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A Review of *Intersections: Theory-Practice in the Writing Center*

Lex Runciman

Joan Mullin and Ray Wallace, eds. *Intersections: Theory-Practice in the Writing Center*. Urbana: NCTE, 1994.

Last year the Oregon Coast Aquarium featured an exhibit of nineteenth and early twentieth-century diving equipment. The displays included various diving bells (some of which looked like hardly-modified barrels or wine casks), and featured prominently was a somewhat more sophisticated hard-hat diving rig originally used for salvage and for ship repair. It was composed of several parts. A brass headpiece sprouted various valves through which breathing mixtures were pumped and released, and in front it featured a round, heavily-reinforced circle of pale blue glass from which the diver could view the immediate watery surroundings. The headpiece itself snapped and buckled onto a full-body suit of rubberized canvas that included a lead-weight belt worn at the waist and shoes that looked as if they weighed twenty pounds each. The entire outfit suggested awkwardness, difficulty, and danger; it said diving was an activity only for those trained and fit and heedless of risk, only for the pros who had learned how to maneuver and be effective in that rig and at those depths which it allowed them to visit.

I begin by recalling this cumbersome diving suit because as I began reading this book, I heard, among my many interior voices, a small but vocal minority insistently cautioning me against any deep diving, any foray into theory's murky water and changeable currents. "Watch out," those voices said, "you may never see the light of day." And apparently these voices aren't unique; other writing center colleagues hear them too. Ray Wallace's essay

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is not the first in this collection, but he eloquently recognizes that wariness writing center personnel feel towards theory and theorists. After all, we pride ourselves (rightly, I think) on what we have learned from the directness of our experience in writing centers, experience we know to be related to but different from classroom teaching. We know classroom teaching both requires us and allows us to make the sweeping generalizations necessary to speak to the group, we know how often (virtually always) those generalizations are inadequate or incomplete, and we know the challenge of adapting them to individual writing tasks and individual writers as they work at their own tasks. If we see the inadequacy of classroom generalization in our working with writers, no wonder we're suspicious of generalizations of theory that seek to claim even wider authority. Stephen North has labeled us "Practitioners"; Jeanette Harris calls us "primarily pragmatists." As Wallace points out, we don't disagree with those labels.

If our conviction about the complexity of our interactions with writers in writing centers has led us to a general wariness of theory, that wariness and the resulting unwillingness to engage ourselves in discussions of theory—any theory—has sometimes meant we've maneuvered ourselves to the edges of what institutions (especially research institutions) value: namely theoretical and methodological sophistication. And often enough we've been shoved there right from the start. Why? Perhaps because it's been too easy for outsiders, for other faculty (including some in composition) and administrators, to believe that we've just been winging it, proceeding by guess and by gosh. Wallace is right (and courageous) when he identifies this division as "an 'us' against 'them' feeling when those called Practitioners are confronted by theorists" (70).

What's shrewd and especially valuable about this book is the recognition of its editors and contributors that at some fundamental level Practitioners—whether they are writing center personnel or automobile assemblers—work better (and know they work better) when they understand not just how to proceed but also why to proceed that way and (especially this) how to usefully modify what they do to fit new variables. And writing centers make cars look simple. We're not dealing with automobiles, we're dealing with writers (individually or in small groups) who are trying to construct their own cars out of materials they borrow or invent themselves in order to arrive at a destination they cannot yet foresee. We know that working with writers in writing centers demands astonishing (often exhilarating) mental agility, but without theory—good theory and lots of it, this book would suggest—we don't know how to judge our various choices. Without theory (and none of us are entirely without it) we could only experiment blindly, suffering the consequences of our frequent errors and the euphoria of our occasional good luck.

