

1-1-1999

## Review: Weaving Knowledge Together

Christina Murphy

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/wcj>

---

### Recommended Citation

Murphy, Christina (1999) "Review: Weaving Knowledge Together," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 19 : Iss. 2, Article 7.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1418>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries.  
Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

## Reviews

**Carol Peterson Haviland, Maria Notarangelo, Lene Whitley-Putz, and Thia Wolf, eds. *Weaving Knowledge Together: Writing Centers and Collaboration*. Emmitsburg, MD: NWCA Press, 1998.**

*Reviewed by Christina Murphy*

There is much to praise and much to be disappointed with in *Weaving Knowledge Together: Writing Centers and Collaboration*, the latest book from NWCA Press. *Weaving Knowledge Together* is a collection of essays on a range of topics from assessment through agency. Ostensibly, the theme that binds the collection together is that “all of the chapters implicitly demonstrate how our image of collaborative interaction shapes our interpretations of what we do in a writing center” (234). If that is the case, the demonstration of that central point is more implicit than explicit. The “image of collaborative interaction” the book presents emphasizes the ways in which these essays were written. The implications of collaboration as a pedagogical, theoretical, or institutional model are only a secondary emphasis. That said, the best aspects of this collection are its method and rhetorical style; the weakest aspect is the editors’ inability to provide an in-depth analysis of the chapters or to anchor the chapters in a strong theoretical base. Therefore, the lack of depth and newness in the book’s investigative focus makes it of questionable value as a resource or reference tool.

The most noteworthy and commendable dimension of *Weaving Knowledge Together* is that it does exemplify the types of collaboration that are the core principles of writing center transactions. *Weaving Knowledge Together* is a collaboration, in fact and in principle, among all the many participants in writing center experiences—from writing center directors, to graduate students, to peer tutors, to writing center tutees. All their voices are heard, and all of their ideas and talents have gone into creating the essays in this collection. As the editors state in the “Introduction”: “Overwhelmingly, in a drive to publish or perish, academicians write over, erase, or omit student voices. In the rare instances where student voices do emerge—in excerpts from student papers or transcripts from conversations—they act largely as foils for academicians to display their expertise at theorizing students” (8). Clearly, this is a major truth about academic writing, and the editors validate collaboration’s central strength by bringing together voices and ideas in a new context of participation. I was struck by the simple truth and the simple power of their

statement about the majority of academic texts: “Thus, although the texts celebrated the coming together of differently situated voices, they limited some of those voices by speaking for them rather than by inviting them to speak for themselves” (8). I think *Weaving Knowledge Together* is exceptional in its ability to invite students into the texts as participants, composers, co-authors, and collaborators. Each chapter in *Weaving Knowledge Together* was written by a “writer-group” of “at least three authors—a faculty member and/or writing center director, a writing tutor, and a student user of a writing center” (8). Each writer-group was to keep a journal of its collaborative writing venture. This approach to an actual collaboration among the many participants in a writing center transaction is an innovative approach to demonstrating the methods of collaboration that writing center practitioners believe in but often do not apply in such an inclusive manner. The vitality that results is invigorating, and it creates a tenor for this book that few academic books possess.

That is the “good” news about *Weaving Knowledge Together*. The method it demonstrates is engaging, and the style in which the essays are written is clear and often lyrical. The style of this book is definitely not “academese,” and that is a major contribution in itself. This is a book that is a “good read” in the fullest sense of an honest and direct purpose that brings the reader into its context of ideas and experiences.

The “bad” news about this book is that, for all the strengths of its style and method, it really is not a very useful book, nor does it have many new ideas to offer. For those entirely new to the writing center field, the book may have some experiential value as a collection of case histories of successful and unsuccessful writing center practices. For those more familiar with writing center theory and pedagogy, *Weaving Knowledge Together* seems like a re-run of ideas, images, and issues we have dealt with before. In fact, the outline of the book presented in the “Introduction” confirms this sense of déjà vu. Chapters one and two “explore place—writing centers’ locations, arrangements, aesthetics, and relationships to their institutions—arguing that these places are integral parts of writing centers’ identities and functions” (10-11). Those familiar with writing center scholarship might ask, “Haven’t we heard this before?” And the answer would be a strong “yes” because location, place, and institutional relationships as aspects of a writing center’s identity have been explored in detail in numerous essays—especially over the last decade or so. Similarly, chapters three and four “also discuss physical places” and focus on the roles of assessment and technology as writing centers develop new programs and new spaces. Chapters five and six explore “the ways that collaborations and interactions with students create cultures within writing centers” (11), and “chapters seven, eight, and nine continue to examine these roles, problematizing writing center work by placing it within larger cultural frameworks” (11). Chapter seven, in fact, examines the tensions

and possible collaborations available to writing centers and writing across the curriculum programs.

