



Jill Gladstein

## Review: *Around the Texts of Writing Center Work* by R. Mark Hall

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In our writing center, as peer writing tutors move on from the required gateway course, they share the challenges that arise because of the differences between what they learn in the course and what they experience in a consultation. For example, the tutors express a desire for the writing center to be an inclusive and safe space while at the same time they express their discomfort and frustration when students do not perform the genre of the writing center consultation as the tutors expect. This tension between inclusion and expectations pushes us as a center to explore our shared practices and beliefs in order to highlight the disconnect between our theory and practice as individuals and as a center. As an experienced director, I still wonder which methods and tools to utilize to encourage this exploration by those working in our center. During the required gateway course, in which tutors read widely in writing center and composition theory and conduct a final inquiry project, the tutors share what they believe should be valued practices, but the reflections on their practice after they complete the course illustrate that theory and beliefs do not always translate into a comfortable practice. How do we continue the learning that begins in a required course or set of meetings to help tutors explore connections between their beliefs and their practices as they continue their work in our centers?



R. Mark Hall's *Around the Texts of Writing Center Work: An Inquiry-Based Approach to Tutor Education* provides readers with a comprehensive approach for integrating tutor training with a center's research agenda, asking those who work in a given writing center to serve as practitioner researchers of their own practice within a writing consultation and the center itself. He argues for the examination of documents from our centers, such as tutor-session notes and observation transcripts, because these documents serve as artifacts of our practice, and when they are analyzed by those of us working in the center, we can have discussions about what we value and how those values do or do not play out in writing consultations. Hall asks us to take an inquiry-based approach to tutor education in which we ask our staff to continually theorize and interrogate our shared practices embodied in our texts in order to uncover and articulate the *why* behind the *what* of our daily practices in our writing centers. He shows us how to use inquiry to build a community of practice.

Hall's book comes at a time when the field of writing center studies continues the call for more research of our practices. Much like the *The Oxford Guide for Writing Tutors: Practice and Research* (2016), Hall brings together tutor education and research in order to show readers that having a research agenda does not need to be an extra burden for a writing center or its members. Instead, by sharing a rich description of how he utilizes documents from his center to theorize about, research on, and reflect upon the current practices of his tutors, Hall argues that our documents ask us to interrogate the relationship between theory and practice in order to develop the habits of mind necessary for this work. His text pushes new writing center administrators to go beyond a simple how-to approach for tutor training and provides a space for more experienced writing center administrators or established centers to revisit their practices in order to make their values more explicit.

In separate chapters, Hall presents five different documents that may be found in the everyday practices of a writing center: 1. a list of valued tutoring practices; 2. transcripts of tutoring sessions; 3. tutor-session notes; 4. a peer-tutor blog; and 5. an assignment for ongoing tutor education. In each chapter he applies a different conceptual framework to the presented document to show readers how the document could be pulled apart and analyzed in order to help tutors uncover the relationship among theory, practice, and research. For example, in Chapter 2, Hall shares the process of having his staff identify and list the most valued practices in their work as writing tutors as a means of creating a community of practice. He purposely calls them valued because

while "best" implies the only/right way to tutor, "valued" acknowledges that these practices are not arbitrary or neutral. They are ne-

gotiated. They are privileged. Thus “valued” prompts us to confront the ways that power circulates in and around such a list. “Valued” invites questioning, such as “Valued by whom?,” “Why?,” and “To what ends?” “Valued” invites us to trace the ways our writing center community’s shared goals, meanings, and practices evolve over time. (p. 21)

Hall’s distinction of the word *value* shows us the level of analysis he expects an inquiry-based approach to tutor education to take in our own centers. The list of 20 valued practices includes such items as “establish a rapport with writer” and “address writer’s concerns” and reads much like a list you would find in many centers. However, this list doesn’t serve as an instruction manual Hall hands out to his tutors each semester; through this chapter he illustrates how he instead utilizes the list to provide a safe and reflective space for observations of tutors. The list of 20 valued practices provides Hall’s tutors with a structure for their observations, in which tutors use one or more of the valued practices to guide their observation. Observers ask the tutors which values they would like the observer to focus on, which allows both the observer and tutor to learn from the observation and follow-up discussion. More than the list itself, the creation and discussion of this list, paired with observations, highlights the messiness of writing center work, which allows the tutors in Hall’s center to see observations of their work not as evaluative of how well they tutor but formative or insightful into the relationship between individual practices and shared values.

To further promote the value of tutor observation and to illustrate where tutor education could overlap with a center’s research agenda, in Chapter 2, Hall shares a synthesis of multiple studies conducted over the course of three years at three different centers where he amassed a set of 163 observations. Hall, with others in his centers, assessed transcripts of the observations to see how often the different valued practices occur in tutor consultations. He presents the findings to illustrate how this assessment informs the tutor education in his center.

