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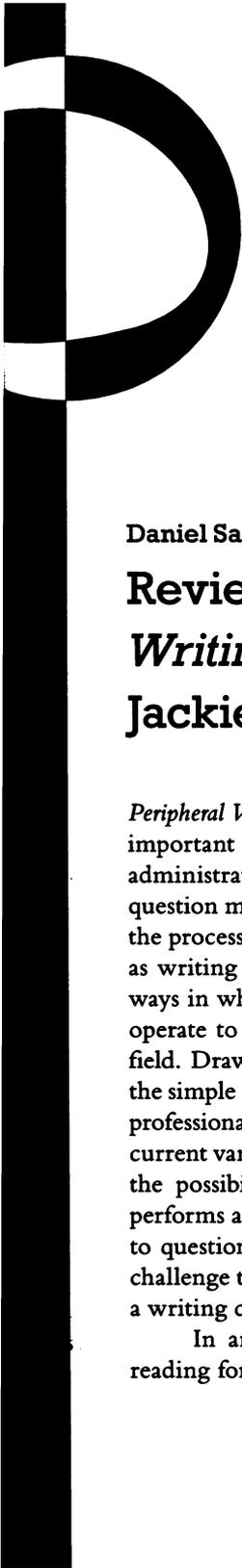
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Daniel Sanford

Review: *Peripheral Visions for Writing Centers*

Jackie Grutsch McKinney

Peripheral Visions for Writing Centers is at once a difficult and an extremely important read. In a critical text for current and future writing center administrators and scholars, author Jackie Grutsch McKinney calls into question many of the most cherished aspects of writing center work. In the process, she addresses hard truths about the disciplinary identity we as writing center professionals have constructed for ourselves and the ways in which our unconscious assumptions about writing centers can operate to hinder us from a full, open, and flexible conception of the field. Drawing on the scholarship of narrative theory, she argues that the simple and straightforward way in which writing center scholars and professionals conceptualize writing center work 1) belies the extent of current variation in approaches to writing center work and 2) constrains the possibilities for future scholarship and development. This book performs a valuable service in calling on us as scholars and professionals to question many of our unconscious assumptions about the field; the challenge to us is to embrace diverse approaches to thinking about what a writing center *is* and what activities it truly engages in.

In an initial chapter that functions as a very solid standalone reading for tutor education, Grutsch McKinney introduces the central

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idea of her argument: the “Writing Center Grand Narrative” (WCGN), a firmly entrenched conception of writing centers as “comfortable, iconoclastic places where all students go to get one-on-one tutoring on their writing” (5). Grutsch McKinney asserts that the WCGN is a narrowly constrained view of writing center work that has emerged out of decades of existential struggle for disciplinary identity and that this narrative operates as a basis for viewing and assessing writing center work. In addition, the WCGN delineates group identity, guiding the discourse of writing center work and marking its adherents as members of an in-group. Grutsch McKinney makes the case that internalizing the narrow view of writing centers associated with the WCGN limits the scope of writing center research, prescribes the scope of writing center practice, and constrains writing centers to operating within only a small portion of their potential.

The second chapter of the text presents the theoretical grounding by evoking theorists whose work bears on the study of narrative, providing a useful overview (drawing on Eubanks and Penner) of narrative theory. The major thinkers Grutsch McKinney draws from are the postmodernist philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard and the cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner. Lyotard presents narratives as cultural constructs that ground societies’ approaches to large ideas such as history, knowledge, and society and then presents postmodernism as the questioning of such narratives. The term “grand narrative” is Lyotard’s, as is the spirit of skepticism and critical stance towards narratives. Bruner focuses on the human penchant for conceptualizing the world and ourselves in terms of stories. Grutsch McKinney stresses three aspects of Bruner’s work on narratives that are important to her argument: that personal narratives conform to cultural expectations; that narratives guide action and learning by forming a basis for how new ideas are integrated, accepted, or rejected; and that any given narrative is a subjective interpretation of reality, one of an infinite number of potential ways of conceptualizing a domain of knowledge. Grutsch McKinney also provides a brief, useful overview of composition scholars who have identified and engaged with problematic narratives that bear on the teaching of writing and of ways in which writing center scholarship has focused on the stories that underlie our work. Grutsch McKinney presents an uncomplicated view of narrative theory in which accounts from different disciplinary approaches are consistent with one another; unfortunately, Grutsch McKinney does not explore the tension between approaches to narrative that have developed out of literary studies and out of cognitive psychology. Her work might have benefited, in particular, from a discussion of the related (and

