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## Review: Writing Centers

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## Reviews

**Murphy, Christina, Joe Law, and Steve Sherwood. *Writing Centers: An Annotated Bibliography. Bibliographies and Indexes in Education, Number 17.* Westport, CN: Greenwood, 1996. 304 pages, \$69.50. (ISBN: 0-313-29831-9)**

### *Reviewed by Eric H. Hobson*

Working my way through *Writing Centers: An Annotated Bibliography* has reminded me of family reunions. On the surface, family reunions, like annotated bibliographies, are not something about which I tend to get all that excited. The writing center community is part of my extended family, and as often happens at family reunions, similar stories and requests for action recur regularly. With the publication of *Writing Centers: An Annotated Bibliography*, compiled by Christina Murphy, Joe Law, and Steve Sherwood, one of the community's common and longstanding stories/requests has been realized.

Until now, the community has not had a single source to go to for a thoroughly reviewed and annotated digest of writing center literature. As a result, those of us who have tried to break into the field, or began to think about trying a different approach to tutoring, or decided to take a stab at understanding more about a particular theoretical angle on what we do in the writing center, or tried to gain a global perspective on where the community's conversation has been in order to chart where it might go, ended up reinventing the wheel. In essence, we have had to strike off alone into the unknown when we know good and well that others must have been this way before. And this lack has been the topic of many conversations in conference rooms, bars, and restaurants across the country. I even distinctly remember thinking to myself in 1988, or thereabout, that I should create such a resource since I was in the midst of a dissertation that necessitated (or, at least it seemed that way at the time) I read everything ever written about writing centers. Even as I entertained the idea, I knew I had neither the inclination nor the stamina required to complete such a monumental task. Luckily for writing center scholars (and for me), Murphy, Law, and Sherwood completed the task for us.

My first test for any reference tool like *Writing Centers: An Annotated Bibliography* is to see if it works in its intended role. I didn't move through the book linearly. Instead, I worked my way through it in the same way I make my first pass through and around the assembled mass at a family reunion—I circled the perimeter, moving into the crowd here and there to stop by familiar looking groups and individuals to say “hi” and to

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get my bearings. And what I found was reassuring: as a research tool, the bibliography works extremely well.

As recorded in this bibliography, my writing center family has a much older and more diverse heritage than I often remember. The community and its literature are also much larger than I usually think, encompassing a far-flung network of related topics and practices in a wide array of settings. This range, encompassed by the writing center scholarship compiled by Murphy, Law, and Sherwood, is reflected by the manner in which they organized the resulting material. To make the tasks of sorting and of accessing the available material manageable, regardless of the user's level of familiarity with the writing center community and the issues surrounding it, the compilers use thirteen logical categories: Anthologies, History, Program Descriptions, Professional Concerns, Writing Center Theory, Administration, Writing Across the Curriculum, Educational Technology, Tutoring Theory, Tutor Training, Tutoring, Ethics, Research. Acknowledging the need to access the bibliography's contents from more than one direction, the editors sagely included two indexes: Author and Subject.

One gripe I often have with works of this type is that the indexes are not comprehensive enough to be of much use to anyone but those already most familiar with the subject. Thankfully, the subject index in *Writing Centers: An Annotated Bibliography* is not only thorough, it is at times stunning in its level of detail: this index encourages one to stumble into connections that one has not seen between familiar articles and books because it allows each entry to fall into many categories. "See also" notations provide compelling multidirectional links, something reference works do not always provide. This produces an index system that warrants celebration—and I am not being hyperbolic in making this point, because I have wrangled with clumsy, inaccurate, and flat-out useless indexes in more instances than I like to remember.

The annotations themselves provide the reader carefully crafted digests of the books and articles compiled. They are brief (usually one to two sentences), and this brevity may cause some readers to think the annotations a bit thin on average or to argue that some pivotal texts are undersummarized. However, the compilers faced a no-win situation: if they waxed eloquent or extensively about the many articles presented that deserve praise, the resulting book would be much longer and more expensive than it is. Additionally, the result would be a book lacking balance and, quite possibly, the objectivity demanded in a reference tool of this type. All things considered, I find the annotations do an admirable job distilling hundreds of diverse entries to summary statements that are both logical and accurate.

The sheer number of entries in this bibliography gets my attention

each time I use it, and use it I have since it arrived in my mailbox. The 1447 entries—ranging from 0001 Farrell, Pamela B., ed., *The High School Writing Center*, to 1447 Zelenak, Bonnie, Irv Cockriel, Eric Crump, and Elaine Hocks, “Ideas in Practice: Preparing Composition Teachers in the Writing Center”—are a testament to the valuable work that members of the writing center community have been engaged in for nearly one hundred years, long before this community coined or officially appropriated the label “writing center.” This record charts the territories we have explored and provides a detailed topography of the homesteads to which we have staked a claim and subsequently worked. It also points out, however, a number of topics and issues whose absence in the writing center literature reveals rich areas for future scholarly activity. For example, the topic of formative assessment—and of other forms of assessment, too, for that matter—is not present as a discrete topic of conversation.

However, given the writing center community’s longstanding adherence to a process-based educational philosophy that intends to make better writers, the vast majority of the instructional/tutorial activity that takes place in the writing center conference falls under the rubric of formative assessment. Given current interest in alternative forms of assessment fueled in part by constructivist theory, this is a topic and a lineage that the writing center community would do well to explore in detail and to broadcast to all available audiences. A thorough exploration of *Writing Centers: An Annotated Bibliography* would undoubtedly provide the intrepid with many other research agendas, just the type, for instance, around which to construct writing center based thesis and dissertation projects.

The only negative comments I have heard through the grapevine about this book are directed at its price tag. Admittedly, \$69.50 is much more than members of the writing center community typically shell out for writing center books. However, this book is a landmark project. Our colleagues’ efforts in undertaking the Herculean task to bring this project to completion deserves our thanks and our tangible support.

Given the relatively small market that Greenwood Press can hope to attract with this book, they will have to sell a respectable number of copies just to recoup their investment. And, since so few publishers—academic and/or commercial—are willing to take a risk on this community, Greenwood Press deserves our thanks in terms of sales.

Its presence in a school’s library or writing center, not to mention on a writing center director’s bookshelf, will save novice and experienced scholars much time and frustration as they begin or continue to research and publish in this field. Put simply, readers of this review should feel compelled to make sure that at least one copy of *Writing Centers: An*

*Annotated Bibliography* has a home on their campus.

My copy of *Writing Centers: An Annotated Bibliography* already shows wear from repeated thumbing through and frequent trips to the copying machine. While I am the first to admit that its contents are not the stuff bestsellers are made of, this book has made a prominent spot for itself in my office, just within reach to provide me, my students, and my colleagues with a starting point or an additional reference for our writing center related work. In addition to such a pragmatic, workaday reason for valuing this book, like the family members that one sees only at reunions, *Writing Centers: An Annotated Bibliography* provides the writing center community something invaluable, a sense of place in the lineage of a lasting and important educational project.

**Eric H. Hobson** teaches writing at Eastern Illinois University. Currently NWCA First Vice President, he writes about writing centers, writing across the curriculum, and writing in professional settings.