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Review: *Creative Approaches
to Writing Center Work*
Kevin Dvorak and Shanti Bruce, eds.
New York: Hampton, 2008

by Alfred E. Guy Jr.

About the Author

Alfred E. Guy Jr. is the R.W.B. Lewis Director of Writing and an Assistant Dean of Academic Affairs at Yale. He previously worked as a director of writing programs at Johns Hopkins, Princeton, and New York University. He is also an Associate of the Bard College Institute for Writing and Thinking. He has written about intellectual development, academic freedom, neurobiology, and zombies. At Yale he teaches introductory courses in academic writing and creative non-fiction, as well as courses on science fiction and psychology.

From the title alone, I knew that I would like *Creative Approaches to Writing Center Work*. I'm a writing center director, and everyone wants to work creatively. Perhaps the first innovation of the collection is to define writing center work more broadly than is immediately apparent. Several essays address what happens when a tutor works one-on-one with a writer, but others focus on developing tutors themselves, on nurturing in students a vocation as creative writers, and on promoting a campus-wide culture of writing and research. In each, the contributors define a baseline approach to this work and then offer theoretical and practical ways to expand our thinking about it, guiding us to approach the work more creatively. Above all, these essays argue for the integral role of playfulness in teaching: because play makes learning more effective, and because it builds better relationships among teachers, tutors, and writers.

In their introduction, Kevin Dvorak and Shanti Bruce frame

the collection as helping to counter the institutionalization of the writing center—a no-longer-new idea that they worry has developed too centralized a sense of how to do things. The alternate image they offer is the coffeehouse, a place where multiple and vibrant literacy activities flourish, where participants invent new ways to work together as need arises. The call for submissions invited contributors to reflect on the role of “play” in writing center work, asking them to describe “how they incorporated creativity into their writing center environments” (xiii). The book is divided into three sections. The first is the most theoretical—although nearly every essay in the book includes both theory and suggestions for practice. The second stays the closest to the everyday work of the writing center, focusing especially on tutor education and development. The third section highlights aspects of writing center outreach and publicity, describing activities that corral a much wider range of stakeholders into the work of writing and performing.

Part I of the collection is subtitled “Explorations in Creativity,” and most of the essays in this section concentrate on defining creativity both as a human activity and as a feature of teaching or tutoring. The opening essay, by Michele Eodice and Elizabeth H. Boquet, defines improvisation in jazz and then applies each of seven features to the culture and practice of tutoring. The brilliance of this essay is the theoretical framework it provides for insights that a teacher may already have had while working with students or tutors: why error is important, how much learning depends on retrospection, how writers in the center need to alternate between collaborating and soloing. They see these practices as allowing tutors and writers to create new practice, to “change the symbolic domain” of tutoring (7), without becoming overly codified or formulaic. This essay and that by Scott L. Miller provide some of the collection’s most powerful bibliographies for further study. Miller highlights Vygotsky’s notion that the self is constructed during language play, and uses this idea to argue that, in order for students and tutors to reach their full creative potentials, they must engage in speaking and writing that’s at least informal, if not resistant, unsanctioned, “salacious, raunchy, insulting, . . . and/or violent” (21). Harry C. Denny’s essay in this section is of special note, because it offers the most resistance to the call for “more creative”

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writing center work. Theoretically, Denny draws most forcefully on the tradition of radical pedagogy, and the essay celebrates how writing centers have served to help less privileged students gain academic capital. But will a focus on new methods and audiences, he asks, weaken our contributions to social justice in the university? (67)

Most of the essays in Part II, “Creativity and Tutoring Writing,” focus on creative approaches to tutor education. Lisa Zimmerelli describes innovations in her tutor education course that were designed to heighten what she calls a sense of “peerness” (100), so that tutors would, in turn, work with writers more collaboratively and less hierarchically. Sandee K. McGlaun’s essay begins with the use of role-playing activities, but extends beyond it to describe a series of skits her tutors present to the whole university, facilitating a discussion of authorship and academic integrity. This essay reflects deeply but concisely on how role-playing gives tutors and writers access to powers that self-consciousness often inhibits (123). This section has the book’s best balance of theory and practice; each essay provides enough detail for readers to try out the practice in their own writing centers, while also considering the deeper implications for teaching and writing. Especially notable in this vein is Anne Ellen Geller’s essay, which describes how she asks her tutors to reflect on their work by drawing pictures of moments from recent conferences. The images included in the essay demonstrate how this practice makes insight rich and accessible. The method is so sound, and described so clearly, that I lifted it out of the book and used it with my own tutors while working on this review. I’m not alone in my admiration: contributors seemed to have reviewed each other’s work before publication, and Geller’s is the most internally cited essay in the collection.