much more widely accepted within cognitive psychology) concepts of cognitive schemas and scripts. The interdisciplinary spirit of the theoretical grounding of her work is much to be admired, however, and her argument proceeds clearly from key aspects of narrative theory.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 address each of the three main aspects of the WCGN. Chapter 3, based in part on a thoughtful survey of listserv discussions, publications, and writing center websites, presents a breakdown of the remarkably consistent storying of writing centers as cozy homes, borne out in trappings such as lamps, plants, couches, and coffee makers. Grutsch McKinney parses out the origins and reasons for this narrow conception of the physical space of a writing center—the desire to welcome and comfort students, a reaction to the sparseness of earlier writing labs, alignment with an identification of the center as a family, identification against the more formal settings of other spaces in the academy—and points out several of the potentially negative repercussions of this view. This chapter contains a few of the more discomfort-inducing passages in the book, speaking to how many of the patterns we reliably fall into when we speak about writing centers may operate more to mark our identity as members of a community than to accurately describe the centers we work within. In many cases, and even more troubling, they perpetuate a view of writing centers that may be at odds with the very inclusiveness we seek to cultivate. The idea of “home” is perhaps in itself uncomfortable for many students from troubled domestic backgrounds. The metaphor may limit the positioning of the center to engage with students’ degree of comfort with public discourse. And a relaxing atmosphere may undercut the expectation that students will actively participate in the session and may detract from the idea of the center as an intellectual space. In addition to these points, Grutsch McKinney makes a compelling case that the specific idea of “home” being conveyed is highly culturally marked and can operate as much to exclude students who don’t fit within a narrow range of social parameters as it does to welcome those who do.

Chapter 4 engages with that aspect of the WCGN whereby writing centers are conceptualized as iconoclastic, entailing an idea of writing centers as different, as nontraditional, and as a haven for outsiders. The topic frames a discussion of the positioning of writing centers relative to the rest of the academy. Making another of the book’s more unsettling points, Grutsch McKinney describes the identification of writing centers with iconoclasm as essentially a defense mechanism against marginality. Identifying key texts in a survey of stances towards the marginal status of writing centers, Grutsch McKinney explains how the meme of existing outside of the mainstream has developed

in reaction to imposed estrangement and perceived inadequacy, and that this meme has come to be embraced as a key part of the identity of writing centers. She describes the implications of this stance as it pertains to two high-stakes issues in the field: the professional status of writing center directors and the nature of writing center scholarship. She questions the utility of writing centers' identification as outsiders in light of the vital work of forming partnerships and gaining recognition from university administrations. The point she ultimately makes, however, is that our preoccupation with writing centers' role in the university is counterproductive, distracting us from more useful and viable ways of perceiving our relationships to the local and institutional ecosystems of which we are a part.

Chapter 5, which tackles the narrow conception of writing centers as places where “all students go to get one-on-one tutoring on their writing,” contains perhaps the most direct implications for the daily practice of writing centers. Surveying the literature and engaging more closely with her survey data than in other chapters, Grutsch McKinney describes the role of tutoring as a defining practice in writing center work and how the twin assumptions that 1) what writing centers do is tutor and 2) this tutoring takes place in one-on-one sessions exist at the very core of how writing centers are conceptualized. One of the more compelling findings from her survey of writing center professionals is that this narrow construal of *the* writing center is so implicit as to be largely unspoken, taken as axiomatic to the extent that responses tend to assume one-on-one tutoring without mentioning it explicitly. Alongside these core ideas, further constraining the narrow frame within which tutoring is conceptualized, comes a cohort of ideas that have become unchallenged parts of tutoring practice—that tutors are peers, that all students are welcome, that the goal is to create independent writers, and so forth. Grutsch McKinney describes how the centrality of tutoring to the way that we story ourselves has clear benefits in terms of shaping how university communities perceive writing centers, as well as in making our work quantifiable. She argues that it also has clear costs in the association of tutoring with remediation and the compartmentalization of the writing center as a locus for addressing deficiency. Grutsch McKinney speaks compellingly, drawing heavily on the scholarship of Nancy Grimm (for instance, “Regulatory Role” and “Rethinking”) about how individual appointments can operate to place the onus for addressing writing deficiency on students (as opposed to faculty or institutions). Grutsch McKinney also argues that individual appointments make writing centers complicit in perpetuating negative institutional messages and attitudes relating to the acceptability of

