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Review: The Writing Center Resource Manual

Peter Carino

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Reviews

Silk, Bobbie Bayliss, Ed. *The Writing Center Resource Manual*. Emmitsburg, MD: NWCA Press, 1998. (ISBN 0-9648067-2-X).

Reviewed by Peter Carino

In its early years the National Writing Centers Association would send new directors a “starter kit” upon request. The kit contained some forms, handouts, and basic advice to help get the doors open, but as writing centers expanded their missions and the NWCA Board took up concomitant matters, the “starter kit” fell into obsolescence and was not always readily available. The publication by NWCA Press of *The Writing Center Resource Manual*, edited by Bobbie Silk, eliminates the need for the “starter kit,” for in collecting twenty essays on the nuts and bolts of writing centers, in addition to useful appendices of materials, this volume will prove invaluable to the new director, as well as offering the veteran much to consider. Like any collection, this one suffers some unevenness, and some directors may find their pet topics slighted or missing (see below). However, despite any flaws, and there are very few, the *Resource Manual* is a publication to be celebrated.

Bobbie Silk is to be credited with her arrangement of the text into four easily usable sections following her brief introduction: “Starting a Writing Center,” “Managing a Writing Center,” “Special Needs and Opportunities,” and the appendices. Silk notes in her introduction that some of the articles overlap but were permitted to do so because “voices speaking out of individual experience give us multi-dimensional perspectives.” This choice stems from the *Manual’s* commitment to respecting “context,” one of the most recently discussed issues in center scholarship and on WCENTER. Silk notes that:

Without having been coached to do so, every contributor to this manual makes clear in his or her article that writing centers are individual and contextual. This is a persistent and important theme running through the manual, and it is a theme important to you as a reader who will use the information provided here in your own unique situation.

Although Silk’s claim obtains in some essays more than others, the *Manual* as a whole bears her out, with the contributors acknowledging

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issues, situations, and needs that might emerge in contexts different from as well as similar to their own.

In the opening section, “Managing a Writing Center,” Jeanne Simpson’s “Assessing Needs, Identifying an Institutional Home, and Developing a Proposal,” not only offers the would-be director sound and thorough advice on how to establish a center but also reviews various models: e.g., center in an English department versus center as part of a learning center, director as faculty versus director as administrator, and the like. Simpson’s instructions on linking the center to the university mission, aligning the center with administrative goals, and writing a clear funding proposal also cut across contexts.

Context is again specifically addressed in Brad Walkaways’s and Norma Collins’s article on establishing middle and elementary school centers and in Jeanette Jordan et al’s piece on high school centers. In both, the authors are enthusiastic yet frank and practical in warning of potential problems in these settings: space, location, staffing, funding. Gail Cummins gives a similar overview for examining one’s own context in a college or university. Clifton Gardener’s discussion of community college centers, though based largely on his own, contributes further to the overall breadth of the project. Concluding the opening section, Stuart Blythe’s essay on technology offers sound advice on assessing a center’s need for computers, implementing their use, cultivating relationships with campus technical support, and finding help via listserv discussion groups such as that of the Alliance for Computers and Writing and OWL-Shop—all in terms of considering the local technological climate.

Essays in the next section, “Managing a Writing Center,” treat a range of topics from the pedagogical (tutor training) to the practical (safety, funding, designing forms). Opening the section, Mark Shadle raises a taxonomy of questions for assessing context as a means of evaluating staffing. Readers of *The Writing Lab Newsletter* will recognize Eric Hobson’s practical advice on safety as an expansion of an earlier piece. Muriel Harris’s essay on forms and record-keeping (with several of the forms in the manual’s appendix) supplies new directors with everything they need to get started and experienced directors with ideas for improving existing systems. Harris also points out the need to assess the purpose and practicality of forms locally before adopting them. In “Tutor Training,” Paula Gillespie and Jon Olson open by setting forth their personal philosophies of training while recognizing that those of others may differ. They conclude with a commonsensical, though sometimes overlooked recommendation that, above all, tutors should be trained to be kind and compassionate. In between, they address key issues of training—directive versus non-directive methods, who holds the pen, and so on—while presenting a compendium of training methods. For new directors,

this essay will be one of the most valuable in the book; for veterans, an opportunity to reflect on their own training programs.

Completing this section, Katie Fisher and Penny Bird examine budgeting and assessment, respectively. Both of these essays are less sensitive to contextual variety than the other pieces in this section, with Fisher's budgeting experience specific to a small college and Bird's work on assessment particular to a very large center. Nevertheless, readers should be able to extrapolate from the wealth of experience here ideas applicable to their own centers, and coupled with Simpson's essay in the first section, these will add to any director's repertoire when he or she must wear the managerial hat.