Hall ends each chapter with an assignment he uses in his center. For example, with the chapter on observations, Hall shares the Video Case Discussion assignment. With this assignment, tutors are placed into small groups to share and discuss two filmed consultations. In light of Hall’s earlier arguments in favor of observations, the assignment presented here provides guidance for readers wishing to carry out this activity in their own center.

Throughout the text, Hall presents current discussions or debates from writing center practice but with a new lens. He does this by presenting and engaging with literature from many disciplines and using this

literature to interrogate the featured document of that chapter. In Chapter 3, he introduces the conceptual framework of activity theory, a concept that comes from the social sciences, in particular the fields of psychology and education. Hall introduces activity theory through Engeström and Miettinen's definition, which argues that all human activity includes six components:

- an activity, something to do, an “object,” “objective,” “outcome,” animated by some “motive”;
- people who engage in the activity, participants, or “subjects”;
- “Tools” for accomplishing the task;
- “Rules,” “conventions,” or “customs” that govern the activity;
- a “community” of people beyond the immediate participants, who engage in the activity;
- “Division of labor” among participants. (Hall, pp.48–49, citing Engeström and Miettinen)

After introducing readers to activity theory and its components, he examines transcribed tutoring sessions using activity theory to reframe the discussion on what it means for the tutor to have disciplinary knowledge of the text the writer brings to a consultation. He asks tutors and administrators to “consider the tutorial itself as an activity system” (47) in order to explore tutor expertise. He moves the disciplinary discussion away from what an individual tutor knows about the content of the paper by referring readers back to the concept of communities of practice he introduced in the previous chapter and putting that concept in conversation with the community-of-people aspect of activity theory. Hall makes the point that even though tutors may participate in a “community of practice beyond the immediate participants” (49) of the consultation based on their course work or major, it is more important in the activity of a writing consultation that a tutor be seen and function as a member of the writing center community.

Activity theory allows tutors to reassess the activity taking place during a consultation. Hall argues that the activity of a writing consultation is not the sharing of disciplinary knowledge between tutor and writer; rather, it is an activity to explore what a writer knows or does not know about their writing. Hall reframes the discomfort and uncertainty expressed by many tutors so the focus is on expertise in working with the learning process of the writer rather than on a lack of disciplinary knowledge. Through his reading of research on novice and expert practices in several fields, Hall views writing tutors as “expert novices.” He sees writing tutors gaining expertise in the area of novice writers through their familiarity with the misconceptions and conceptions student writers encounter as they perform different academic genres. Hall shows us through the rest

of this chapter how writer and tutor misconceptions and conceptions of the activity of writing and learning play out in the activity of the writing consultation.

Some readers may become overwhelmed by all that Hall presents in his text. At times it seems to be two books in one—one or more research studies between discussions of pedagogy and literature. Readers may see the number of individual texts represented in a studied corpus (163 observations) and wonder how they can create a similar process when those documents or the time and experience required to analyze them do not exist. Writing center administrators may have good intentions to do this kind of work but may feel they don't have the time or wherewithal to do this level of exploration. Perhaps recognizing this possibility, Hall in his final chapter presents a graph to illustrate the connection between documents. Creating a list of valued practices may lead to observations, which may lead to transcripts, which may be coded and utilized in an assessment report. Hall suggests writing center administrators focus on one document, and he provides a list of questions to begin this analysis.

The kind of work Hall suggests in his text may ask more of a center than it is prepared to do. It assumes some of these documents already exist and that much can be gained from a little more time and effort with these documents. As I have heard the ongoing calls for writing center research, I do wonder if the ability to theorize writing center work comes from a privileged position because it demands additional resources. A question I had throughout my reading of Hall's text involved how I would gather the headspace and time for myself and my staff to take on and perform the inquiry-based approach Hall presents. Throughout my reading I found myself jotting down notes on changes we can make to our tutor-education program, but I also wondered when this work would take place. Would I be asking for extra time from my staff, or could this work take place during center hours and meetings?

Hall's detailed presentation of his own practices and analysis illustrates that an inquiry-based approach to tutor education that integrates pedagogy with research should not be seen as a privilege nor an extra burden but as closer to what should be common practice in our centers. What seem to be everyday documents in Hall's center (transcripts, session notes, a blog) may not be the case for others. However, Hall demonstrates in each chapter how theory, research, and practice all come together through an inquiry-based examination of writing center documents—whatever those documents are or even if those documents do not currently exist. Through rich description and highly contextualized chapters, Hall allows for an inquiry-based approach through which his readers can question and explore their own practices and texts. He asks us to look at what artifacts

of our practice already exist in our centers and shows us how we can pull apart these artifacts to uncover our values and practices. Though it remains overwhelming to imagine the possibilities for what I can do within my own center as we examine our documents, after reading Hall's text, I have new ideas and frameworks for how I will help our peer tutors navigate the tension they experience when putting into practice their beliefs about their role and work as writing tutors. Together we will explore their questions in hopes of helping them develop a more comfortable practice that will be informed by theory and research.

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