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Nathalie Singh-Corcoran

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Nathalie Singh-Corcoran

**Review: *The Oxford Guide for
Writing Tutors*
By Lauren Fitzgerald &
Melissa Ianetta**

Tutor education guides, sourcebooks, and manuals are a staple in the profession. I have a dozen on my bookshelf. You may have even more. The genre ranges from the practical “how-to tutor” to the more theoretical “why we tutor.” Lauren Fitzgerald & Melissa Ianetta’s *The Oxford Guide for Writing Tutors: Practice and Research* (2016), is a guide of a different sort. The text is reminiscent of others like Gillespie & Lerner’s *The Longman Guide to Peer Tutoring* (2008), a best-practices primer for tutors-in-training and Murphy & Sherwood’s, *The St. Martin’s Sourcebook for Writing Tutors* (2011), an anthology of research on writing tutoring. But *The Oxford Guide* is also something more. This guide asks us to consider questions of epistemology. How do we know what we know about tutoring, and what counts as knowledge?

Fitzgerald & Ianetta, former editors of *The Writing Center Journal*, respond to recent scholarship that calls on writing center professionals to be makers of knowledge (Lerner, 2014; Driscoll & Wynn Perdue, 2014; and Liggett, Jordan, & Price, 2011), or to put it more crudely, up our research game. Fitzgerald & Ianetta, take up the challenging task of

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teaching new tutors, (and frankly, all of us) how to become reflective practitioners. They argue that it is essential to engage in reflection as we work with writers (p. 52). Reflection helps us understand, develop, and hone our practice. Reflection asks us to consider what is working, what isn't, and why. As they explain, "the process of testing out strategies might raise questions for you and point (to) gaps between extant research and experience" (p. 52). Those gaps are an excellent starting point for inquiry.

The Oxford Guide is divided into four main sections: a general introduction to tutoring, a handbook, research methods, and readings. The text is flexible, and that design is intentional. The chapters need not be read in order. Those responsible for staff development can tailor their reading assignments to suit their professional development contexts.

While the readings can be customized, the first chapter of section one, "Introduction to Writing and Research," sets the framework for the book. Fitzgerald & Ianetta immediately situate tutors as researchers by prompting them to challenge commonplaces. For example, they ask readers to consider the numerous arguments about how best to teach students how to write: "By teaching them grammar ... By letting them write about their personal experience ... By using plagiarism detection software" (p. 4). Proponents of each viewpoint often argue from their felt-sense of what is or should be true rather than research-based evidence (p. 4). This example is one of several meta-moments in *The Oxford Guide*. We have our own writing center commonplaces: always sit next to the writer, never talk more than she does, never hold a pen. But these practices are themselves perpetuated because of our sense of what feels right in a tutoring session rather than what actually works for the writer.

Fitzgerald & Ianetta never suggest that we abandon our sacred practices but that we interrogate them. Their overarching argument is reminiscent of Kerri Jordan's Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association (MAWCA) keynote (2013). In her talk, she took on another of our reified practices: the read aloud protocol. I recall listening to the opening few minutes of her plenary and bristling. "Of course every center uses a read-aloud protocol. It's the best way to engage a writer during a tutoring session," so went my internal monologue. However, as Jordan continued, I quickly realized my assumptions about *the best way to engage a writer* were based on the lore that I had learned and internalized two decades prior as an undergraduate peer tutor. In truth, I didn't really know the efficacy of the read-aloud protocol, but Jordan's message was not that we stop our practices, but that we should investigate *how we know they work*.

We see this same epistemological frame in, "A Tutor's Handbook" the second major section of *The Oxford Guide*. Fitzgerald & Ianetta

suggest that those responsible for staff development begin their reading journeys with section two, especially if tutoring is eminent. Novice tutors who only have a few days or even part of a semester to prepare for their new roles will find their most pressing question—"What do I do?"—answered here. The handbook covers vetted and most-often employed tutoring strategies such as using questions or the Socratic method, dramatizing the presence of the reader, scaffolding, and negotiating priorities in a session. However, Fitzgerald & Ianetta do not stop with the how-to. In section two, along with all of the other chapters and sections, they provide supplemental material in the form of discussion questions, writing prompts, and possible inquiry projects. This additional content points to another meta-moment. Earlier in chapter one, they say, "Even as we've assembled what we think are best practices in tutoring writing, we are also aware that future research will prove some of these ideas wrong or will show tutors better strategies and approaches" (p. 6). The future is now. The supplemental content encourages tutors to begin that research.

The handbook portion of *The Oxford Guide* addresses WAC/WID and multi-modal/multimedial tutoring, but it also tackles more abstract concepts like identity politics. While a chapter on identity is not typical of most tutoring guides, save *Longman*, Fitzgerald & Ianetta's approach implies that it should be. We all write and tutor from somewhere, and that place (or those places) inform how we interact with writers. "Chapter 5: Tutor and Writer Identities" is like the others in section two in that strategies for tutoring are offered, but their treatment of identity politics is akin to teaching methods proposed by Rowan & Greenfield (2011). In "Beyond the 'Week Twelve Approach.' Toward a Critical Pedagogy for Antiracist Education" Rowan & Greenfield caution against the one-off, spray-and-pray lesson on diversity typical of many tutor classes. They argue that conversations about diversity shouldn't just be relegated to week 12 on the syllabus. They instead forward a conceptual framework model where tutors "engage critically, actively, and purposefully with contemporary theory to consciously shape their experience with writing center practice" (p. 143). We see an embodiment of the conceptual framework model in chapter 5 of *The Oxford Guide*. In "Tutor and Writer Identities," Fitzgerald & Ianetta get their readers asking questions about how they perceive their own identities, the identities of others, and how their expectations for writers may reveal more about their own identities (and biases) than the writers themselves. Tutors are encouraged to consider these reflective questions each time they work with writers.