The final group of essays covers specific issues—diversity of clientele, writing across the curriculum, public relations, and writing center research—before closing with a listing of resources. Anne Mullin's brief opening essay on learning disabilities defines types of help appropriate to such students and lists a few tips but is most valuable for directing readers to other resources. Carol Severino supplies directors and tutors with excellent and readily usable means for helping ESL students. In a condensed version of an essay he published in *The Writing Center Journal* a couple of years ago, Michael Pemberton does the same regarding graduate students. One of the more comprehensive and context-savvy essays in the *Manual* is Joe Law's on WAC. Law assesses the various arrangements, including their advantages and pitfalls, that writing centers have with WAC programs. Sally Crisp contributes an enthusiastic and valuable piece of cheerleading regarding public relations, covering not only the expected strategies but also emphasizing the need for centers to be creating an image based on integrity in everything they do. Neal Lerner schools directors in conducting practical research both to document their individual center's value and to expand the community's knowledge. Closing the section Mary Jo Turley lists several resources for new directors—organizations, books, journals, web sites, and the like. This material seems more appropriate for an appendix, but its positioning is a small quibble, and the information included follows this section's practical approach.

Practicality is further evident in the appendices, which include bibliographies, sample forms, and a brief case-study of one of Carol Severino's ESL students. The first of the bibliographies is extensive, and though directed toward tutor preparation, it will aid researchers as well. The second, though briefer, contains annotations of primary research studies on centers. The forms address everything from self-assessment to signing students up for appointments. The case-study not only serves to illustrate Severino's essay in the previous section but would also prove invaluable in training tutors. In sum, the appendices add to the already

abundant materials in the essays.

Some veteran directors may want more on theory, given the developing body of knowledge over the years. Only Steve Sherwood's essay in the opening section focusses on it. Though brief, Sherwood's piece provides a reasonable overview, linking center practice to three paradigms of composition: current-traditionalism, expressivism, and social construction. While certainly it may be high time for center theorists to get out from under these paradigms, here is probably not the place to attempt such a move. Veterans may find this recounting old hat, but for beginners, Sherwood judiciously explicates each paradigm and wisely contends that no one theory captures the complexity of tutorials. Sherwood also provides a bibliography for further reading, and to ask for more is perhaps unfair given the *Manual's* purpose.

The *Manual* could also benefit from a brief section on center history to ground new directors in the long tradition they are joining. In addition, an essay on relations with faculty, like Simpson's on administrators, could prevent a well-intentioned but naive rookie from misreading faculty culture and alienating a group whose students keep centers in business but who have often been vilified in center literature. Granted there is much scholarship on faculty relations to which a new director might turn, but an essay summarizing the history of center-faculty relations and providing tips for managing them would be appropriate to the *Manual's* purpose.

While a little might be added, refreshingly absent from the *Manual* is the whining about marginalization that has sometimes plagued writing center discourse. Certainly politics should not be dismissed, but the writers here tend to address political issues implicitly in their work, integrating advice for dealing with marginalizing contexts rather than merely lamenting them. This stance indicates a maturity in the community; that is, a recognition that centers may sometimes face marginalization but a confidence that it can be mitigated, if not overcome. Such maturity is valuable role modeling for new directors and a relief for some of us old timers weary of the litany of complaint.

As a rhetorical text, the *Manual* is interesting in the way it reflects its broad audience. Readers looking for the kind of "unifying theme" often evident in edited collections will be disappointed. While "context" is the most evident theme, the essays speak to one another in a way which repeats and reiterates various issues, but no one theme runs through all. This conversation, however, is appropriate, for the *Manual* is a manual, not a collection despite its many contributors. Silk notes in her introduction that readers should "read both with purpose and with a wide-ranging curiosity." She further suggested browsing, dipping in and out of sections, to find answers to specific questions. Thus the *Manual* is able to offer

something for all readers according to their needs. Further illustrating this fluidity is the format. Shrink-wrapped, three-hole punched, and binder ready, the *Manual* will readily allow for additions, subtractions, and alterations in future editions, as necessary. The present volume, as it stands, is an outstanding contribution to the field and will be welcomed by neophyte and seasoned directors alike, as well as possibly serving as a textbook in tutor training courses or graduate seminars on writing center administration. While the NWCA once had a “starter kit,” thanks to the efforts of Bobbie Silk, the contributors, and the NWCA Press, it now can offer a complete tool box that will enable new centers to be built and old ones to be maintained in good repair.

Peter Carino is Director of the Writing Center at Indiana State University, where he teaches courses in technical writing, American literature, criticism, and rhetorical theory. He has written three basic writing textbooks and articles on composition pedagogy and American literature.