stigmatized dialects and societally/regionally marked Englishes. She explores as well (based, again, on a careful review of the literature) how the tutor/tutee dyad carries with it a set of assumptions about the cultural identity of both participants in the session. The chapter closes with a survey of extant approaches to writing center work (alternative approaches to tutoring and nontutoring activities in which centers engage) that fall outside the narrative of the WCGN, cautioning us against too narrowly defining our work, storying it in a way that ignores complexity in favor of telling an easily relatable story.

The arguments of chapter 5 are based in large part on a survey of 177 respondents on the WCENTER and SSWC listservs. The methods of this survey, which posed a series of open-ended questions to respondents to ask how they view writing centers generally and how they view their own center specifically, are presented briefly in chapter 5; the results appear in full in an appendix that comprises a third of the book. To whatever extent there is a weakness in Grutsch McKinney's excellent and important text, it follows from a lack of alignment between the author's argument and the empirical methods used to support them. The survey provides a wealth of information, but readers are largely left to their own devices in gleaning it. Chapter 5 engages most deeply with the survey but could have benefited from more analysis of the interesting survey results; chapters 3 and 4 could both have been made stronger with greater support from the survey data, specifically with sections that make explicit how the survey data support the claims being made. Subsequent work in the promising research vein of how writing centers and tutoring are conceptualized would do well to explore alternate methodologies borrowed from other fields, in particular psychology. Grutsch McKinney's surveying of the literature (and, in particular, common tutor "training" texts) to uncover latent beliefs about writing centers is reliably insightful and thorough; survey tools on the other hand may not be the most effective means of getting at people's unconscious assumptions.

The text closes with a chapter addressing her most significant point: if our conception of writing centers remains defined within the narrow and inflexible scope of the WCGN, then the field will split such that other ways of viewing the work of engaging with student writing will emerge as competing models rather than as acceptable variation in practice. Grutsch McKinney points to the multiliteracy centers movement (Fleckenstein; Murphy & Hawkes) and the push towards centers for writing excellence (Isaacs) as the most relevant current challenges to the WCGN. She calls for a new story, one that embraces difference and variation in the identity of writing centers and writing

center studies rather than defining the field in terms of the small set of overlapping values and practices shared across all centers. And she calls for scholarship that challenges the narrative, telling alternate stories that will ultimately, as they accrue weight outside of the narrowly defined scope of the WCGN, force a more broad conception of our work.

There will be thoroughly understandable resistance to this book—it's an intensely critical text that addresses precisely those aspects of writing center work that are most deeply cherished by a large number of people in the field, and it errs on the side of honest insight where there is a choice between truth and tact. It is, however, essential (if bracing) reading for those with a stake in the future of the field. The clear articulation of the issues around disciplinary identity that define the current state of writing center studies have profound, far-reaching implications for the future of writing centers. Jackie Grutsch McKinney presents a powerful argument that we are being held back by an excessively confining view of writing centers, and *Peripheral Visions* will be cited in future scholarship as a one of a growing collection of texts that desire to set the stage for the next phase of engagement with student writing.

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Daniel Sanford is the director of the Center for Academic Support and associated faculty in the Department of Linguistics at the University of New Mexico. His research spans the cognitive sciences, learning and writing center theory, and composition; his interests within these fields include formulaic language, language rights, adult learning, and pedagogical models. His work has appeared in *Cognitive Linguistics*, *The Journal of Cognitive Science*, *Composition Forum*, and other venues.