So perhaps the right question isn't "Do we need theory?" but rather,

“What theories can help us?” And it becomes clear reading this book that the answer to that latter question involves a wider-ranging understanding of theories than we’ve perhaps been aware of before. Some of the essays in this book—three especially—offer us quite directly useful theoretical underpinnings. Julie Neff’s essay on how the learning-disabled learn (they do learn quite well, her essay clearly shows) ought to be required reading for anyone in education. It draws from academic disciplines far removed from any traditional notion of English or of composition; it draws on observations and theories of brain function and how the brain processes information and makes it available for speech or for writing. This is not English, not a discussion of grammar or of rhetoric in any historically traditional sense. Neff draws her information and insights from the intersections of biology, physiology, biochemistry, and psychology as all of these help illuminate what some writers do.

Similarly, Muriel Harris offers a cogent and useful discussion of how cultural differences can affect writing center conferences, and of how we can use an awareness of those differences as we work with writers. Harris’s piece discusses North American and Asian cultures at some length, speaks interestingly about German academic discourse, includes brief mention of Hindi, and uses the differences between the conventions of Indian English and those of American English as a particularly enlightening example. Harris points out that the different cultural assumptions writers and writing assistants bring to a conference can frustrate both parties. To make her points, Harris goes to sources that borrow heavily from sociology, anthropology, and linguistics—areas that even thirty years ago were, generally speaking, considered separate from any discussion of writing or of what one could usefully do to help writers improve.

Like Muriel Harris, Phyllis Lassner cautions us against making too easy assumptions about what we think we know of those who arrive at the doors of a writing center. In Lassner’s words, “Although sensitizing peer tutors to issues of diversity and difference is at the center of their training, my fear is that we assume unproblematic definitions of ‘a community of literate writers,’ of peerness, and of difference” (149). Lassner brings a focus on gender studies and feminist perspectives to bear on writing center consultations, and her essay makes effective use of peer tutors’ journals to illustrate some of the complexities and fluidity of power in any writing center conference.

As even these three essays begin to make clear, we need theories, plural. Or in Eric Hobson’s words, we may as well admit (and celebrate) the fact that “no single theory can dictate writing center instruction” (8). I wish he hadn’t used “instruction” there; I wish he’d said “interaction,” but the point stands. And it is just this principle which guided Joan Mullin and Ray Wallace as they assembled this collection. They have thrown the net widely, beginning the

book with essays exploring what we mean by collaboration—perhaps the one theoretical umbrella we’ve all huddled under. Three essays (those by Sallyanne Fitzgerald, Christina Murphy, and Alice Gillam) specifically encourage us to keep thinking about collaboration, reminding us that it includes much more than sitting next to someone and talking about a writing project. Murphy’s essay is particularly interesting in her critique of social constructionism (the assertion that the self is a social construction). Here too, she goes far afield, to psychology and particularly to authorities in cognitive and psychoanalytic theory, in order to argue that social constructionism does not do justice to the experience of collaboration that we’ve had in writing centers.

Other essays, those by Pamela Farrel-Childers and Tom MacLennan, discuss how affective variables (variables having to do with factors such as stress, openness to the making of mistakes, formality or informality of discussion, suspension of any final judgments, treatments of others as reciprocal equals, and the like) can influence learning, and how the conscious awareness of these variables can lead to friendlier, hence more effective, writing centers. MacLennan introduces Martin Buber’s theories of human communication, suggesting they can be particularly useful in light of writing center conferences. In Buber’s words,

There is genuine dialogue—no matter whether spoken or silent—where each of the participants really has in mind the other in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them. There is technical dialogue, which is prompted solely by the need of objective understanding. And there is monologue disguised as dialogue. . . . (126)

MacLennan goes on to discuss Buber’s idea of encounter, a meeting in which “both parties are changed (129).” Such discussions begin to affirm and more fully illuminate both the dynamics and the real rewards of writing center work.

For my part, all the essays in this collection seem helpful and well-chosen, especially if read individually rather than in quick succession (like the chapters in a novel, for instance). Read too quickly, a certain kind of theory-numbness sets in (and it has set in a couple of times as I’ve read for this review). This numbness, this loss of connection between the language of theory and the complex but physically present humanity of action in writing center encounters (I like Buber’s term here), is perhaps exactly the response that keeps writing center personnel from drowning in theoretical abstraction. It is by no means an entirely negative instinct to want to surface occasionally.

