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Review: Good Intentions

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Reviews

Grimm, Nancy Maloney. *Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times*. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook Heinemann, 1999.

Reviewed by Christina Murphy

This is an intelligent and intriguing book. Its central premise is to “use theory to challenge common sense understandings and to move writing centers into productive engagement with the conflicts in literacy education” (xiii). Those who know Nancy Grimm’s scholarship will find familiar themes here: the focus upon social justice as the primary emphasis within literacy education; the call for the writing center to be a leading force in revolutionizing academics and in making the academy more responsive to underrepresented and undervalued voices; and the sense that writing centers and the people who populate them have failed to realize the promise writing centers hold for “a deeper understanding of literacy” and for “more democratic approaches to literacy education” (xii).

By “using a combination of theory, metaphor, story, and argument,” Grimm seeks to create “a more complicated vision of writing center work” (3). Her “complicated” postmodern vision of the writing center is closely allied to visions of the role of education that have been developed by such social theorists as Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux—among others—who have espoused a component of social revolution as an aspect of future academic endeavors. Aronowitz and Giroux have argued that social theory should play a significant role in reshaping the world. This is true in whatever dimension social theory is found—from art to politics, from education to scientific inquiry. In postmodernism, this philosophy is often called “Critical Theory” and its proponents “Critical Theorists” (David Hoy and Thomas McCarthy, *Critical Theory*, Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994). “Critical Theorists” contend that education for postmodern times must be “progressive,” and they argue for transformations of contemporary political and educational systems, which they regard as largely out of sync with issues of social justice and social activism.

In this regard, Grimm is to be praised and her book appreciated for positioning writing center discourse within the central issues of contemporary life and contemporary education. As the theme for the upcoming 2002 CCCC Convention indicates, it is timely, indeed, to question the

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ways in which academics and the academy engage in cultural reproduction as a primary aim. In fundamental truth and fact, the academy decides who shall be admitted, who shall be educated and how and to what role, and who shall be ejected, rejected, or dismissed from the educational process. This is an idea that Grimm wishes her readers to grasp in its full potential, and, to achieve that aim, she asks us to examine the academy and the writing center as cultural texts. We are to deconstruct the premises that give substance, foundation, purpose, and meaning to these entities as institutional forces. Grimm states that “modernist conceptions” of the writing center “are reaching their limits. Within a modernist framework, writing centers will be chronically undervalued because they are expected to mask contradictions or contain differences” (3). To her credit Grimm is about a more serious business than just pitting modernist and postmodernist viewpoints against each other or valuing one over another in order to create, as she says, another false and unproductive binary. Instead, the postmodern view offers a lens through which to examine how modernist views have, for too long, held the writing center back and limited its influences upon the educational process.

To examine this perspective, Grimm focuses upon two primary issues—identity formation in the writing center and the types of critical pedagogy the writing center should embrace. In the first emphasis—identity formation—Grimm is a most moving and persuasive writer, as is Nancy G. Barron on the same theme in the “Afterword” to the book. Grimm becomes a story teller, drawing from her own days in college to show how the language one learns in one’s first cultural sphere of the family, with its cultural roots and socioeconomic experience, shapes a personal and intellectual identity that will be valued or undervalued, appreciated or obliterated by the cultural reproduction process of academics. From her own story, Grimm moves on effectively to tell the stories of students she has interacted with in the Writing Center at Michigan Technological University. These students have complex stories to tell and personal insights to reveal, but their stories and their voices do not fit the requirements of assignments given by their instructors or, in equal measure, the requirements of “academic writing.”

Grimm’s frustration is intensified by the approaches most writing center professionals take to this complex set of dilemmas they face on a daily basis. As Grimm states, “In higher education, many of the unresolved anxieties about literacy come to rest in writing centers” (*xiii*). Grimm regards “modernist” approaches as largely ineffectual in responding to the larger issues of “the need for more complicated understandings of authorship, of identity construction, of multiculturalism, of home literacies, of literacy standards” (*xiii*). “Modernist” approaches are rooted in metaphors of comfort or temporary aid—some of which only duplicate

the power relations of the classroom in substituting the tutor's "voice of authority" for the teacher's. Consequently, Grimm claims that her "goal is to make well-intentioned people uncomfortable. I write to disrupt the good intentions not only of the people who don't understand the value of writing centers, but also, most important, of the people who think they do" (x). In response, Grimm's aim is to seek insights through theorizing, which she says became for her "a habitual search for the conceptual language that helps me articulate the understandings arising from working in a contact zone" (x). And ultimately, "theorizing like mapmaking, is an activity that offers a heightened sense of position, a keener awareness of where the writing center is in relationship to other social systems and ideas" (xi).

