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Review of *The Writing Center: New Directions*

Jeanette Harris

Wallace, Ray and Jeanne Simpson, eds. *The Writing Center: New Directions*. (Garland Publishing, 1991), 295 pages.

Books about writing centers are few and far between. In the almost thirty years since writing centers first appeared on the academic scene, only a dozen or so books have been published that are devoted entirely to the subject. Not a lengthy list for a profession that has influenced the teaching of writing widely and profoundly.

Because writing center books are not published frequently, each one must bear the weight of great expectation and close scrutiny. Therefore, I began to read the most recent book-length publication, *The Writing Center: New Directions*, with some trepidation. Would this new writing center book (the only one, to my knowledge, published in 1991) fulfill my expectations? Would it live up to the promise of its name and provide “new directions”? Would it meet the diverse needs of writing center people, some of whom are novices while others are experienced, even jaded?

The answer to all of these questions is yes. Ray Wallace and Jeanne Simpson have put together a volume of eighteen essays by twenty-three authors that is a welcome and useful addition to the brief list of existing writing center scholarship. Like Muriel Harris’ *Tutoring Writing* and Gary Olson’s *Writing Centers: Theory and Administration*, to which it is most similar, Wallace and Simpson’s book is a collection of essays written by experienced writing center administrators and researchers. It is also like these

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earlier books in that it includes both practical and theoretical essays that range over a variety of topics.

The editors identify the audience for the book as “second-generation” writing centers, those “which have matured past the initial problems of establishment.” And, in general, the book seems to address this type of reader—the writing center person who has been around awhile rather than the one who is just beginning. I believe the earlier collections by Muriel Harris and Gary Olson still best serve the needs of the beginning director who wants to know the basics. However, even novice writing center directors will find Wallace and Simpson’s book useful. Writing centers and the schools they serve have changed in the past decade, and this book offers ideas and solutions that had not yet occurred to those contributing to the earlier collections.

Since its title promises “new directions” and its preface reinforces this promise with assurances of “fresh insight and concrete examples into the expanding role of writing centers,” it seems only fair to evaluate *The Writing Center* primarily on the basis of how well it succeeds in giving its readers something new and different. I found most essays both fresh and concrete, but some managed only the latter, narrating in detail the author’s own experiences without making these experiences meaningful or significant to others. Still others, and these include some of the most ambitious essays, those that attempt to explain writing centers by locating them in a political and philosophical context or to relate writing center pedagogy to other disciplines, seem to lack a clear sense of the audience for whom they are intended. They focus on theory but fail to make explicit the connections to practice that would make the theory relevant. But these are the exception. In general, the essays, even those that are largely a retelling of the authors’ own writing center stories, are clearly written, informative, and useful. And in most instances, the essays included provide the promised new directions, describing fresh, if not revolutionary, approaches to old as well as new problems.

The Writing Center, like all anthologies, is rather like a cafeteria in that not all its offerings will appeal equally to all readers. But that is one of the strengths of a collection of essays. In spite of the common purpose of all the essays to investigate “how writing centers identify new roles, new constituencies, and new methodologies across our college and university curricula,” each one also has its own purpose and flavor. Among the essays that most pleased my palate are the following:

“Writing Center Outreach: Sharing Knowledge and Influencing Attitudes about Writing” by Bradley T. Hughes is a comprehensive, practical guide to effective outreach. Hughes does not merely recount what he has done in terms of outreach at the University of Wisconsin at Madison (although he concludes in his essay with three specific examples of successful outreach programs at his school). Rather he begins by arguing persuasively for the necessity of devoting time and resources to outreach and then articulates eight general principles to follow in establishing effective programs. I found his essay clearly written and well informed.

Jeanne Simpson’s essay, “The Role of the Writing Centers in Student Retention Programs,” delivers the “new direction” promise of the book’s title as well as any included. In this well-focused, thoughtful essay, Simpson argues that “Writing centers . . . are not just about writing, they are about student success” and that the position of the writing center can be strengthened if it focuses on the role it can play in student retention.

William C. Wolff also points writing centers in a new direction in his essay, “Writing Services: A New Role for the Writing Center and Faculty.” In order to illustrate the effectiveness of faculty development workshops sponsored by a writing center, Wolff describes how faculty from different disciplines at his institution, Appalachian State University, revised the general directions that he had given for peer response. In a series of miniature case studies, Wolff shows how each faculty member revised the directions to accommodate his or her own discipline’s writing purposes. The result is an essay that argues persuasively for the value of collaborative learning and the effectiveness of the writing center’s role in writing across the curriculum.

Offering a similar suggestion, Sallyanne Fitzgerald, Peggy Mulvihill, and Ruth Dobson propose that writing centers sponsor writing support groups for graduate students (“Meeting the Needs of Graduate Students: Writing Support Groups in the Center”). Their essay is largely a description of their own experiences at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, but it illustrates convincingly how successful and useful such groups can be, especially for ESL graduate students.

