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Al DeCiccio

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Review: *Writing at the Center: Proceedings of the 2004 Thomas R. Watson Conference*

Jo Ann Griffin, Carol Mattingly, and Michele Eodice, eds.
(IWCA Press, 2007)

by Al DeCiccio

When the University of Louisville announced its fifth biennial Thomas R. Watson Conference in Rhetoric and Composition (2004), it was entitled "Writing at the Center." Under this theme, compositionists addressed the administration and institutionalization of programs designed to foster, support, and enhance students' abilities to write. The 2004 Watson Conference has become celebrated for the following:

- promoting student agency;
- establishing cooperative relationships among Writing Program Administrators;
- strengthening the relationships of writing programs to academic departments;
- clarifying the perceptions of upper administrators, accrediting agencies, and funding sources toward the work of composition professionals;
- indicating areas for writing program research, history, and theory; and
- changing public attitudes and politics surrounding the teaching of writing.

IWCA Press has now produced a CD, entitled *Writing at the Center: Proceedings of the 2004 Thomas R. Watson Conference* and edited by Jo Ann Griffin, Carol Mattingly, and Michele Eodice. General Editor Byron Stay explains that partial proceeds from the sale of the CD, which is a 380-page, carefully prepared text that

About the Author

Al DeCiccio is Academic Dean and Professor of English at Rivier College. Al is a past President of the International Writing Centers Association; he also served a five-year term, with Joan Mullin, as co-editor of The Writing Center Journal. At the IWCA conference in April 2007, Al was presented with the 2006 IWCA Muriel Harris Outstanding Service Award. Al regularly contributes ideas about collaborative learning, writing, and writing center theory and practice.

is both traditional and non-traditional in its layout, will be directed to the Writing Centers Research Project located in Louisville.

WC7 readers should purchase the CD, not just because it will help support the Writing Centers Research Project, but because it will address questions they are always asking, including “Where is the center of writing in my school and where should it be?” Moreover, in typical writing center fashion, the CD is filled with wit, humor, research, and informed local and comprehensive strategies for writing center theory and practice. As an added bonus, *WC7* readers will be delighted with three non-traditional texts: (1) the session-specific “graphic novel”-like vignettes provided by Stephanie Mues (e.g., “I just don’t have the tools to do this assignment.” and “Can we set an agenda for the session?”) that are meant to be placed before, between, and after the sections; (2) the CD’s final “article,” Bradley Hughes’ “Flex Appeal,” a parody of Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11*; and (3) the clever cartoons crafted by tutor Kathy Bartlett about familiar writing center scenarios.

After the “Introduction,” which frames the CD by discussing the importance of the word *center* to the field and by detailing the articles that follow, the text begins with a chapter entitled “Five Authors in Search of a Writing Center.” Here the wit and humor of the writing center community is evident, as Beth Boquet, Michele Eodice, Frank Farmer, Carol Mattingly, and Jane Graham employ the figure of speech *prosopoeia* to adopt the voices of Darwin, Barthes, Bakhtin, Bloomer, and Willard. In so doing, each author divulges her or his “individual knowledge of (and experience in) writing centers,” providing “an informed, yet whimsical, representation of how these thinkers would fare in contexts alien to them but quite familiar to us.” (By the way, Michele Eodice even provides Barthes’ responses in English and in French!)

In the next chapter, “Foundations and Futures,” Neal Lerner, David Russell, Beth Burmester, and Kathryn Dobson and William FitzGerald provide four routes for the writing center community to take in developing future research agendas. Lerner’s historical analysis of research undertaken about writing centers is fascinating both because it reveals how fertile the field has been (his work shows that writing center research is not bankrupt) and because it conceptualizes writing centers as sites of ongoing fruitful research. Russell argues that systematic research in writing, particularly in the writing center, will help the field to answer questions about sources of credit. Burmester asks readers to consider the classical rhetorical tradition in thinking about future research. She maintains that “[t]he classical tradition also provides common ground for writing center history as that history intersects with other histories of writing and sharing text in social spaces.” Finally, Dobson

and Fitzgerald suggest that the personal statement might be a genre for writing center researchers to investigate.

“Conversations Across Programs” is the fitting title for the next chapter, as five articles entreat readers to consider different structures as well as to reconsider long-standing programs designed to effect good writing. Barbara Schneider presents her research on the various structures for writing center administration, pointing out the advantages and disadvantages of each one. Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber, Laura Greenfield, Magali Armillas-Tiseyra, and Jennifer Cotton help readers to re-think their practices by showing how transferable the methodologies might be among the composition classroom, the creative writing classroom, and the writing center. Michael Mattison’s narrative about the rise and fall of the Writing Fellows Program at Boise State is one of those memorable writing center stories that, though site specific, can help the community to think more comprehensively about structures like Writing Fellows programs. Kati Duffey, Kristin Graham, and Corinne Viglietta ask readers to consider making an alliance between the writing center and the first-year composition program, and Mark Sutton asks for more conversation between those who practice in composition class and those who practice in the writing studio.

In the chapter “Voices in/from/of the Center,” readers will find four articles that discuss what the writing center means to those who work there, to those who have worked there and now work elsewhere, and to those who work at sites that are not university-specific and may even be for-profit. In their article, Harvey Kail, Paula Gillespie, and Bradley Hughes unveil some findings of the peer writing tutor research project, looking for ways to further demonstrate how collaborative learning in the writing center changes tutors and writers socially and cognitively. Paula Gillespie, Natalie Abram, Aesha Adams, Jennifer Meitl, and Jim Nute follow with a parallel piece about how tutoring in the writing center has affected their lives, particularly their professional lives. Beth Godbee’s piece details her work as a self-employed private tutor, advocating not that writing centers charge students for tutoring but that writing centers investigate ways for building into their tutoring structures a strong sense of reciprocity, responsibility, and care. Finally, Pam Childers writes the article she did *not* present at the conference. Because she thought her talk in Louisville, while researched and scholarly, did not represent her honest voice, Pam offers here her heartfelt, experiential open letter about why the writing center can provide an authentic site for high school writers and their teachers to practice writing.

After the closing piece by Bradley Hughes, the cartoons that follow it by Kathy Bartlett, and Stephanie Mues’ final graphic piece, the CD ends with a list of con-

tributors that shows why scholarship about writing centers is unique in higher education. *WCJ* readers will recognize many writing center scholars, of course, but they will also be pleased to see represented those who are or have been writing center tutors. As has been the case since the field unabashedly heralded such collaboration between professionals and students at the first joint IWCA/NPCTW conference in Hershey, PA, in 2003, writing center scholarship continues to be produced by student tutors with the same fervor as investigations that are conducted by their more established colleagues.

There are moments in the CD when the feel of a particular article seems very much like being in a session with three or four presenters. One also wonders why, after having the authors provide a useful and brief introduction to the first chapter, the editors did not see fit to ask the authors of the other chapters to provide similar introductions. And there is some unevenness in the length of the pieces. But these are minor misgivings, especially when *WCJ* readers will notice how representative the pieces are in this CD. Even more important, readers will note that each article is thoroughly researched, many are annotated, and all include bibliographic entries. For these reasons, I believe *Writing at the Center* adds credibility to the writing center field. Further, the cartoons, the graphic novel-like vignettes, and the witty parodies give this CD and, by extension, the writing center community, a personality that *WCJ* readers will want to display in their own centers.