

12-1-2021

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Recommended Citation

Bouza, Emily (2021) "Review: Theories and Methods of Writing Center Research: A Practical Guide edited by Jo Mackiewicz and Rebecca Day Babcock," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 39 : Iss. 1, Article 18.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1973>

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Emily Bouza

Review: *Theories and Methods of Writing Center Research: A Practical Guide* edited by Jo Mackiewicz and Rebecca Day Babcock

With nine chapters on theories and 10 chapters on methods, all contributed by knowledgeable professionals, *Theories and Methods of Writing Center Research: A Practical Guide*, edited by Jo Mackiewicz & Rebecca Day Babcock, is the research guide I have been waiting for. I have previously conducted two IRB-approved studies on writing centers and am in the middle of my third; without this guide, I have had to pull from multiple sources and have tried to read between the lines of published articles to determine the theories, methods, and methodologies that might best suit a writing center-specific context as a site for inquiry. While I will still turn to multiple sources while designing any research study and still encourage others to do so as well, this collection offers a starting place to ground research projects within the field of writing center studies.

While in my own research I have turned to many research guides in writing studies and even linguistics, education, and psychology, there are a few notable predecessors to this book within writing center studies. *Researching the*

Writing Center: Towards an Evidence-based Practice, by Rebecca Day Babcock & Terese Thonus (2018), now in its second edition, has been critically beneficial in helping me situate my research within the body of writing center scholarship, as it chronicles existing studies in many key areas of inquiry. *Strategies for Writing Center Research* by Jackie Grutsch McKinney (2016), walked me through the steps of the research process and introduced me to how to best conduct some of the more common methods of writing center research. *The Oxford Guide for Writing Tutors*, by Lauren Fitzgerald & Melissa Ianetta (2015), is also a good introduction for student tutors starting research projects, as it guides the beginning researcher through the steps of conducting a study. However, while these previous books have examined the state of the field and outlined methods, *Theories and Methods of Writing Center Research* is the next step for me as a researcher and really the next step for writing center studies as a whole. This book will help researchers ground their research in specific theories, critically engage in methods with an understanding of the limitations and benefits of those methods, and gain the comprehensive wisdom and experience of the 26 contributing authors.

The book is divided into two sections, one on theories and another on methods. The nine chapters that discuss theories cover genre theory, second language acquisition (SLA) theories, transfer theory, activity theory, disability theory, Vygotskian learning theory, critical race theory, queer theory, and feminist theory; the 10 chapters on methods address ethnography, corpus analysis, mixed methods, grounded theory, historiography, case studies, meta-analysis, rhetorical analysis, discourse analysis, and survey strategies. Each chapter can be read on its own as a guide to that particular theory or method, though the introduction and the conclusion provide useful insights on research in writing center studies as a whole, and I would recommend perusing both in addition to those chapters most useful to your own work. Mackiewicz & Babcock guided the contributors towards addressing four fundamental topics in each of their chapters: defining a particular theory/method, justifying its use, proposing research questions that might benefit from the application of the theory/method, and positing the place of theory/method in the future of writing center studies.

With these grounding topics as a common thread throughout the book, each chapter provides fundamental knowledge, points to past studies as examples, and draws the field towards the future, all while situating the authors' responses in each of their personal experiences. Mackiewicz & Babcock state that their goal for the collection is to help researchers "formulate research questions that both interest them and that benefit the field" (p. 1). As Mickey Harris explains in the foreword, this book is important for graduate students and novice researchers, but it is perhaps equally important for experienced writing center administrators, as "all writing center directors should be acquainted with

how to conduct institutional research in order to build, expand, and maintain an effective writing center” (p. xiv).

While I am familiar with most of the theories covered in this collection, I was able to learn so much, especially about how these theories are situated within the field of writing center studies. For example, I am well acquainted with feminist theory from my days as an English literature undergraduate student, but Michelle Miley’s chapter drew my attention to the history of the nurturing nature of writing center work and how this has been devalued over time but could be revitalized and given greater power through a feminist lens. Each chapter gave me enough foundation to define the theory and understand some of the theory’s origins in other fields. Each contributor also addressed their own relation to the theory, how they have used it to guide their work, how prominently the theory has been discussed in writing center scholarship, and possible new areas for inquiry.

I truly appreciated how the chapters on methods all contained personal elements, with many authors sharing their own research journeys and reflecting on the past research that led to an invitation to contribute to this book. This approach seemed to follow Steven J. Corbett’s call in his chapter on rhetorical analysis for researchers to share the stories of their research and provide a surplus of meaning so that readers can connect to the narrative aspect as well as draw their own conclusions from the data. I also greatly appreciated those chapters that included details on potential issues the authors had experienced in their research or seen others run into. Lori Salem’s chapter on survey methods was particularly helpful in highlighting four main challenges she has seen in approaching survey research in writing center studies and how to address each challenge.

As someone who is interested in research on non-native English-speaking clients at writing centers, I was disappointed to see that cognitive-based theories of SLA are given more prominence in the book than other theories and that a discussion of code-meshing or translanguaging/translingualism is left out. Within their chapter on cognitive-based SLA theories, Carol Severino & Emilia Illana-Mahiques share their critique of cognitive-based theories of SLA for not embracing social and cultural context, and they provide a description of sociocultural theory as well. However, I believe this chapter misses an opportunity to include a more social justice-oriented direction for SLA research in writing center studies in the promotion of global Englishes through translanguaging and multilingual language ideologies.

