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# Institutional and Intimate Contexts: A Review of Recent Writing Center Scholarship

*Bradley T. Hughes*

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Joyce A. Kinkead and Jeanette Harris, eds. *Writing Centers in Context: Twelve Case Studies*. (Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1993) 274 pages.

Thomas Flynn and Mary King, eds., *Dynamics of the Writing Conference: Social and Cognitive Interaction*. (Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1993), 127 pages.

This past year saw the publication of two new books devoted specifically to the work of writing centers, and, as Jeanette Harris pointed out in these pages in 1992, book-length publications about writing centers are still rare enough that each “must bear the weight of great expectation and close scrutiny” (205). *Writing Centers in Context: Twelve Case Studies*, edited by Joyce A. Kinkead and Jeanette G. Harris, consists of extended descriptions of twelve different writing centers. These profiles offer clear, vivid descriptions of each program’s history, purpose, philosophy, services, staffing, training, and administration. Thus the book emphasizes the big picture, the macro-level of writing centers. As its title promises, *The Dynamics of the Writing Conference: Social and Cognitive Interaction*, edited by Thomas Flynn and Mary King, examines the much more intimate setting of writing center conferences, focusing on individual instruction and the interaction between a teacher and a student. As will become clear, these books are so different that they need to be considered separately in order to understand and evaluate their contributions to the growing writing center literature.

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### *Writing Centers in Context*

The editors announce the purpose of this book clearly in the introduction: they want to fill a gap in the literature by defining and describing writing centers not as abstract ideals or through a single example but through the details, the realities, the instantiations, and the voices of many particular writing centers. At the same time, they want to emphasize that each center is different, indeed must be different, in order to respond to local needs and to fit its local context. In fact, the editors emphasize diversity and locality above all, Kinkead going so far as to say that “it is impossible to make generalizations about writing centers” (232). To accomplish these goals, the editors asked the directors of twelve writing centers at eleven different colleges and universities (Utah State has two different programs) to describe their programs in great detail. In subject matter, this book is a direct descendant of Joyce Steward and Mary Croft’s *The Writing Laboratory: Organization, Management, and Methods* (1982). This book also descends from overviews of composition and writing-across-the-curriculum programs such as Tori Haring-Smith’s *A Guide to Writing Programs* and Toby Fulwiler’s and Art Young’s *Programs That Work: Models and Methods for Writing Across the Curriculum*.

In their choice of writing centers, the editors claim to have sought diversity above all—especially diversity in contexts, in size, in source of funding, in location, and in philosophical and pedagogical orientations (xvi-xvii). The centers profiled are in two-year, four-year, and comprehensive colleges and universities; in open admissions and highly selective schools; in urban and rural areas; in private and public institutions. Some serve specific groups of students, while others are open to all students, at all levels, writing in all courses. In their philosophy and pedagogy, most of the centers favor dialogue about writing in progress rather than skills-based instruction, but some do offer explicit grammar instruction and testing. There is also a good geographical balance, from Massachusetts to Indiana to Utah to California and the state of Washington, though the southeast and southwest may feel slighted. Although I think the book exaggerates the distinctiveness of each program, the editors do in many ways achieve the diversity they promise. I wish, however, that they had explained their selection process and justified their choices more thoroughly because these choices really matter. The programs profiled here will, at least for a while, be seen as models and will be a kind of synecdoche, a part that stands for a varied and complex whole. Certainly there are other writing centers different from these. There is not enough in this book, for example, about centers that devote a substantial portion of their instruction to graduate students, about centers that emphasize group instruction, or about centers that work primarily with writers from non-composition or non-humanities courses. And certainly there are many other popular, deeply rooted, successful, and innovative writing centers that

are not profiled here—an obvious point but one the editors would have done well to acknowledge.

Each of the twelve profiles follows a standard but not inviolable format: typical headings include history, physical description, chronology of a typical day, clientele, tutor selection and training, types of services, administration, evaluation, research, and prospects for the future. Although I wish that each chapter provided more standardized statistics about such things as staffing levels, students served, instructional time, and funding, the format offers sufficient detail about each program and allows readers to identify particular sections of interest to them. The useful index, table of contents, and epilogue also help readers sample the book selectively. The only weakness in the format is the chronology of a typical day. The concept is good—one valuable way to experience and understand a writing center is to see how it actually operates through time, not just hearing all of its programs described as if they are static or operate simultaneously. But as they are narrated in some of the chapters, the typical days sound repetitive and often trite and even invite parody. They seem the writing centers' version of the "earth's diurnal course."

