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Review: *Writing Center Research: Extending the Conversation*

Gillespie, Paula, Alice Gillam, Lady Falls Brown, and Byron Stay, Eds.
Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2002

by Carol Peterson Haviland

The editors of this long-awaited volume have aimed "to open, to formalize, and to further" the writing center research dialogue in order "to encourage and guide other researchers," as well as to present the "new knowledge that has resulted from the studies it reports" (back cover). They have succeeded.

This collection does not present a tidy or unified snapshot of the current research scene, nor does it offer a neatly organized agenda for future work. And this is appropriate. Rather, its chapters illustrate the very wide range of purposes, topics, theories, and methods that writing center research engages, and it is exactly this presentation that accurately represents both the diversity and the integration of theory, practice, and research that characterize most writing center research practices.

Alice Gillam's Introduction situates writing center research within the larger research scene, particularly that of composition studies. Identifying two strands of inquiry (empirical and conceptual), she sets the stage for chapters that discuss what research means, what counts as research and why, and how it is and might be conducted. She notes researchers' moves toward "interested" observation, toward critique as well as justification, toward increased concern for the ethics and the political and material consequences of their work, and toward methodological pluralism and self-reflection. In Chapter One, Gillam elaborates this introduction as she analyzes several early essays that call for, survey, and critique writing center research. Here, too, she points to the ways openness, tolerance, and shared critical reflection can move our research beyond the earlier defensive studies chiefly designed to explain, justify, or exalt writing centers.

Some of the chapters that follow focus on a range of specific questions and projects (assessment, literacy, technology, administration, institutional discourse, tutoring, list-

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serves), while others examine theories that might undergird writing center work (feminism, grounded theory). However, a consistent and appealing aspect of each is that contributors uniformly characterize theoretically informed writing center research as interesting, possible, useful, and rewarding. Beth Boquet comments, for example, "Practice is not a thing; it is an action. Theory too should imply movement, should be considered a generative category rather than [a] static one. Coming to theory and to practice has involved, for me, loosening up on those terms, digging them out from their sedimented positions so that they can be come productive again" (34).

Thus, in their research on student-centered assessment, Jon Olson, Dawn J. Moyer, and Adelia Falda enact their center's tutoring models, "addressing questions, through conversations, that help people see more clearly what they've been doing so they can then do more effectively what they need to achieve" (111). Just as they assert that assessment need not be either threatening or boring, their chapter implies that research can and should be free of these constraints. Similarly, in their chapter on portfolios, Sharon Thomas, Julie Bevins, and Mary Ann Crawford ask how "students are using writing to learn, and what are they learning about writing" (150), again illustrating that far from an "add on" or external agenda, research is central to writing center work.

A nicely complicated example of this integration of query, practice, and research is Judith Rodby's "The Subject is Literacy: General Education and the Dialectics of Power and Resistance in the Writing Center." Using critical theory to "interpret[s] a series of misunderstanding between a student and a tutor as their interactions were mediated by the discourse of a writing assignment" (222), Rodby offers a framework for examining "how subjectivity and power play out as faculty assign writing, students write and revise, and tutors coach" (222). This chapter offers a useful perspective on the ways a specific question (how to prepare tutors) leads to complex research on subjectivities, conflict, and agency. Noting the dilemmas inherent in her own intersecting roles, Rodby comments, "in much composition research there can be no clear-cut distinctions among the activities of doing research, of writing about research, and of pedagogy—that is, of consciously changing a situation" (232). She reports that when a professor-interviewee asked about revising an assignment with which both tutors and students had struggled, she was unsure whether to respond "as a researcher, a Writing Center Director, a compositionist/WAC consultant, or . . ." (232). Thus, she uses Thomas Newkirk's word "emerging" to describe her study, unsure just when her question about how to work with a puzzled tutor and student evolved into this research project. Her concluding words represent the research agendas of many contributors to this volume: I wanted "us to develop a common vocabulary to talk about

writing assignments and to share our differing perspectives” (234). Along with Rodby, many of the authors point to research agendas that emerge out of curiosity about writing, about writers, about differing perspectives and about the consequences of pursuing those curiosities through careful research.

In sum, this collection offers a very useful picture of writing center research in all of its messiness and diversity. The contributors demonstrate that research need not be a sword threatening to behead new directors or to level centers that are not richly endowed. They offer a research agenda that can be much more than externally driven self-justification or indulgent luxury. Rather, the studies illustrate a variety of ways thoughtful directors can work with their staff, their students, and their colleagues to pose complex and revealing questions and to study them rigorously and productively. The agenda, thus, is not a call for specific projects or methods as much as a call for intellectual curiosity, for social action, for professional contribution. If we respond by joining this “conversation about the nature and purposes of writing center inquiry” and by engaging in carefully conceived and theorized research in our own centers, will honor the work of these authors as well as enrich our field.