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## Review: The Center Will Hold: Critical Perspectives on Writing Center Scholarship

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*Review: The Center Will Hold:  
Critical Perspectives on Writing Center Scholarship*

Pemberton, Michael A. and Joyce Kinkead, eds.  
Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 2003

by Lauren Fitzgerald

Reading *The Center Will Hold* makes me feel hopeful about writing centers. First of all, because this collection was published in honor of Muriel Harris, it's almost impossible not to feel upbeat. What Nancy Grimm calls Harris's "characteristically optimistic" contributions to the field (44)—*The Writing Lab Newsletter*, *Teaching One-to-One*, her articles and addresses, her mentoring of junior colleagues, and even the layout of the Purdue Writing Lab (real and virtual)—serve as touchstones for nearly the entire volume. I'm cheered too by how very much there is to celebrate about a career that has "touched virtually every aspect of writing center inquiry," as Michael Pemberton and Joyce Kinkead remind us in their introduction (5). That Harris's work can provide such a solid foundation for a scholarly collection shows how far the field has come over the last quarter century.

Harris's centrality to *The Center Will Hold* helps to provide a coherence not always found in edited collections. But the seventeen contributors, most of them well-known writing center scholars themselves, do more than celebrate her work. Implicitly (and sometimes explicitly), each makes the claim that there is such a thing as *Writing Center* scholarship, that it is no longer, as Jeanette Harris famously quipped just a few years ago, "an oxymoron" (qtd. in Pemberton 21). And they do so by investigating such vital concerns as writing center research, assessment, tutor training, session dynamics, collaboration, professionalization, communication, space, and mentoring. What also unifies these ten chapters is that nearly all of them follow the fairly standard scholarly triad of surveying the history of the topic, critiquing current opinion, and offering

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recommendations (capped off with an impressive list of references at the end). Though I happen to value this scholarly perspective, I don't want to suggest that the contributors follow it rigidly; each brings to bear his or her particular expertise and point of view and, more important, offers suggestions that the rest of us can also achieve—which makes me feel even more hopeful.

Also contributing to the optimism of the volume is its presentation of the history of writing centers as dynamic and changing. Peter Carino explores the “long and unresolved history” of “the question of tutorial power and authority,” from the ideals of nondirective tutoring through the more recent critiques of “peeriness” (97). Rebecca Jackson, Carrie Leverenz, and Joe Law examine the emerging history of graduate courses in writing center theory, practice, and administration and discover that they reflect “the paradox of professionalism” that marks the field as a whole: students learn that “while writing center specialists can now point to an extensive body of scholarship as a sign of the status of their work, much of that scholarship addresses the problem of not being treated as status equals in the academy” (140, 149). This crucial connection between writing center professionalism and scholarship is also explored by Pemberton in his chapter on “*The Writing Lab Newsletter* as History: Tracing the Growth of a Scholarly Community,” which charts the *WLN*'s transition from a “personal” ethos (with its humble origins on a Sears typewriter on Harris's kitchen table) to a “more professional...communicative stance” (24). The only contributor who seems to offer a vision of writing center history as static is Harvey Kail, who unearths a kind of ur-text or “master narrative” underwriting tutor training manuals from the 1970s and '80s and argues that it (inescapably?) constructs the tutor's development as one of “separation, initiation, and return” (73, 74). Overall, however, by focusing on change, the collection's take on history is decidedly different from that of Yeats's famous apocalyptic poem (which the title pointedly alludes to). *The Center Will Hold*, these authors imply, because the new millennium is just the beginning of the story for writing centers.