Aside from this small excess, the details contained within the case studies are an important part of what makes this book so welcome and valuable. Writing center directors like to visit other centers and to talk with other directors and tutors. *In Context* offers all of us cheap, fast, and convenient trips to other writing centers to collect both ideas and enthusiasm to improve our programs. The book contains details about everything from floor plans to methods for recruiting tutors to lists of handouts to descriptions of forms for record keeping. This abundance of information provides an excellent introduction to the design and administration of writing centers; in fact, it is nice to have a single book of this sort to recommend to those new to the field and especially to those setting up new writing centers or redirecting and expanding existing ones. Wisely, this book offers them options, not absolutes. *In Context*, however, is equally valuable to writing center veterans, though for different reasons. They will mine this book for new and successful ideas. But they will also read it comparatively—for reassurance and to discover differences.

Obviously, each reader will notice and appreciate different things in a book of this sort. Above all, I was impressed by the careful ways in which most of the centers select and train tutors, processes which reflect the careful thought centers give to their purposes and philosophies. To illustrate the book's wealth of ideas, let me share a few smaller items that caught my eye. Center directors at Purdue, Harvard, and the University of Puget Sound all involve existing tutors in the process of selecting new colleagues. Harvard hires a tutor each spring semester specifically to work with students writing senior theses. To ensure that students get to know the writing center, the University of Southern California's writing program requires all 2500

## Institutional and Intimate Contexts: A Review of Recent Writing Center Scholarship 175

students enrolled in first-year composition to work on at least one assignment at the writing center, and the center has a staff of over 100 graduate writing consultants. By contrast, Ed Lotto at Lehigh University and some other center directors writing in this book deliberately do not encourage course instructors to require students to visit the writing center. Puget Sound requires all peer advisors, as they are called there, to talk about a writing project of theirs with another advisor at least twice a semester. Purdue, Toledo, Lehigh, and Johnson County Community College (Kansas) all have faculty, not just students, evaluate their centers. The Universities of Washington, Toledo-Scott Park Campus, and Utah State advance good arguments for offering tutoring on a drop-in as opposed to a scheduled basis. Joan Mullin at the University of Toledo-Bancroft Campus had great success inviting the president of her university to participate in a staff meeting at the center. Harvard publicizes its center by reminding students that “Every writer needs a reader.” And the rhetoric associates program at Utah State University (modeled on the one at Brown University) and the tutoring via e-mail already offered there and planned at Colorado State make it clear that writing centers are concepts and methods that are not necessarily limited to a particular place on campus.

But there is more to this book than such details. Many of the authors weave details into larger stories about themes central to our field. Quite a few, for instance, tell the archetypal tale of a writing center’s evolution from drills and skills to a conversational, collaborative, process model. Some tell stories that underscore the editors’ claim that no one can understand any writing center without knowing its history and the institutional forces that shaped it. For example, because some of centers are part of English Department writing programs, they strive to match their philosophies to those of the larger writing programs, share staff with them, and serve almost exclusively students from writing courses. Others, independent of writing programs, work to build bridges to them, while still others respectfully maintain their distance. Quite a few of the authors tell stories of persistence. Brenda M. Greene’s description of the writing center at Medgar Evers College (part of CUNY) reveals the difficulties of a program that has redefined itself several times and that “currently is involved in a struggle to maintain its existence in the midst of an economic crisis” (43) on its campus. Other authors tell stories of compromises. Some, for example, are refreshingly candid about how ambivalent their faculty and students are toward writing instruction, and as Ed Lotto explains, how in such a context writing centers must recognize and adapt to the disciplinary and vocational realities on their campuses without sacrificing a vision of a broader sense of what writing and writing instruction can mean (79-80). Finally, one of the most persistent stories running

through this volume demonstrates the transforming power of, in Julie Neff's words, building "strategic alliances" (134) across an institution, of integrating a writing center more fully into a college, and of making it a respected academic program.