Unfortunately, very little new will be found here—most of the ideas explored represent very familiar territory to most writing center practitioners and scholars. This is the disappointing news about *Weaving Knowledge Together*—the method and energy of the book are exceptional, but the actual content is often pedestrian and repetitive. The musicians assembled to create and play the symphony of this book are most talented, but the symphony itself is quite mundane and disappointing. Since the chapters themselves often have a great vitality and energy, it may be that the editors have failed to provide an appropriate conceptual framework for a broader understanding of the ideas in this collection. If I understand the “Introduction” correctly, the writer-groups for each chapter were detailing an experiential and narrative sense of their writing center odysseys. If the authors were not encouraged to provide a theoretical frame for their experiences, then this task should have fallen to the editors, who definitely should have incorporated into this book a knowledge of the research from which the writer-groups were creating premises and arguing for conclusions and insights.

The editors of the book begin the “Introduction” with a quotation from an article in *College English* by Elizabeth Rankin on two modes of epistemology—one “grounded in the experience of student writers and teachers” and the other grounded in “academics” (7). I want to be as fair as possible in evaluating *Weaving Knowledge Together* within both modes of epistemology. I would reformulate Rankin’s terms into the familiar ones of “scholarship” and of “practitioners’ lore.” If one looks to *Weaving Knowledge Together* for the epistemology of scholarship, the result is disappointing. This book will add little new knowledge to the field. If one is interested in narrative histories of particular writing centers—their struggles for context, identity, institutional validation, and the like—this book may prove an interesting guidebook. In this vein, it reminds me of *Writing Centers in Context: Twelve Case Studies*, edited by Joyce Kinkead and Jeanette Harris and published by NCTE in 1993. That book was a collection of narratives on twelve writing centers—from start-up to full-fledged academic status and identity. In many ways, *Writing Centers in Context* might have worked even better had it been a collection of videotapes that could give a sense of the true “essence” or “feel” of each of the writing centers. While *Writing Centers in Context* proves an interesting read the first time through and is valuable as a narrative history of the development of twelve noteworthy writing centers, it is not the type of book one would re-read or return to for important insights. I suspect *Weaving Knowledge Together* may meet the same fate. It is primarily a collection of “biographies” of particular writing centers. With such “biographies” the question always remains of how valuable specific

stories, issues, and accomplishments can be to other institutional contexts. After all, the writing center field celebrates with great enthusiasm the fact that each writing center is virtually unique in the institutional issues and communities it serves, yet we continue to produce books that offer specific case studies as if they were readily transferable or replicable in other contexts. I would also add that writing center contexts are so malleable that many of the circumstances described in these “biographies” or in the case studies in *Writing Centers in Context* have probably changed substantially—if not dramatically—since the publication dates of either book.

The implications of what that may provide us in terms of significant and applicable knowledge surely are subject to interpretation. So let me consider several perspectives on this issue. The first is that writing center “biographies” are always valuable to newcomers to the writing center field who will draw from these stories valid insights for the design, set-up, and administration of their own centers. The second is that “biographies” offer us a type of “group therapy” approach to our work—offering us ways to express our joys and sorrows and to vent our frustrations. The third is that “biographies” offer us a compendium of Aesop’s Fables—moral lessons in pitfalls to avoid and exemplary accomplishments to emulate. The fourth is that each “biography” offers us a picture of the shape, context, and purpose of a writing center, and this picture can be valuable as we set up new writing centers or attempt to reconfigure the writing centers we have.

It would be foolish to argue against the merit of any of these four perspectives, especially since each writing center person has a different set of circumstances to deal with and will draw from these “biographies” the insights he or she needs. Undoubtedly, what may be an insight to one person is old hat to another. This is an unavoidable consequence and a possible strong benefit of a case-study approach. However, I would argue for the concentric circles approach in order for writing center scholarship to offer as much as possible to all members of the discipline. If the core of our work is in narratives, case studies or “biographies,” there certainly can be no harm—and definitely can be much benefit—to complementing that core with a sound theoretical and scholarly framework. That is what is missing in *Weaving Knowledge Together*, and that is what limits the usefulness and broad application of this collection.

