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Peter Carino

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Review: *The Idea of a Writing Laboratory*

Neal Lerner
Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2009

by Peter Carino

About the Author

Peter Carino is Professor of English at Indiana State University, where he teaches composition, criticism, American literature, and literature of baseball. He directed the ISU Writing Center for eighteen years, has served as president and treasurer of ECWA, has authored two basic writing textbooks, and has twice won the IWCA annual award for best article on writing centers.

Neal Lerner's *The Idea of a Writing Laboratory* purposely and admittedly echoes the title of Steven North's influential essay, "The Idea of a Writing Center." Lerner, however, has a much larger agenda. While North championed the writing center as a place on campus where students could talk with sympathetic listeners about their writing, Lerner's notion of *laboratory* encompasses a method rather than a place. As a designation for place, *writing laboratory* has survived some degree of pejoration over the years, due to the oblique medical connection it shares with its long-discredited cousin, *writing clinic*. Lerner's book not only recuperates the term *lab* but links it to a long history of laboratories in science teaching and broadens it to include any teaching in which students must perform the tasks of a discipline rather than just master the material of its subject matter. Much of the project is achieved through Lerner's dovetailed analyses of problems and developments in science education and writing instruction.

The book is organized with chapters loosely alternating between science and writing, though connections are made between the two throughout. Lerner's first chapter provides a substantial and well-

researched history of writing centers, or labs, beginning with sporadic experiments in a laboratory method of teaching writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Central among these is Helen Parkhurst's Dalton Plan (named for her school), a one-to-one classroom method that "peaked . . . in 1925" but succumbed to the supposedly more efficient methods of the structured classrooms of the time (19). Later chapters take readers through specific examples of writing labs at Minnesota and Dartmouth, demonstrating how the lofty goals of the former were eventually transformed into remediation and how the latter's origins in remediation resulted in a long and troubled history ending in failure. Throughout, Lerner shows how funding, concerns with efficiency, and the labor-intensive nature of teaching one-to-one has usually transformed well intended efforts for educational reform—whether in science or writing—into a means of dealing with and branding certain groups of students as inferior. While this history is well integrated in the larger purpose of the book, on its own it would also serve to provide anyone interested with a solid background on the struggles of writing centers before open admissions.

The parallel history of science education is similarly depressing. It may be heartening to some in writing centers and the humanities that science was fighting throughout most of the nineteenth century to be respected and funded as a central piece of university curriculum. Throughout this struggle, like their colleagues in writing instruction today, those in the scientific disciplines also fought for laboratory instruction that would enable students to practice science rather than just imbibe its laws through classroom lectures. A leading proponent of such instruction was Harvard naturalist Louis Agassiz, who promoted exploratory drawing and writing as a means of understanding. Agassiz is the hero of much of Lerner's discussion of science instruction; unfortunately, the kind of lab work Agassiz championed devolved into its opposite: "The legacy of short responses to demonstrate mastery of content is by far the norm despite the efforts at reform and the calls for students to engage in critical and creative thinking as top-notch scientists would do" (74). One could substitute "writers" for "scientists" in this sentence and find a clear articulation of the pedagogy of many writing programs today.

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Lerner's histories clearly illustrate that education history continues to repeat itself. Rather than a march of progress, reform is an ongoing struggle, pitting enlightened but expensive methods against efficient but ineffective means. The "enlightened" approach, which Lerner calls "the laboratory method," provides "situated learning." In writing instruction, this includes a social constructionist epistemology, peer interaction, multiple drafts, repeated feedback, one-to-one instruction, and creative assignments providing opportunities for addressing issues of interest to students rather than artificially contrived topics. Opposed to enlightened situated learning are the usual suspects of current traditionalism: classroom lectures on principles of writing, abstract knowledge of such principles, mode-driven assignments, and obsession with grammatical correctness.

The only flaw in this book is that it sometimes lapses into binary thinking, with any method under the laboratory banner considered good, any more "traditional" methods bad. There is a certain irony here in that when Lerner presents a model "laboratory" course in writing in the sciences at MIT, the course clearly combines pieces of both. While students certainly practice science in their labs and receive much feedback on their writing, the assignment sheets for them (meant to enable students to work toward a scientific article) are rather prescriptive, with one going so far as to provide students with a pre-written abstract and most others dictating sections and headings that must be included. Lerner chooses not to comment on the prescriptive nature of these, a curious omission given that he earlier derides freshmen composition courses based on rhetorical modes. Similarly, writing teachers who daily face students who can barely construct a clear and grammatical sentence may be cynical about illustrations taken from elite students at an elite institution.

Quibbles aside, this book represents excellent scholarship. It is researched in depth, scrupulously documenting primary sources excavated from institutional archives, as well as covering an extensive array of secondary sources. Lerner writes in a style that moves seamlessly between the elegant and the colloquial. Much of the history goes a long way in dislodging erroneous material (heretofore accepted as commonplace) in the history of both writing centers and

writing classrooms. Aside from writing center workers, the audience for this book should be composition scholars and teachers, as well as anyone who teaches technical and scientific writing. Let's hope the title will not deter these groups, for anyone engaged in the teaching of writing would benefit from reading this important book.

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WORK CITED

North, Stephen M. "The Idea of a Writing Center." *College English* 46.5 (1984): 433-46. Print.