In her chapter about the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) writing center at the University of Washington, Gail Okawa transforms the genre of program history and description into a passionate and ideological rationale for a writing center. Filled with evocative details about particular students and with voices from tutor journals, this chapter articulates a vision of a writing center that can give authority over writing to students of color and nontraditional students, a place where they

can feel comfortable discussing their experiences with language as well as their thinking on any subject with people who might share their complex experience in the academy. Such a center would have the potential to cultivate a safe and enriching environment for multiple views of reality so that students could feel free to take risks. It could encourage student writers to find voices that would serve them in their private and public worlds. And it would have the potential to provide revised perspectives about where authority *should* lie in writing so that students assume true authorship of their work. (170)

Okawa is not describing merely a vision; the details provided here about the Washington EOP center convince me that it has achieved many of these goals.

There are ways in which *In Context* could have been even stronger. I wish that more of the authors had revealed and addressed the problems that their writing centers face. Several authors do talk about the challenges presented by growing numbers of ESL students who are anxious to write the error-free English their course instructors want; about students' disappointment when work with a tutor does not lead to improved grades; about the difficulty of assessing the effectiveness of writing center instruction; about the fear of budget cuts, or the continuing demand to do more with less. But every writing center I know, no matter how successful and how well established, faces more problems and faces them more frequently than is suggested in these portraits. Although I realize that in a book of this sort authors hardly want to dwell on negatives or to complain about their institutional contexts, I still wish that there had been a fuller airing of some of the problems we all face: attrition in optional programs, the inadequacy of our instruction for some students, demand overwhelming supply, new responsibilities overwhelming a center or a director. And given its importance, I am disappointed

that the authors did not discuss the problem of inadequate funding and offer creative ideas for expanding writing center budgets.

Much is said in this book about the services that writing centers provide, but little is said about how our choice of services limits access to our programs. All writing centers, knowingly or not, make choices about which services they will offer and which students they will serve. We all limit the students we help by our locations, hours, appointment system, tutor selection and training, and publicity—and these choices are not all predetermined by context. These choices and their implications deserve at least some discussion.

Although the book's emphasis on local context is a strength, it seems to have led to a shortcoming. Too many of the chapters, though by no means all, fail to acknowledge that their structure, staffing, and programs were influenced by writing centers at other schools; they thus ignore a broader national context of writing centers and the inheritance they have received from other writing centers and from the literature on writing center design and management. The effect of this omission is to make us seem ahistorical and somewhat unscholarly, as if each writing center were *sui generis*.

Finally, I should compliment the authors for avoiding one of the risks attendant to self-portraits: that is, succumbing to narcissism or boosterism. Only the briefest slips of this sort appear—one about the socio-economic status of a college's community and another description of a center so unmitigatedly positive that it sounds too good to be true. But overwhelmingly the authors are appropriately modest about their programs and their accomplishments. In fact, these writing center directors may actually be too modest to explore how much they and their predecessors contributed to or determined the success of their programs. Admittedly it would be difficult for the authors of these case studies to examine their own influence, but certainly a director's strong leadership and stability can play a vital role in a program's success. And this leadership is a significant aspect of the local context that the book neglects. Perhaps these authors should not say this themselves, but I hope that the book's readers understand this important human element in a writing center's historical context.

### *The Dynamics of the Writing Conference: Social and Cognitive Interaction*

This slender volume (119 pages of text) obviously differs from *In Context* in many ways, primarily in its focus on conference pedagogy, its emphasis on theory, and its desire to address classroom teachers as well as those in writing centers. *Dynamics of the Writing Conference* will be of interest, for different reasons, to two very different groups of readers. Practically oriented teachers will find much to like in the ten individual essays that make up the volume, essays that in earlier versions appeared in the proceedings of the East Central Writing Centers Association from 1983-1989. The essays contain good,

practical advice about communicating effectively with students and guiding their growth as writers. The essays offer specific advice, for example, about using counseling techniques to build empathy and trust with students. They offer conferencing strategies for helping particular groups of students: returning adult students, students with learning disabilities, and speakers of an African-American dialect. They also address familiar teaching challenges: helping students, for example, learn to write about multiple and conflicting sources and helping students come up with something substantial to say about a work of literature.

More theoretically oriented readers will be attracted to the editors' introductions to different sections of the book and to some of the individual essays. From the very beginning, the editors, Thomas Flynn and Mary King, set an ambitious theoretical agenda: "The purpose of this collection . . . is to show how the social and cognitive interaction between students and teachers in writing conferences can promote the engagement of the higher-order thinking skills that students need to fulfill college writing requirements" (vii). The editors observe that research and theory have emphasized the social dimension of writing conferences while neglecting the cognitive—and have never sufficiently considered the two together. To fill this gap and especially to emphasize the cognitive side of conferences, the editors examine collaboration based not on peer relationships but on the interaction between novice and expert; in their view students in conferences are novices seeking advice from teachers who are experts.