I especially regret the lack of this conceptual framework because many of the stories in *Weaving Knowledge Together* are dramatic and moving. They tell of difficult struggles to establish and maintain writing centers within institutional settings that are not always conducive or supportive to the work at hand. One of the most moving stories is “Erika and the Fish Lamps: Writing and Reading the Local Scene” by Colleen Connolly, Amy DeJarlais, Alice Gillam, and Laura Micciche, all of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. The premise of the essay is that the

authors wanted to know “what a reading of our physical place might tell us about who we were or who we thought we were” (15). What they discover, via fish lamps and bold posters set up in the writing center by peer tutors, is that their writing center first conceptualizes itself as a “borderland”—a place that stands in opposition and in contrast to the conformity and ordinariness of the rest of the academic enterprise. What they later realize is a fairly fundamental disillusioning most people experience in life when we find out the tail is not wagging the dog. Their writing center exists via an institutional mandate and budget; when that mandate changes, the writing center changes also. Whatever may be the writing center’s sense of its mission, that mission will be modified, redesigned, perhaps even nullified by institutional mandates and needs. While the authors may wish to view the writing center as “the natural location for subversive, counterhegemonic literacy work” and while they may abhor having to trade in the fish lamps for a relatively sterile location and appearance in a typical academic building, this is the reality. While nostalgia for the past and grief over a changing present are valid personal responses, they do not change the realities of academic funding and program design—especially in a world and at a time when philosophical and financial support for education is declining.

The authors of the “Fish Lamps” essay state that “local narratives” like theirs “while not transferable in their conclusions, nevertheless raise questions and reveal patterns that may be instructive to others” (24). They also contend that they believe that “the value of such narrative is not in their generalizability but in their demonstration of the insights available through critical, self-reflective narrative inquiry” (25). Which brings us back again to the issue of the relevance of practitioners’ lore and the relationship of “biographies” of individual writing centers to the broader discipline itself. I would argue that these “local narratives” often tell us of naivete and mistaken or limited initial premises—and the grief, disappointment, and frustration that occur when the larger institutional and societal missions shatter the illusions of autonomy and independence. Definitely, this is a message we need to hear, but also it is a message we have heard with great frequency and insight over the last few decades. Really, the story the “Fish Lamps” authors tell us is a variation on Lou Kelly’s classic essay “One-on-One, Iowa City Style: Fifty Years of Individualized Instruction in Writing” that was published in *The Writing Center Journal* in 1980 and reprinted in *Landmark Essays on Writing Centers* (Hermagoras, 1995). Writing centers do change—and must adapt—in response to changes in institutional contexts. While this may be a disappointing fact of life for some, it is also a confirming fact of life for others. The success and commitment of the “Fish Lamps” writing center has prepared the way for a new writing center and staff to take their place amidst a high-tech location committed to serving the composition program. This is not so much a loss as a transition; the loss belongs to those

who would prefer a “borderland” writing center, but the loss may not be to the students who will use the new center, the composition program that will benefit, or the literacy education that will occur there in different ways from the original start-up idea of the “Fish Lamps” writing center. While I agree with the “Fish Lamps” authors’ belief in “the insights available through critical, self-reflective narrative inquiry” (25), I think the true inquiry needed here should be into the reasons why, in the writing center community, change is so often accompanied by a romantic, Thoreauvian resistance to having the writing center be “institutionalized.” This is an area of inquiry I wish the editors had explored—or at least had encouraged their authors to explore—as an important aspect of the present conflicts and polarities that are shaping writing center discourse and experience.

In the “Epilogue: One Reader Reading,” Joan Mullin writes: “When should an evolving writing center accommodate? Assimilate? Continue, as chapter one suggests, a familiar narrative? Push against the established narrative?” (237) I would extend Mullin’s question to the writing center community as a whole and ask when we will move beyond our “familiar narrative” of case studies and writing center biographies and move to some broader and more pressing issues for the writing center field than the compiling of “local narratives.” Unfortunately, to my mind, *Weaving Knowledge Together* is more of the “familiar narrative” rolled out one more time for review and consideration. This volume presents tried-and-true issues and stances but is remarkably short on new insights, remedies, approaches, or alternatives. I would urge the writing center community to examine its work with fuller insight, depth of analysis, and well-reasoned scholarship that draws upon multiple fields of inquiry and argument. Case studies and “local narratives” may seem inviting because they are familiar, but they cannot remain the dominant paradigm of our research and publications. After all, we can only run so long and so far on “local narratives” with limited transferability. We need new directions for our scholarship that will offer new insights and may actually help us *resolve*—rather than just *record*—the dilemmas and disappointments chronicled in *Weaving Knowledge Together*.

**Christina Murphy** is Professor and Chair of the English Department at the University of Memphis. She has served as the President of the National Writing Centers Association and has won the “Outstanding Scholarship” award from NWCA for an essay and for a book on writing centers. Her publications include *Landmark Essays on Writing Centers* (with Joe Law), *The St. Martin’s Sourcebook for Writing Tutors* (with Steve Sherwood), *Writing Centers: An Annotated Bibliography* (with Joe Law and Steve Sherwood), and *Writing Center Perspectives* (with Byron Stay and Eric Hobson).