One more essay, Jay Jacoby’s “‘The Use of Force’: Medical Ethics and Center Practice,” deserves particular mention. Recognizing the considerable

interest in writing center ethics (What should writing assistants do? What should they not do?), Jacoby has gone to the literature of medical ethics to see what it might offer. Jacoby is aware of the dangers of medical metaphors in a writing center context. He knows “that student writing is not a condition, a disease to be cured” (134), so he turns instead to the patient-doctor relationship as a prism through which to view the writer-writing assistant relationship.

His discussion focuses on three related terms: *autonomy*, *beneficence*, and *paternalism* (or Jacoby’s preferred alternative, *parentalism*). Autonomy, according to Jacoby’s source (Garret et al.), refers to the fundamental respect accorded to another individual, namely that “one human being, precisely as human, does not and should not have power over another human being” (137). Paternalism refers to any attempt to infringe on or negate a person’s autonomy. And beneficence refers to the presumed motive for such infringement or intervention, the aim to act for a person’s own good. Jacoby argues that such beneficence may not exist except as an ideal, and that in writing center conferences, beneficence risks becoming a kind of gate-keeping for the university and its academic standards. Though I wonder if Jacoby isn’t overstating the charge a bit in order to underscore his point, he argues that writers using a writing center can too easily be seen as “individuals whose decision-making competence can be compromised, for their own protection (we want them to pass, don’t we?) and that of society” (140). In plainer terms, Jacoby worries that writing assistants can too easily violate a writer’s autonomy by suggesting or telling those writers what to do, what to say, or how to say it. He notes Diane Morrow’s observation that “most students begin by assuming that the tutor is in charge; most students come into the session taking a passive role” (143) and concludes that under such circumstances writing assistants can too easily justify their own interventions because they believe that in retrospect the writers they work with will agree with their suggestions. Jacoby rightly refers to this as little more than a justification for brow-beating.

Though this ethical problem—what to do with the passive writer unwilling to claim authority—does not exist with every writer who comes to a writing center (indeed, it’s often the very best writers who recognize how helpful it is to them to discuss their drafts and their preliminary thoughts), anyone who has worked in a writing center recognizes the difficulty and ethical complexity Jacoby has identified. His solution lies first in understanding the principle of informed consent and then in translating that principle from the realm of medical practice to the practices of writing center conferences. It is a discussion too sophisticated to be accurately summarized here, save to point out that it sees writers as decision makers and argues that writing assistants must work to make sure that decision-making role is both active and informed. In the course of this discussion, Jacoby argues cogently

and persuasively that the field of medical ethics can help us re-picture many of our writing center practices and dilemmas.

Joan Mullin and Ray Wallace are to be commended for gathering such a wide-ranging set of voices and for realizing that only a wide range will do. They have assembled a provocative and instructive book, one that will engage seasoned writing center personnel and one that will give new writing center personnel plenty to consider as they gain experience. And for those in composition who have shunned any involvement with writing centers (too messy, too anecdotal), the essays here should begin to suggest not only how humanly complicated writing center experience is, day in and day out, but also how fruitful and rewarding it can be. This book stands as testament to how wide-ranging and still wide-open is our search for theories that help us grasp what writing and writing centers involve. It ought to stand as an invitation to all of us to continue its enterprise. Indeed, one would hope that NCTE, publisher of this book, would revisit this arena with a follow-up book of this same sort in another five years.

Finally, this book leaves me with the not unpleasant weariness one feels after a sustained physical workout. Having read it once, backtracking often to reread and attending to some essays more quickly than others, I have the healthy sense that I have only begun to grasp the complexities these contributors discuss. Further, I have the sense that we as a body of writing center practitioner-theorists have only begun to fully grasp the complexities of what we do. I think perhaps we know as much about our conferences as doctors do about neurology and the invention of consciousness. We know as much about these things as science knows about the ecology of the sea.

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