*Dynamics of the Writing Conference* is divided into four sections. The first, written by Flynn, introduces the book's theoretical issues. The other three sections follow the "primary features of instruction in higher-order thinking skills as they apply to a writing conference" (viii): the social, the cognitive, and then the independence that student-writers are supposed to achieve. In his introduction, Flynn synthesizes literature from composition theory, cognitive science, and educational psychology for three purposes: to describe the characteristics of higher-order thinking skills that he argues conferences help develop, to define the sociocognitive characteristics of conferences, and to suggest how novices and experts can work together effectively in a writing conference. Conferences are ideal for teaching higher-order thinking because, according to Flynn's summary of Lauren Resnick's work, not only does a social setting motivate students, it "provides occasions for modeling effective thinking strategies," "allows others to critique and shape one's performance," and "provides scaffolding for a novice's initially limited performance" (9).

It is stimulating to see conferences considered in the light of this theory. And viewing conferences from a sociocognitive perspective does help validate Flynn's argument that writing conferences are effective pedagogically. As I read this chapter, however, I was concerned that it does not do justice to the



## Institutional and Intimate Contexts: A Review of Recent Writing Center Scholarship 179

complexity of the issues it raises. It seems to take on too many topics for its length, and the author consequently sometimes lets lists of characteristics substitute for more sustained explanations that I, at least, need to understand these issues fully. I was also concerned that the editors blur the distinction between social constructionism and social interactionism (Nystrand). And on a different note, I was occasionally bothered here and elsewhere in the book by the way classroom writing instructors are portrayed. They are described as not using conferences and not bringing their instruction close to students. This simply does not square with my knowledge of most classroom writing instructors. In fact, I agree with Thom Hawkins who said recently that “in many schools around the country the classroom and the writing center are beginning to look more alike than different” (5).

The social section of the book recommends strategies teachers can employ to build collaborative relationships with students, and it offers much good advice. King is right when she asserts that teachers need help learning to manage their roles in conversations with students: “By the nature of our enterprise, we who teach are likely to concentrate our efforts on the information-processing function of language, and we often neglect the social aspect, which constructs and maintains relations among people” (21). To help us attend to social matters, David Taylor recommends counseling techniques—especially ones for listening and checking understanding—that teachers can use in conferences to establish trust and empathy, to share responsibility with the student, and “to adapt the pace of instruction to the student’s ability to absorb it” (24). In the next chapter, JoAnn Johnson criticizes one of the most sacred conference techniques—asking students questions. Based on her research as well as that of others, Johnson argues that for students to learn, questions need to come from them, not from their teachers. When questions originate from the teacher, they only reinforce the teacher’s power and express the teacher’s perception of the student’s need rather than indicating any felt need from the student, a need that is a prerequisite for learning. I like the challenge that Johnson poses to received wisdom, but I wish that she had explained more fully both when questions might be useful and how the imperatives she recommends as an alternative to questions (for example, “*explain* the assignment made by the teacher” [39]) instill in students a questioning attitude. In the next essay, David Fletcher analyzes the beginning of a conference between a tutor and a student. As if to prove Johnson’s argument, this conference goes awry because in his relentless questioning the tutor ignores what the student is saying and thus denies the student authority over her writing. Although the problems in this conference seem a bit obvious—and to be fair we should acknowledge that some of the irrelevant questions are probably a legacy of training—this is a good cautionary tale, and Fletcher’s close reading of it reveals important points about the negotiation of authority within conferences.