The first two sections of *The Oxford Guide* introduce readers to the field of writing center studies and some of the research that informs

our current tutoring practices. The first two sections also encourage tutors to explore their burgeoning questions about how and why we work with writers. After engaging with those sections, tutors will likely begin developing hunches about which ideas or phenomena deserve more attention. “Research Methods for Writing Tutors,” the third main section, helps students structure their research questions. Using Steven North’s, *The Making of Knowledge in Composition* (1987) as their own frame, Fitzgerald & Ianetta unpack methodologies often used in writing center research. They cover lore, theory, history, and empiricism (qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods). They suggest which research methods are best suited for different kinds of research questions. For example if tutors are exploring a long-standing partnership between Engineering and their writing center, that inquiry might best be suited to historical research (p. 194). If a tutor wanted to explore theories of mental toughness in sports science and its applicability to writing center work, they might choose a theoretical framework.

In addition to helping tutors determine a methodological frame for their research, the section offers heuristics like an “Argument Planning Brainstorm” (p. 198). It contains information on conducting ethical research. It provides sample human-subject, solicitation letters (p. 238), and Fitzgerald & Ianetta even spend some time explaining key terms in quantitative research such as central tendency, mean, mode, and standard deviation (pp. 246–249).

At the beginning of this review, I mention that *The Oxford Guide* is a hybrid of sorts: part handbook, part reader. The readings come at the end of book in “Section 4: Readings from the Research.” This section is comprised of 21 articles. Some articles like Bruffee’s, “Peer Tutoring and the Conversation of Mankind” will look familiar to seasoned writing center workers but others like Hitt’s “Access for All: The Role of Dis/Ability Studies in Multiliteracy Centers” will be brand new. The readings serve a two-fold purpose. Like other guides that are also anthologies, the articles orient readers and expose them to a larger scholarly conversation. However, the readings also serve as mentor-texts. All of the research methodologies introduced in the previous section are represented, and many of the issues raised in the best-practices section are explored. In addition, and this is one of the best parts of *The Oxford Guide to Peer Tutoring*, peer tutor research comprises well over half of the represented articles. The book affords readers not only the opportunity to develop their own research questions and studies, but it also shows them how their peers have done it (and that it can be done).

I can easily envision incorporating the book into staff development. I teach a tutor education class every spring and have been

thinking of ways to integrate the text. Fitzgerald & Ianetta have helped me reconceive several of my assignments and activities including an observation reflection that I ask my tutors-in-training to complete. The assignment is typical of many writing centers. Students watch a tutoring session take place, take notes, and then write-up what they saw (from the way the tutor greeted the writer to the way the session ended). We then discuss the observations in class and talk about the similarities and differences in the sessions they observed. During our conversation, we explore what happened and why, making reference to best practices like greeting the writer, setting the agenda, and engaging the writer. Rather than complete one formal observation, I'm considering an observation journal wherein tutors would describe multiple sessions. I'd still require they write one up, but I'd ask them to describe the session that caused them the most cognitive dissonance. Perhaps they'd focus on a session where there was palpable tension, and the writer and tutor didn't establish a rapport. Perhaps they'd focus on a session where they thought the tutor was being too directive. Perhaps they'd focus on a session with a writer they'd be uncomfortable tutoring. These spaces of discomfort are good reflective starting points. Why don't the sessions look like textbook, best practices? What does a new tutor's discomfort suggest about identity and identity politics? Such conversations would be rich and nuanced and could be threaded throughout the semester. They would also be productive starting places for more extensive tutor inquiry projects.

There is still much I haven't said about *The Oxford Guide*. Fitzgerald & Ianetta's book is nearly 600 pages, and I only have so much room to express my gratitude for their exceedingly thoughtful, thorough, and well-researched work. Even with such high praise, there may still be some who are skeptical of the recent emphasis on research (with a capital "R") in the writing center world. Some may say that they have no time to conduct a research study, or perhaps your program doesn't offer a tutor education class, so tutors don't have time to ruminate about issues such as identity. For those who may still feel doubtful, I suggest we employ a teacher-researcher frame of mind. Certainly teachers endure similar time constraints, but as Anderson (n.d.) remarks, "All that distinguishes teacher research from the everyday work of teaching is that teacher research consists of intentional and systematic inquiry in order to improve classroom practice." In short, it's not such a stretch to be both a teacher and a teacher-researcher just as it's not a stretch to be both a tutor and a tutor-researcher. The move from practitioner to reflective practitioner starts with a desire to improve practice, and Fitzgerald & Ianetta have given us the tools to begin our work.

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About the Author

Nathalie Singh-Corcoran is a Clinical Associate Professor and the Writing Center Coordinator at West Virginia University. She is also a past president of the International Writing Centers Association. Nathalie has authored several publications, including “A Collaborative Approach to Information Literacy: First-year Composition, Writing Center, and Library Partnerships at West Virginia University.”