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## Review of *Writing Center Perspectives*

*Elizabeth H. Boquet*

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**Byron Stay, Christina Murphy, and Eric H. Hobson. *Writing Center Perspectives*. Emmitsburg, MD: NWCA Press, 1995.**

Dave Healy introduces his essay in this collection by considering the reasons why metaphors abound in writing center work: “Metaphor making proliferates in conditions of indeterminacy. . . . Writing centers, because of their historically indeterminate status in the academy, have prompted a good deal of metaphor making” (12). Later in the book, Donna Fontanarose Rabuck grounds her essay on voice in the tutorial session in a metaphorical reading of the role of the tutor as midwife.

We, the audience for publication on writing center theory and practice, behave much like the expectant parents in this scenario, anxiously awaiting the most recent work and enthusiastically greeting it upon its arrival. All with good reason: we know how difficult it is for writing center work to gain recognition in the academy; how much energy, therefore, it takes to eke out the time to research, write, and publish on writing centers; and what a struggle it is to then convince publishers of the market for our work. So, like those proud parents, we want to think that the final product is perfect.

The expectations surrounding this publication are heightened by the story of its birth. *Writing Center Perspectives* is the first publication by the newly-created NWCA Press, a press formed in response to many of the concerns outlined above. The press is designed to create an avenue for publishing writing center scholarship in order to disseminate writing center knowledge and to advance writing center professionalism. Most of us can

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agree on the need for such action and can applaud the effort.

With that said, I now turn to my review of the book and feel that I must admit that the work is . . . well . . . uneven. As a record of the conference proceedings, it is valuable. That the first collection published by NWCA Press be a compilation of the conference papers seems appropriate. Having been unable to attend the first NWCA conference in New Orleans, I, for one, was anxious to read the transcripts. And these articles represent well the diversity of writing center work—from theoretical pieces to practical ones, from considerations of peer tutors to discussions of professional consultants, from hands-on work with writers to hands-on work with administration. That is exciting.

Healy's article, "In the Temple of the Familiar: The Writing Center as Church," proves to be the perfect lead article for the collection, providing a nice fit between the known (that writing center work is situational, contextual, and pluralistic) and the unknown (that current writing center theory and practice can be illuminated by contemporary theology). Healy's work gives us a basis against which to read the multitude of voices that we encounter in the rest of the collection.

Nearly every article draws, as we would expect, on students and tutors for some of the text, but it is heartening to see the number of articles *focusing* on writing center research in this collection. Carmen Werder and Roberta Buck's article "Assessing Writing Conference Talk: An Ethnographic Method" addresses a perpetually vexing problem in writing centers and offers a model both less intrusive yet still rich in its potential for accurately capturing session dynamics. Jean Kiedaisch and Sue Dinitz tie writing center work and writing across the curriculum together by investigating a very local scenario, the ways their writing center has responded to an instructor's request for group sessions, and by suggesting larger implications for considering the role of the tutor in a group setting as not merely an "expert in writing" but a facilitator of critical thinking. Viewing the tutor in this manner represents a paradigmatic shift in the structure of institutional authority as it is played out in the writing center.

Learning to negotiate institutional authority is another theme that is represented well in this work, and the articles dealing with administrative issues are quite helpful. Jeanne Simpson points out that "the professional preparation of writing center personnel is very effective at covering the theoretical and the pedagogical and virtually silent on the managerial and budgetary" (52). I would certainly agree that this is a gap in the professional literature. Yet, in this book, the reader discovers three useful articles on administrative issues, the most intriguing of which is Joe Law's "Accreditation and the Writing Center: A Proposal for Action." Though this idea has been tossed around for a while, as Law acknowledges, I have not seen it laid out as well as he does in this essay.

Many of the pieces, however, still read as though they were conference presentations, not pieces that have been carefully crafted in anticipation of publication. Few go into great depth on their topics, often concluding just as they are getting into the thick of the issues. Several articles gloss over potentially exciting ideas in pursuit of, in my opinion, a less interesting point. For example, Rabuck's article goes on for six pages covering well-trodden ground. The last two pages of her article, however, raise two intriguing topics: the first an "accountability study [conducted] to measure objectively the quality of [their writing center's] services" (118); the next, an allusion in the concluding paragraph to the two different (competing?) writing centers on the University of Arizona campus (119). These two things I found myself wanting to hear more about.

I do not intend to single out Rabuck's article for particular criticism. Rather, I use it to illustrate the point that much of this work represents a shell of what it could, indeed what it should, be. As an audience member, I would expect presenters to skim the surface of their topics, raising more questions than they answer, given the impermanence of the setting. As a reader, however, I want to see prior work referenced and extended; and I want to see these issues problematized and theorized.

In the end, I suppose a book review should leave the reader with an answer to the question, Should I buy/read/know this book? My response to that is, unequivocally, yes. Though Terrance Riley may question the value of professionalism in writing centers (see the Fall 1994 issue of *The Writing Center Journal* for Riley's comments), the general trend is toward *increasing* professionalism. None of the contributors to this collection question that value; few who support the conference which spawned this work question that assumption; and certainly those members of the profession who spearheaded the efforts to establish this press seem not to oppose the notion.

In the conclusion of his essay, Law writes: "[P]rofessionals regulate themselves, setting and enforcing standards appropriate to the task at hand. If we are professionals—as we claim—then we must assume those responsibilities" (161). As professionals, then, we have the responsibility to be conversant with the work of others in our field—*all* the work, given a field the size of ours—and to take that work in fresh and important directions. If our goal in creating and sustaining the NWCA Press is to provide a forum through which we can demonstrate the exacting scholarship occurring in our university writing centers, then we have a tremendous imperative to be rigorous in our intellectual pursuit of this goal.

I dare say, we will find that we do indeed have the most beautiful baby after all.

**Elizabeth Boquet** is the director of the Writing Center at Fairfield University in Fairfield, CT. Her work has appeared in *The Writing Lab Newsletter*, *Composition Studies*, and *Landmark Essays in Writing Centers*. Forthcoming essays include publications in Woolbright and Briggs' *Stories from the Center* and Tassoni and Tayko's *Sharing Pedagogies: Teachers and Students Examine English Curricula*. She currently serves on the NWCA Executive Board.