Most of the essays aim to support playfulness in any aspect of writing center work. As an element of this larger conversation, several focus especially on working with students on creative writing. In the second section, Hans Ostrom’s essay is a forceful, welcome response to teachers and tutors who complain that they don’t know how to respond to student fiction and poetry. Ostrom points out the “absurdity” of this concern in a field still largely dominated by professors with vast expertise in—presumably, even a vocation for—reading and writing about literature (147). But taking the tutors at their

word, Ostrom's essay gives both conceptual and practical guidance for helping creative writers, and is especially smart about how a focus on genre can link tutoring across all types of writing.

The creative writing thread is an even more important element of the book's third section, "The 'Creative' Writing Center." The connection is especially clear in Julie Reid's essay, which describes small workshops that can take place in the writing center and that allow students to generate creative writing in the first place. Carol Severino and Cinda Coggins Mosher also describe short, informal writing prompts that a tutor can use to help a writer develop a more fluent practice over the course of multiple sessions. Their essay stakes out territory far from the editing side of the tutoring spectrum, aligning itself instead with young writers' struggles to produce engaged writing in what feel like personal and creative voices.

Two other essays in this section also describe activities related to creative writing, but their primary focus is on writing center publicity and promotion. Wendy Goldberg recounts a developing tradition in her center of public events that celebrate the work of writers across campus. As a result, these celebrations draw a wider audience of students, faculty, and even parents to think of the center as a place for more than just tutoring. A wistful essay by Derek Boczkowski, Ian Randall, Truly Render, and Sarah Sinovic describes a collaborative story, several years in the making, that invited students across campus to become part of the college narrative about writing and that shows how the public, playful nature of participation generated the exact spirit of exploration sought by nearly every contributor in the collection.

In reviewing the collection's major themes, I've left out two essays that deserve separate attention. Given their focus on tutors and on outreach, few essays attend specifically to the practice of working one-on-one with students who are writing academic essays. But Chad Verbais writes of the elegant decision to put toys on the tutors' desks. He is conscious of the risks—writers or their teachers might think that toys signal too lighthearted an attitude (144). But three outcomes result that any writing center would envy: (1) Sometimes students and tutors use the objects to enact questions or struggles in the writing. This development partakes of qualities of drama therapy, and recalls

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McGlaun's essay about role-playing. (2) Sometimes students (or tutors) play idly with a toy while working directly on the text, using the objects as stress reducers or to distract the internal censor while generating language. (3) Having toys in the writing center makes students (and tutors) happy. The second essay I want to highlight is by Jill Pennington and Timothy A. Miank, in which tutors and directors collaborate to solve a perennial problem: how to meet the much larger and more urgent demand near the end of the semester. Their answer is to invite every student in first-year writing to come the writing center at the same time, near midnight the week before portfolios are due. They divide writing tasks into a series of elements and station tutors and teachers to cover each one. As students self-select for their major concern, they are primed to collaborate with each other while they wait for some individualized attention.

Pennington and Miank's essay hit the sweet spot of my expectations for the collection. As much as I enjoyed thinking about the range of tasks that can be approached more creatively, I was especially gratified to read about innovations that advance the writing center's central mission, helping students learn to develop as academic writers. Of course, innovations on every front can be connected back to tutoring. Tutors who learn their craft in a playful atmosphere feel more authorized to innovate; this authority is a prerequisite to good teaching and mentoring. The many practices that focus on creative writing also invite into our work a spirit of imagination that can counteract students' fear of failure. But I want to echo a concern that Denny develops fully in his essay. Sometimes the desire for more creative practice—or for practices that bring different students into the writing center—seems to reflect what Denny calls “misgivings about conventional tutoring” (65). While it can be invaluable to broaden the base of writing center visibility and support, we should be wary that outreach designed to convince all students that we can serve them does not, paradoxically, confuse the students who—by traditional measures—need us most.

In their practices, the essays in this collection are predominantly inclusive. They maintain a deep support for inexperienced writers. But an anxiety lurks in some of the collection's broader reflections about making writing centers more vital and relevant. Invocations

of “institutionalization,” in particular, seem a little pro forma. No essay gives an instance of how the developing consensus about best practices, outlined brilliantly in the essay by Eodice and Boquet, has actually gotten in the way of any writer new to the academy. If I could add one sentence to this collection, it would be a reminder that even in the twenty-first century, providing ungraded, individualized help to students who seek it voluntarily remains on the radical fringe of university practice. I hope that we will, like the contributors in this volume, continue to innovate and play together. Happiness, after all, does not just make our work more effective. It is an intrinsic good. But I also remind us that innovation is already in the DNA of most writing centers, where what we call the routine is nearly always, already, creative.