The third section shifts the focus to what the social dimension of the writing conference is supposed to make possible—the cognitive development of student writers. The essays in this section illustrate how student writers struggle with new writing, and how they often play it safe by clinging to previously successful, though limited, approaches to writing. The essays go on to illustrate how teachers can share with and inculcate in students expert writing strategies, strategies that will promote students' cognitive growth. Using one brief example, Thomas Schmitzer suggests that teachers should be on the lookout for seemingly obtrusive points in students' drafts, points which deserve to be discussed during conferences because they may offer clues to students' more complex thoughts. Based on her research, Marcia Hurlow identifies problems in the syntactical patterns of the writing done by her returning adult students and relates those problems to students' insecurities as writers. She then suggests how teachers, through conversations with individual students, especially about their lives and work experiences, can create a supportive environment that leads returning students to growth in syntactical fluency and clarity. Mary King's contribution to this section urges instructors to teach their students expert strategies, specifically reader-response techniques, for reading and responding aesthetically to literature. She argues that these strategies help engage students in a text and lead them to develop more substantial analyses. In a nicely illustrated and persuasive essay, Patrick Slattery recommends conferencing strategies that help students with a familiar problem—"analyzing divergent viewpoints" and "staking out and justifying their own positions" (80)—when writing papers based on multiple sources. Grounded in William Perry's intellectual development theory, Slattery's conferencing strategies are designed to help advance students' writing toward relativistic thinking.

Moving writers toward independence is ostensibly the subject of the book's final section. In a provocative analysis of the problems associated with labeling some students "learning-disabled," Cornelius Cosgrove argues that "conferencing and process-oriented writing instruction offer what writers need, regardless of evaluative distinctions" (101). Susanna Horn makes much the same point about helping speakers of an African-American dialect. She demonstrates that "waiting until the editing stage before commenting on dialect concerns is imperative; once the student is sure about content, many dialect-associated errors are spontaneously eliminated from subsequent drafts" (103). Although both of these essays are good ones, why they are placed in this particular section of the book escapes me; they do not seem to be any more about independence than do others in the collection.

The final chapter, though, clearly illustrates the movement toward the "self-regulation" or the "working outside of another's control or influence" (93) that King says is essential for higher-order thinking. In a compelling

narrative, Paula Oye describes the “Cinderella-like growth” (112) of a writer during her first year of college, growth in confidence and in writing ability. This story illustrates the teacher’s growth as well: over time, the teacher deliberately avoids being directive and becomes “tougher with [the student], pressing her to find support for her ideas and forcing her to clarify her thoughts” (117). This is the kind of story everyone who has taught in a writing center for a while has been privileged to witness, and it serves as an ideal culmination to the book because it illustrates a teacher managing both the social and the cognitive aspects of the conference well.

As I hope my summaries have made clear, some of the book’s chapters offer new ways to think about conference pedagogy, and even some of the essays that cover familiar ground include reports of research and particular examples that make them rewarding reading. Furthermore, the book as a whole does a good job of emphasizing and illuminating the cognitive dimensions of a writing conference between an expert and a novice writer. And it offers compelling arguments—both theoretical and experiential—that conferences can lead students to higher-order thinking.

I wish I could say, however, that the editors succeed in achieving their laudable goals of trying to unify this collection theoretically and of demonstrating all of their claims. Put simply, the problem is that some of the most challenging and important ideas in the book are underdeveloped. Sometimes the treatment of complex literature is too brief; sometimes theory about higher-order thinking and expert-novice relationships is not related specifically enough to the development of writing abilities; sometimes individual essays do not directly address the editors’ theoretical points; and sometimes both the individual essays and the editors’ introductions neglect recent writing center scholarship. Many of these problems are, I think, a direct consequence of the book’s genesis. Limiting the source of the essays as the editors did and imposing a theoretical structure on them after they had been written (even though they were revised for this book) made it very difficult to unify the collection and to provide balanced and comprehensive treatments of the book’s various subtopics. These criticisms, however, are not meant to take away from the book’s many accomplishments. They only prove what the editors themselves wisely acknowledge in the preface—“the impossibility . . . that one book can hold everything” (viii).

What, finally, do these two books suggest about current writing center scholarship? They say first of all that our field is now large enough that discussions of theory and administration no longer fit in a single book as they did ten years ago (Olson). Both books, despite their differences, also suggest that there is a continuing demand for practical information and advice. And, most important, both also reflect the ambitious aspirations of our field—to see what we do in more complex and richer ways. *Writing Centers in Context* defines the range of our practice and establishes our collective history, but

while doing these things it insists upon the complexity of and variation in what we do. *Dynamics of the Writing Conference* deepens our understanding of conference teaching by seeing it from the perspective of social and cognitive research and theory—a literature that is central to the broader field of composition studies. And this book not only uses that literature but contributes to it as well. There is no doubt that both of these books, in their very different ways, push us toward that more complex and deeper view of what writing centers do.

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