I was also disappointed not to see a chapter on participatory action research, as I think this method is particularly suited to writing center studies that value both the peer relationship between tutor and writer and undergraduate tutors as contributors to research and knowledge-making. In fact, as participatory action research draws on many methods, it could have been addressed in

multiple chapters, but none of the contributors mentioned this approach to research design. Grutsch McKinney (2016) does address action research in her book *Strategies for Writing Center Research* and includes a description of the method, how to conduct it, and its limitations; I suggest that researchers turn to Grutsch McKinney's book for more information on this approach.

Many of the contributors bring up the idea that conducting research using the theory or methodology they discuss in their chapter will allow researchers to speak to scholars in other disciplines. In their chapter, Cara Marta Messina & Neal Lerner name mixed-methods approaches (those that combine quantitative and qualitative research) as the "best way forward for writing center studies to create knowledge and to reach a broader range of audiences" (p. 208). Similarly, in their chapters, Randall W. Monty and J. Michael Rifenburg both speak to going beyond the academy, Monty through calling for corpus analysis as a route for interdisciplinary collaboration within and beyond the academy and Rifenburg through using case studies as a method to work outside of "disciplinary silos" to create "social impact" (p. 146). Additionally, in his chapter, Steve Price speaks to the benefit of reaching outside of writing center studies when doing meta-analyses of writing center work and the ability of meta-analyses to legitimize our work to other disciplines.

Several contributors also bring up the possibility for writing center work to have a great impact on writing pedagogy across disciplines: John Nordlof speaks to the potential of Vygotskian learning theory research within writing centers to affect discussions of learning processes in other fields; Corbett shows how rhetorical analysis and telling stories can allow us to "reach outside typical writing center publications to a broader audience of educational reader" (p. 170); and Layne Porta Gordon speaks to the possibilities of genre theory for training tutors to do transdisciplinary work.

In the conclusion, Mackiewicz & Babcock share the trends they see across the chapters, including a focus on RAD (replicable, aggregable, and data-supported), or empirical, research. A related theme that I saw throughout the book was the importance of interdisciplinarity and the ability to speak to those outside of our immediate field of writing center studies and even beyond the scope of composition studies. Even in specifying that RAD is a term only used in writing studies, the editors point towards the importance of expanding the audience for writing center work because, as the authors note, "[Isabelle Thompson] argued that making up our own term, rather than using the more common term 'empirical research,' only hinders non-writing-studies researchers from finding our work" (p. 224, note 1).

Mackiewicz & Babcock also identify a theme of diversity throughout the chapters, specifically the "importance of studying the diverse populations that constitute writing center clientele, staff, and administration" (p. 221). I agree that this is a critical direction for writing center research. I would add that

many chapters went beyond suggestions about simply how to study our diverse populations and called attention to how a theory or method could promote social justice, both within writing centers and beyond our immediate contexts. For example, Frankie Condon, Neisha-Anne Green, & Wonderful Faison, in their chapter on critical race theory, push researchers to reflect on the ways we might knowingly or unknowingly have contributed to and acted within systems of White supremacy within our institutions and writing centers. Additionally, Mitch Hobza & Harry Denny, in their chapter on queer theory, speak to the importance of studying “the inevitable conflict that arises from pushing a center to be as inclusive as possible” (p. 45) despite the less than inclusive environments of most schools and the viewpoints of writing center staff. Also, Noah Bukowski & Brenda Jo Brueggemann speak to critiquing through disability theory the systems undergirding writing center work. Furthermore, Rifenburg shows how case studies can be used as a tool for leveraging social justice, especially through more public-facing scholarship, and Monty shares how collaborations through corpus analysis work can promote social and restorative justice. In addition, Messina & Lerner, in their chapter on mixed methods, forward the claim “that researchers should always acknowledge their own positionality, their ability to colonize and appropriate narratives, and their biases and subjective experience” (Bishop, 1992, as cited on p. 215). The theme here is more than just a necessity to study our diverse populations, but a necessity to do research that promotes more critical and socially just writing centers, institutions, and even greater communities.

Theories and Methods of Writing Center Research is a must-read for anyone hoping to do writing center research. While previous works have offered a view on how to conduct research, none have given such a comprehensive guide to the key theories and methods of writing center studies, especially with the added insight of experts who have done highly acclaimed work on the topics discussed. Mackiewicz & Babcock share that writing center research “has grown up” (p. 1), and this book is a reflection of that. I add that this book is the necessary next step for writing centers as a field in its own right. The more critical discussions we have about how writing center studies can work with and speak to other disciplines and community partners, the more we will further the field by giving it more visibility and prominence within and outside of academia, particularly through the call for social justice-focused research. *Theories and Methods of Writing Center Research* has opened my eyes to many new ways to conduct my own work, but more important, it has helped me to define and expand the scope of writing center studies in a way that will impact every conversation I have about the field.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Morris Young for first assigning a book review assignment and then giving me plenty of leeway with finishing that assignment after the pandemic started. I would also like to thank the entire review and editorial team for their feedback and kindness through this process.

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