

1-1-2011

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Kevin Davis

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Recommended Citation

Davis, Kevin (2011) "Review: Centered: A Year in the Life of a Writing Center Director," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 31 : Iss. 2, Article 6.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1735>

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Review: *Centered: A Year in the Life of a
Writing Center Director*
Michael Mattison
Raleigh, NC: Lulu, 2008

by Kevin Davis

About the Author

Kevin Davis, who has directed the Writing Center at East Central University since 1987, believes in the power of narrative, the wisdom of peer tutors, and the value of a well-placed hug. He also knows all the words to “Up in the Air, Junior Birdmen.”

Dear Mike,

Earlier this summer, I turned down a position at a well-regarded liberal arts college. After twenty-four years at one position, I had begun to fear stagnation, so when I saw the ad for a composition director, I thought “why not?” In the course of interviewing, receiving an offer, and contemplating a decision, I discovered the answer to that question. Why not? Because the new position would have taken me out of the writing center world, and I could not imagine a me without a writing center.

Not long after turning down the position, I picked up your book, *Centered: A Year in the Life of a Writing Center Director* (available from Amazon, from Lulu.com, and as a download from the iTunes store), and came across these words: “No one holds the Writing Center directorship; someone is the Writing Center Director. I’ve often thought of it that way; it’s not a job so much as something I am” (36). Exactly, Mike. I’ve always wondered if I became a writing center person because I took the job, or if I found myself into this position

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because I have always been a writing center director, even in the days before I knew what a writing center was. Having read your book, I'm beginning to think the second is more likely. "Wild horses couldn't drag me away," as the Rolling Stones put it.

(Before I go any farther, I want to thank you for expanding on the idea of a writing center having a soundtrack; I wish the book had come with a CD [though I understand why it could not]. I recognize that our writing center has a soundtrack, and I see that it changes from year to year; knowing the soundtrack is an important aspect of knowing the center. As I write this letter/review, I'm listening to Radio Paradise [www.radioparadise.com], finding that every song they play is somehow related to what I have to say about your book.)

This, Mike, is what I enjoyed about spending time with *Centered*: for once in my lonely writing center existence, the book made me believe that I had a colleague, someone who shared my questions, my values, my inspirations. As we become writing center directors, it seems we're doomed to suffer a certain kind of isolation. As you describe a year in your life as Boise State's writing center director—day by day in journal-like entries—your book discusses each of these shared topics, explicitly or implicitly:

often, we have no true colleagues within our universities;
usually, we are in a near-constant state of winning and
keeping allies;
frequently, our peer writing consultants become more than
mere employees;
necessarily, we rely on the world of WCenter, academic
publications, and conferences for support and stimulation.

I found great pleasure reading your book, watching you deal with everything I deal with. This surprised me in a way; why would I want to read a book that describes my own life? Perhaps I needed the self-validation, another voice to tell me I'm not as crazy as I sometimes fear that I am; perhaps I needed to know that I have at least one true colleague.

Which brings me to a question I kept returning to as I read: who is this book written for? Well, it's written for you, of course, detailing a year of your life, and it's written for me, as we have very similar lives; so that's one audience: the solitary writing center director who works

with peer writing consultants. For these readers, the book is sure to bring a certain amount of recognition and, in my case, a certain amount of relief as I became aware that I'm no crazier than you are.

And beyond that small group? I'm not sure. Do my faculty colleagues want to know this kind of detail about my life? My provost? Would my writing consultants like to know what is going on in my head? Would my spouse want to know why I'm working late, again? I'm not sure, and perhaps that is a weakness; then again, perhaps it's a strength, having a tightly focused audience.

* * *

I must tell you, Mike, that as I read I kept having an urge to rip the book apart and have someone hide the pages throughout the corners of my life so that I would discover them, one by one, in surprising ways: on the back of the cereal box at breakfast, in the folder of cello music, mingled into the stack of towels. I kept wanting to discover this work, these ideas, within the fragmentation of my day rather than holistically, completely on a read-through; perhaps this is why it took me weeks to finish a book I enjoyed reading: my need to digest it in fragments.

* * *

Monday, as we neared the end of the fiscal year, I asked my summer workers to report to me about their time sheets; I wanted to be sure that we got them right. Tyffany bit my head off: "So you're saying that you think I'm an idiot and will mess this up."

"No," I responded, somewhat taken aback. "I'm saying that last summer Josh was an idiot, so I'm trying to prevent that from happening again."

"So you're saying I'm like Josh."

"Well, no; you're not Josh. You're right. Forget it. I trust you."

Fifteen minutes later, Tyff and the requested report were in my office. She apologized, saying that a weekend with her father had made her a bit defensive.

As she left, my head went back to a passage of yours: "I love my consultants. . . . Not romantic, not parental/familial . . . and not really

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a friendship. The relationship is too complicated somehow. . . . So what is it? What's the love that exists here? A mixture of respect, of collegiality? They're good people" (46).

Yes they are, Mike, yes they are. Tyff and I chatted a while longer, about our mutual respect, about being able to turn away when someone you care about hurts you, about acceptance and forgiveness. I didn't tell her that our writing center works, in part, because we all love each other, but I'm sure she knows. I'm a little bit afraid of Tyffany, but I hugged her anyway; "Every whisper of every waking hour I'm choosing my confessions" (REM in "Losing My Religion").

* * *

Once, years ago, I thought writing center work was all about writing, papers, and processes. Like many writing centers, we liked to say we help make "better writers, not better writing" (North 438). It's a nice sentiment, but after all these years, I'm pretty sure that it's incomplete. We aren't making better papers or better writers or even better people; we're just here, doing what we can on the affective dimension, person to person.

I was relieved, then, when I read these words from you:

I'm reminded again that sometimes a paper is not 'just a paper.' . . . Those pages we take into our hands are often lives, moments, and emotions . . . offered up to a reader with the hope of explaining, at least a little, what it is like inside another's mind. I'm not sure that happens anywhere as much as it does in a writing center. (137)

When you've seen enough writing center tears, Michael, you know our work is about much more than writing. When you've watched the body language change in the middle of a session, when you've seen relief visible in a person's eyes, when you've seen a writing consultant reach deep within herself, then you've seen the work that truly matters. Here's how Laura Viers puts it in "I Can See Your Tracks": "Oh I can hear the snakes creeping cross the scene; I'm quaking in my boots, but you won't hear me scream." The WC world is one of creeping snakes and quaking boots; we try to help people quiet the screams.

* * *

I found great value in several of your passing ideas as you presented them in *Centered*. Often, you just offered me snippets, and I liked that; it let me riff off of your chorus, and I would find myself sprawled on the couch, the book open on my chest, as I stared at the ceiling, rethinking a class or a consultant relationship or a writing center construct that I hold dear, the aspects that make this work special to both of us.

“As I walk back to the parking lot, I wonder if I can do this for twenty years” (171). Yes, Mike, you can work happily in writing centers for twenty years, for longer (I’m beginning my twenty-ninth as I write this). And, quite probably, you will (though I see that you’ve moved on to Wittenberg from Boise). Directing a writing center isn’t a job; it’s who you are. And you will find no escapes from yourself, for you will continue to find, as you have in this fine little book, that this work is what keeps us *Centered*.

Regards,

Kevin

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WORK CITED

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