As important as this history is, for most of the contributors it is “only a starting point from which to provide reflective, descriptive, and predictive looks at the field,” as Pemberton and Kinkead point out (2-3). I would add “critical” to this list as well, since, to borrow from the volume's subtitle, many of the *Perspectives* offered on *Writing Center Scholarship* are indeed *Critical*. For instance, many contributors persuasively charge that writing center administrators do a less than adequate job of articulating what exactly goes on in our centers. In “Writing Center Assessment: Searching for the ‘Proof’ of our Effectiveness,” Neal Lerner attributes this failure to our “fear of num-

bers" (59)—and the quantitative or statistical research methods that would more meaningfully convey to our institutions what we accomplish. For other contributors, the major culprit in this failure to communicate is our continued adherence to non-directive tutoring and the assumptions that undergird it. The long-held belief that tutors do not (or at least should not) collaborate with student writers has repercussions for tutors, who "feel guilty or deficient for failing to live up to the doctrine" (Carino 113), and directors, whose research is hamstrung by the assumption that only individuals are responsible for attaining the seemingly "value-neutral skill" of literacy (Grimm 45). Intriguingly, Michele Eodice suggests this minimalist model informs why we fail to engage as fully as we should in the lives of our institutions: Our fear of being "in service to others" (123) prevents us from taking that important collaborative first step.

Even the stern words about the less than ideal state of writing center theory and practice give me hope, however, since they lead inevitably to scores of valuable recommendations. As an alternative to the nondirective model, for instance, Carino suggests simply but powerfully that tutors should be trained in "flexibility"—to move between directive and nondirective tutoring, depending on the level of knowledge the writer brings to the session (110). For Grimm, a similar shift in perspective alters how we understand the literacies of student writers and the research possibilities they offer: "No longer is research done only to prove something to the institution," she argues, "but also to change the thinking of the institution" (47).

The volume's most prevalent recommendation is that we work to improve our methods of communication. Providing tips about how to communicate effectively with central administration, Josephine Koster encourages writing center administrators to "practice what we preach to our tutors" by thinking about these dealings rhetorically, "establishing common ground and creating ethos by using the language of the audience" (152, 164). Lerner takes on this challenge by reconsidering *what* we communicate. Offering a framework drawn from studies of first-year experience programs, he suggests that we investigate writing center "effects" (64) by assessing student needs, satisfaction, and perceptions—as well as getting over our worries about measuring outcomes. Eodice urges us not merely to communicate our research to others at our institutions but also to collaborate with them on it. James Inman and Donna Sewall invite us to move beyond our institutions, to take advantage of such electronic forums as WCenter in order to mentor junior writing center colleagues. But such dialogues, they caution, cannot be idealized—they require careful attention to the material constraints of electronic media. "An Ideal Writing Center: Re-Imagining Space and Design,"

co-authored by writing center workers (Kinkead and Leslie Hadfield) and experts in interior design (Tom Peterson, Stephanie Ray, and Sarah Preston), reminds us that another key area in which material conditions influence communication is the physical layout of our centers. "A well-designed writing center," they write, "has an identity that speaks implicitly to its patrons" (175). Before embarking on any major remodeling project, we would all be well advised to follow the list of suggestions they offer for collecting relevant data about our centers.

Because I am so convinced that *The Center Will Hold* will help writing center professionals re-imagine the theories and practices of their work for many years to come (I know I've already been deeply influenced), I hesitate to bring up my very minor complaints. Most minor is that with the footnotes printed towards the end of the volume, the process of reading several of the chapters is an awkward one of constantly flipping back and forth (though this layout is probably less the result of editorial choice than the exigencies of production costs). Less minor, it strikes me as ironic that a volume published in honor of Mickey Harris, a people person *par excellence*, would contain so little evidence of research into the face-to-face, human aspects of our work. Ethnographically-inflected studies of writing center work have a tradition in our field, yet this is one area that seems not to have merited a "critical perspective."

Even so, this collection offers a great many important contributions, due not only its historically-informed and unflinching critiques and recommendations but also a quality essential to its overall optimism: the willingness to journey beyond the center. As Eodice acknowledges, "For writing centers, whose history is full of scrambles for turf, for a stable budget line, for a physical space of their own, purposefully seeking a boundaryless state sounds risky" (124). It is, but as the contributors persuasively argue, doing so has rewards. (For example, and I think tellingly, the collection is the first exclusively focused on writing centers to receive the Council of Writing Program Administrators' Best Book Award.) As we know from Mickey Harris's many contributions to our field, taking risks is essential to successful writing center work.