I also liked Richard Leahy’s straightforward description of his own experience in publishing a writing center newsletter at Boise State University (“A Lot of Pleasure, A Bit of Agony: Producing a Newsletter for the Faculty”). He is especially persuasive in arguing that a newsletter increases a writing center’s credibility. And, by including a copy of one issue of his newsletter in an appendix to his article, he provides a clear model for those who want to attempt this type of venture.

In “Changing the Ways We Teach: The Role of the Writing Center in Professional Development; Or, The Virtue of Selfishness,” Jay Jacoby and Stan Patten present the interesting and possibly accurate view that the most valuable function of a writing center is not improving the writing of students but rather developing teachers of writing. They argue that “service in a writing center is the best possible method of professional development in writing instruction.” I found their arguments and the testimonials of their tutors, which they include in their essay, utterly convincing.

I liked Robert Child’s essay, “Tutor-Teachers: An Examination of How Writing Center and Classroom Environments Inform Each Other,” because it is based on research and because the essay itself is both informed and informative. In this description of his qualitative study of the effects of tutoring on classroom teachers, Child carefully qualifies his modest findings and concludes simply that although “the tutor-trained teacher makes a very effective classroom teacher,” he or she may also be frustrated by a classroom environment, which necessarily inhibits one-to-one instruction. Child’s essay not only provides readers with new insights into the effect of tutoring experience on classroom teachers but also presents a clear model of the type of research that is possible within a writing center.

Nadene A. Keene’s essay, “Portfolio Evaluation: Implications for Writing Centers,” is one of the most timely in the collection. Portfolio evaluation, which is increasingly used in writing programs across the country, has important implications for writing centers. Keene thoughtfully explores these implications and provides readers with guidelines for dealing with this new form of assessment.

Finally, I found “More Science in the Writing Center: Training Tutors to Lead Group Tutorials on Biology Lab Reports” by Karen Hollis an unusually well-focused and useful essay. Hollis describes in detail her practice of discussing and analyzing lab reports with her tutors as part of their training. By focusing on the form and content of biology lab reports in a training session, tutors gain familiarity with a type of discourse that is often alien to them and learn to appreciate the different conventions that constrain and shape scientific writing.

In addition to its collection of useful, thoughtful essays, *The Writing Center* gives us a new glimpse at our profession. The book can be read not just as a series of individual essays about writing centers but collectively as a statement of what writing centers have become. What does this book tell us about ourselves at this stage in our professional development?

First, I think it tells us that we are primarily pragmatists rather than theorists—in Stephen North’s terminology, practitioners rather than researchers or scholars. By far, most of the essays focus on practical rather than theoretical issues. Although most of the authors try to include pertinent theoretical considerations, it is clear that their main concern is what works and what doesn’t.

Second, the book clearly suggests that we are storytellers first and scholars second. The oral tradition has always been a strong force in writing centers. We are most comfortable when we are telling other writing center people what we did, what happened in our center, what battles we fought and won or lost, what worked and what didn’t. Most of the essays in this collection are basically these types of stories.

Third, the book indicates that we are a well-defined discourse community. A glance at the lists of works cited at the end of each essay reveals the same sources cited over and over again. For example, Muriel Harris’ and Stephen North’s names appear repeatedly. They are clearly the voices we know best and revere most. In addition, the *Writing Lab Newsletter* and *The Writing Center Journal* are the sources of most of the articles that are cited. Unlike the field of rhetoric and composition, which has experienced an explosion of publication in recent years, writing centers remain an almost intimate profession whose members know the same people and read the same texts.

Finally, this book tells us that we haven’t changed all that much: the second generation of writing centers is much like the first. In spite of new issues and new technologies, most writing center people are still responding to the contexts in which they exist and the challenges which they confront in much the same way as those who started the first writing centers. We still change what we can change and compromise with or adapt to what we cannot change. Writing centers are still evolving and defining themselves as they grow, and writing center directors are still balancing and juggling a variety of responsibilities and interests. As in the past, many are overworked and underpaid. Most are struggling to define and establish their programs in schools and departments that are more concerned with budgets and accountability than with writing skills and students and working with peers who do not understand or value the teaching of writing. (This includes everyone from the engineering professor who wants the writing center to proofread the papers written by her non-native speakers of English to the literature colleague who views the teaching of writing as a service rather than a profession.) If there are differences between the two generations of writing centers, I sense they are superficial rather than integral.

This latest book about writing centers leaves me, as usual, wishing for more—more publications that are research-based, that give a clearer, more complex sense of the theories that inform writing center pedagogy, that explore the potential of new technologies, that unite theories of practice. It is time, I believe, for writing center scholarship to move beyond the practical. This does not mean that we should abandon our practical orientation or stop telling our stories, for these features are at the core of who we are. But it does mean that we should stretch toward an understanding of the principles that inform writing center pedagogy, asking not just what works but why it works.

In spite of these reservations, I am grateful for *The Writing Center: New Directions* and what it tells us about writing centers and about ourselves.

Jeanette Harris formerly served as president of the National Writing Centers Association and as co-editor of *The Writing Center Journal*. Presently, she directs the Composition Program at the University of Southern Mississippi.