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Review: *The Everyday Writing Center*

Anne Ellen Geller, Michele Eodice, Frankie Condon,
Meg Carroll, and Elizabeth H. Boquet
Logan, UT: Utah State UP, 2007.

by Carol Peterson Haviland

If frequent and positive reader response is one indicator of a book's value, and I believe that it is, *The Everyday Writing Center* by Anne Ellen Geller, Michele Eodice, Frankie Condon, Meg Carroll, and Elizabeth H. Boquet already has made its mark. Even in the short time since its release, it has informed numerous CCCC and IWCA conference sessions and elevator conversations, inspired a blog, and anchored a number of WCenter discussions.

Part of the book's appeal is that it joins a welcome group of contributions to composition and writing center scholarship in its enactment of academic writing. Like Joseph Harris' *Rewriting*, it is richly intertextual and thoughtfully theorized yet accessible and relevant to both established scholars and newcomers. Characterized by one reader as "a good read that kept disrupting my thinking," it does indeed deal with the everyday in seemingly everyday ways—but not entirely; it stops to ask "why" and "why not," and it looks to theorists such as Etienne Wenger, Michel de Certeau, and Henri LeFebvre to illuminate what might be dismissed as too everyday to notice.

Invoking Wenger, the writers note that in communities of practice, participants develop, negotiate, and share their habits of being with "no 'dichotomy between the practical and the theoretical, ideals, and reality, or talking and doing'"(6). And, indeed, their text does precisely this. In both the chapters themselves and the practices to which they point, the writers acknowledge the commonly prevailing stratifications of both categories of writing center participants (directors, tutors, writers, receptionists, faculty) and lenses (theory and practice) and then work to defuse their power. Rather, these authors observe, conceptualizing writing centers in Wenger's

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terms as communities of practice creates the possibility for all participants to learn on common ground or, in Wenger's words, "[learn] as a living experience of negotiating meaning" (229). However, the authors do not invoke this metaphor naively, quickly acknowledging, indeed welcoming, the importance of difference, of dissent. And in chapter one, they use the trickster trope to foreground this element.

This reading of trickster emphasizes the constructive intent of disruption, almost ignoring its malevolent possibilities, a limitation that might be critiqued, but the reading is honest in that it does not elide the realities of disruption. Rather, the authors use Lewis Hyde's words to describe doorways not as gate-keeping devices but as places "where deep-change accidents occur" (124). Thus, they acknowledge that even as trickster opens important spaces, shines a light on easily-ignored everyday incidents, in these processes he also creates mischief, puzzlement, instability, and even shock and chaos. Cultivating a trickster habit of mind, they remind readers, demands a willingness to "notice and revel in the accidental, the unforeseen, the surprise" (12). This habit, they note, may require the unlearning of some schooling as it leads us to "question the value of a set of prescribed and relatively stable steps that get a tutor from here to there in exchange for a philosophy that might leave tutors and writers standing alone (yet together) at a potentially fantastic crossroad" (18).

As they move to chapters on time and on tutors as learners and writers, they continue these moves, suggesting that when we feel time, when we participate in it (41), we can conceive of it as elastic and thus emphasize what "tutors can learn and imagine" more than what they "know" (13). These choices, they believe, can help directors, tutors, and writers become more reflective, boundary workers who share ownership as they negotiate meaning (13).

Of particular note is the chapter on racism, which smartly challenges the writing center narrative that implies that issues such as racism do not penetrate writing centers' inherent inclusiveness. Rather, the authors use this chapter to press writing centers to both confront the ways they may, through silence or complacency, perpetuate institutional racism rather than bring "critical theories of race and racial formation" to help writing centers become "sites for meaningful transformation" (14).

In their final chapter on administration, the authors draw on John Tagg's contrasting of structural and functional leadership. They assert that distinguishing between means and ends allows directors to see matters such as efficiency, marketing, and record-keeping as peripheral to "leaderful, learningful stewardship of a dynamic learning and writing culture and community" (14).

This book, however, is about more than tricksters and time or even than tutors and racism. Equally if not more important than its topics is the book itself—and particularly the way it addresses some of the issues that writing center professionals continue to debate.

For example, an extremely tired horse that was re-saddled as recently as in some IWCA 2007 sessions is that of PMU (poor marginalized us); to their credit, the authors of *The Everyday Writing Center* leave old PMU in the barn to do whatever he/she does best there. They do not feel poor or marginalized, and their text simply ignores this weary trope. Rather they feel rich in opportunity and learning, and it is this attitude that their topics and language put forward. Thus, when the authors speak to issues of institutional positioning, they do so by showing how writing centers that function as and thus model communities of practice can shape larger university structures. They do not argue about the importance of their border spaces but rather show how borders might be more richly understood, leaving space for readers to see how such an understanding of in-between spaces might help universities rethink the ways they understand academic territories. But again, the authors neither cavil nor preach; they emphasize what they are and what habits of mind they enact rather than the spaces they occupy or what other people think or should think about them. Instead they talk about listening, extended listening, listening that resists the impulse to “fix” things but uses problem spaces as learning spaces, as spaces to enlarge and complicate their understandings of other people, their ideas, and their choices.

And here, readers can see yet another of the book’s strengths, its theoretical coherence, as exemplified in the authors’ willingness to stretch themselves to model the practices they espouse. When tutors are at their best working with writers, they don’t commandeer paper drafts or keyboards and “fix” writers’ papers. Rather, they ask questions; they work to understand writers’ goals, options, and choices; they learn as they observe writers negotiate terrain that is new to both tutors and writers. In this same way, as they say in their preface, the authors resisted writing edited chapters for a collection and instead worked “through a series of ideas [they] thought essential to writing center work and to present those ideas in a form that enacted the principles [they] espouse: a five way collaboration on every aspect of the text” (1).

Finally, although some readers might critique this group of chapters as neither introducing new topics nor tightly sequenced, a careful reading reveals an artful use of the everyday trope as the topics and structures challenge existing ideas of what “new” might mean. The “leaderly” choices that directors make as they help to cre-

ate communities of practice are at the heart of this book. And this new way of thinking about how to contribute to campus cultures is precisely what writing center work needs to take more seriously. In describing the ways they are building and reflecting on communities of practice, the authors of *The Everyday Writing Center* offer readers a model for reflection, discovery, and learning that can radically recompose both writing centers and their larger academic communities.

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