radical—and makes the case for a radical political orientation to the work. What’s at stake, she argues, is not just writing center work, but really “the future of life on the planet” (9). In this vein, Greenfield’s book reminded me in message and mission of the work of Mary Rose O’Reilly, particularly *The Peaceable Classroom*, in which O’Reilly takes up Ihab Hassan’s question: how can we teach English to get people to stop killing one another? In more ways than one, *Radical Writing Center Praxis* also brings to mind Nancy Grimm’s writing in *Good Intentions* and elsewhere. Like Grimm, Greenfield writes beautifully, with prose that effortlessly delivers complicated and controversial ideas as if they weren’t. Also, like Grimm, it is clear that Greenfield critiques writing center practices and scholarship because she wants it to be better and believes that it can be transformed.

Greenfield’s book is arranged from more theoretical to more practical, though anyone looking for a quick and direct radical praxis to do list will not find one in any of the five chapters. The introduction establishes the historic tension in writing center work between liberation and regulation. Greenfield asserts that we cannot change unless we understand and name our collective (writing center) paradigm and understand how it is operating. This chapter includes, in very plain and very astute language, a must-read section she calls “Oppression 101,” which sets up key terms used in the other chapters: prejudice, discrimination, oppression, institutional oppression, and systemic oppression. (I refrained from annotating this section in my copy because I knew right away I would want to share it with others.)

The first chapter describes and critiques conservative and liberal ideologies and practices in writing center work. She’s clear here that she’s addressing both conscious and subconscious beliefs and that she’s concentrating on the collective politics of the field, not individual leanings. She sees a liberal political framework as dominant, but notes that there are conservative elements at work, too: “When writing center tutors are not empowered to work with students to question the institution, question the teacher, question the assignment, or have agency over their own educational progress, such centers are engaged in conservative politics” (42). And, to be sure, that a liberal political framework is dominant gives Greenfield no peace of mind. She offers a scathing critique of a liberal writing center as relativistic, unable to stand in authority, building faux “safe spaces,” and unable to articulate and act on its values.

In chapter 2, Greenfield introduces a radical politics as an alternative worldview for writing center practitioners and scholars. Radicalism, she asserts, is a belief that “truth is a human construction,” “power is not possessed but exercised,” and that authority resides in “ethically engaged praxis” (59). The core value in radicalism is love, which Greenfield sees as “a recognition of the oneness or interconnectedness of all beings, the reconciliation of false beliefs in a self and an Other, and an honoring of and promotion of life and well-being” (59). Radicalism can function as a beacon—as something we work towards even though we’ll inevitably fail to enact perfectly or completely (61). One refrain throughout the book is that radicalism is hopeful: “change is possible and justice is a righteous endeavor” through resistance, dialogue, and doubt (62). However, Greenfield is also quick to note that radicalism “does not try to make anyone do anything against their will, and it doesn’t prescribe the methods of resistance” (73).

The first two chapters make the case for rebuilding a radical writing center field and the final three chapters address three questions: “Why should we do radical writing center work? What is radical writing center work? How should we do radical writing center work?” (85). Greenfield answers these questions through argument and narrative—sharing her successes and failures in enacting radical writing center practices. Among other things, she suggests in these chapters that we make justice and peace everyday terms (88), consider the degree to which a writing center can be contained by a space (113), stop fetishizing multilingual writers (122), and that we learn from one another by telling stories and listening for resonance (144, 160). Greenfield gives readers a lot to think on—most readers will likely feel the prick of shame (13) in her take of established writing center practices. However, I don’t think readers will feel defeated. I, for one, felt my sense of hopefulness re-awaken.

Some readers are going to find Greenfield’s ideas too hippy-dippy: what does peace, love, and understanding have to do with it?! No matter. This same critique has been lobbed at hooks, Freire, O’Reilly, and other liberatory educators and that complaint has never halted the movement. Others, who are unable to sit with the message, are going to assert that Greenfield is inserting politics into the benign work of writing centers. Those readers might not be reached at first, but I suspect there will be a moment if they stay involved in writing center work that calls them back to this text to reconsider their first reaction. My greatest fear, actually, for this book is that scholars and practitioners will take a quick quote from Greenfield’s text and claim they are enacting this new paradigm. What Greenfield is proposing here is radical in all senses of the word: revolutionary, absolute, and cool.

I'm going to be suspicious of anyone who claims to have done this work quickly, easily, completely, or painlessly.

In addition to the way in which each of these books expands notions of writing center work, the thing that connects each of these four books is that personal narrative and experience is used as a light, to illuminate what had been hidden from view. So much can be said about the power of narrative in contemporary writing studies scholarship, but for now I'll point out how it brings to mind what Janna Levin writes in the very first paragraph of *How the Universe Got Its Spots*. She is speculating why great mathematicians have died by suicide, and she writes,

The lore is that their theories drove them mad, though I suspect they were just lonely, isolated by what they knew. Sometimes I feel the isolation. I'd like to describe what I can see from here, so you can look with me and ease the solitude. (3)

Take a look.

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