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Book Review: Improving Writing Skills

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Improving Writing Skills (Jossey-Bass, 1981, No. 3 in a series called *New Directions in College Learning Assistance*) edited by Thom Hawkins and Phyllis Brooks.

Reviewed by Stephen M. North, SUNY Albany

In their "Editors' Notes" Thom Hawkins and Phyllis Brooks conclude:

In this volume we have attempted to emphasize issues over mechanics, although each chapter contains useful and practical information about the operation of writing centers. We have been conscious of the dangers of parochialism, and our authors represent a broad spectrum of institutions and geographical locations. We believe that readers will come away from this volume with a better sense of the problems and potential of writing centers.

They keep, as far as I can see, their promises, and the volume represents in some ways a real breakthrough for the writing center movement: It is the first book-length treatment of writing centers. It includes or cites most of the major resources or resource persons available in the field. It makes room for different ideas about what writing centers are, and for the different emphases among those people who otherwise do agree.

For these, and probably for other reasons each reader can find for him or herself, it is an important and valuable book. But it is also a book that suffers from a kind of multiple audience problem: it is not clear just who the "readers" Brooks and Hawkins refer to in the passage quoted above are, and the result, for this reader, at least, is not entirely satisfying.

There are at least four audiences addressed. Let me label them:

- (1) Novice insiders: People just beginning writing centers who are looking for ways to think about what such centers involve.
- (2) Outsiders: People who don't have writing centers, are unlikely to become directly involved in them, but who might want to know a bit about them.



- (3) Experienced insiders: People with considerable writing center experience.
- (4) Basic writing devotees: Teachers and administrators concerned about a population of students defined as 'basic' or 'poor' writers. This audience may include, but is not limited to, writing center people.

To make matters a little more difficult, these essays also are divided in their aims: some are essentially political, others primarily intellectual, the latter addressing either teaching or research in composition. Muriel Harris' opening essay "Process and Product: Dominant Models for Writing Centers," for example, is directed at audiences (1) and (2) above, and uses composition theory to achieve a political conclusion: that writing centers and writing labs are both valuable, and will grow more and more complementary as we learn more about them. In the next section, "Basic Writer: Lab or Tutor," Richard Veit and Carolyn Kirkpatrick, drawing mostly on their own experiences, address audience (4), again with a political aim: i.e., selling the tutorial or auto-tutorial as the one best suited for dealing with basic writers. (Despite their apparent conflicts, they end by agreeing with Harris that each kind of instruction is valuable and can complement the other.) Then in the third section, Marian Arkin's "Training Writing Center Tutors: Issues and Approaches," the subheadings run like this: How Do Tutors and Teachers Relate Professionally? How Is Tutoring Approached? What Are a Writing Tutor's Responsibilities?, and so on. Arkin does not, as I expected, draw on composition theory to devise a particular model of tutoring. Instead, she concentrates on an overview of the *politics* of tutoring, on the role of tutors in the academy. My expectations, of course, are those of audience (3) while the essay is clearly aimed at audience (1), and contains mostly political advice, all of it valuable for people new to the writing center game.

I needn't detail the audiences and aims of each section. For those of you who, like me, are in audience (3) and whose reading interests tend to be theoretical more than political, I especially recommend Phyllis Brooks' "Peer Tutoring and the ESL Student" and Aviva Freedman's "Research and the Writing Center." If you're a (3) but more politically inclined, try Mary Lamb's "Evaluation Procedures for Writing Centers: Defining Ourselves Through Accountability," You other readers—(1)s, (2)s, (4)s—will have to fend for yourselves.

Before I complete this review, though, I'd like to suggest that what I've been reviewing is a movement more than a book. Perhaps Brooks

and Hawkins have captured our essence accurately. Maybe we are a really diverse group of people with all sorts of spoken and unspoken interests, axes to grind, and hidden agendas, drawn together partly by our commitment to literacy, but more driven together by adversity, by a society and a profession neither of which seems to want to listen to us. Probably we sense that banded together—despite significant internal differences—we'll have a more powerful voice, and that whatever we can't agree on can be sorted out after the revolution. If my theory is correct, and I think it is, then *Improving Writing Skills* is right on the mark: it establishes us in a forum—publication—where we can be heard. For that, Thom Hawkins, Phyllis Brooks and Jossey-Bass deserve our thanks and congratulations.