Grimm presents many powerful insights and strategies in this book but is at her best when asserting the writing center's relationship to the social order and efforts to align it with more democratic and inclusive efforts. She is most correct in asserting that "often, writing centers inadvertently distance themselves from the academic work of the university by representing writing centers as places where students can find refuge, comfort, and support" (10). It is in this realm that the "good intentions" of many good people often go astray. Instead of finding ways to have the social order of the academy embrace, value, and respond to a range of differences and voices, often those with "good intentions" work to teach students how to shape their ideas, voices, and prose to academic ends. While the care, support, and empathy of "good intentions" may be everywhere apparent, the result is the same—silence for the student who does not perfectly fit the academic mold. Or, if not silence, then a definite reshaping of the person to fit the situation. Grimm quotes compositionist Alice Roy in observing that students of difference, while being "included . . . are not invited to invent a new university that might suit them, and possibly the mainstream, better" (10). Instead, they are invited to participate in the academy via the limited comfort and "good intentions" offered by academics—even those academics who work in the supposedly benign and uplifting writing center. As Grimm concludes, we should approach this process with more than "good intentions." "If we approach writing center work with the aim of understanding the ways we have all been constructed by the expectations of schooled literacy, we create more productive sites for relational learning" (21).

Grimm has many criticisms of the modernist approach, but she also offers approaches and solutions that go beyond the usual limited reach of critique. For example, she states that a first stage is giving up a belief in "the literacy myth" that the problems of literacy reside in the person himself or herself rather than in cultural constructions (29). It means also surrendering the idea that, as Harvey Graff contends, "literacy

is not the *cure for* but the *result of* economic, cultural, and social conditions” (22). In the end, “giving up belief in the literacy myth means facing the possibility that writing center work reproduces social divisions and unjustly regulates access and subjectivity” (22).

These are powerful words—especially for a writing center community that views itself as positive and empathic, as a refuge in a cruel and insensitive academic world, and as a bastion of righteousness—the “good intentions” of which Grimm writes. As she notes, it is painful for a group that prides itself on “good intentions” to take a different look from a different perspective. It is also difficult for that group to move the “conversation” away from the constructive to the constructed. It is much easier, for example, to write about the marginalization of writing centers than it is to question what role the writing center should play in deconstructing academic visions of literacy and the reward and punishment system that keeps those visions in place and intact. Grimm urges us to deconstruct our “good intentions” and to take a hard look at the writing center’s role as a mediator within academics rather than as a force for change.

In the “Afterword,” Nancy G. Barron says that Nancy Grimm asked her if she would contribute an afterword for her book “that would move the conversation about writing center work deeper into issues of diversity and difference” (126). Both Barron’s “Afterword” and Grimm’s book itself accomplish that goal. Grimm’s book also achieves the goal she sets for it in her conclusion: “I hope that this book has not been read as a new grand narrative of writing center theory or as something to be ‘applied’ in writing centers. I hope that it is read as an invitation to reconsider the work of writing centers in higher education, to imagine a practice where social justice replaces pale versions of fairness” (120).

The terms “pale versions of fairness” and “good intentions” may be viewed by some as rebukes, and by others as opportunities. For Grimm, these terms offer writing center professionals the opportunity to transform a “mediated” educational system that tends to reinforce social injustice into one that affirms and actualizes social justice. The knowledge of the educational system writing center professionals have by virtue of their daily participation in the “contact zones” of literacy education is an “earned” knowledge—one, Grimm would argue, that must be brought into administrative and public realms in order to change an educational system “that emphasizes our differences in unproductive ways” (128).

Christina Murphy is Associate Dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences and Professor of English at The William Paterson University of New Jersey. She has served as the President of the National Writing Centers Association, and she has presented and published extensively on writing centers, including co-editing *The St. Martin's Sourcebook for Writing Tutors*, *Landmark Essays on Writing Centers*, *Writing Center Perspectives*, and *Writing Centers: An Annotated Bibliography*.