

New Directions/Critical Reflections: The Past, Present, and Future of Writing Center Research

Paula Gillespie, Alice Gillam, Lady Falls Brown, and Byron Stay, eds. *Writing Center Research: Extending the Conversation*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2002. 296 pages \$59.95 (cloth), \$27.50 (paper).

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As a new member of my department's writing program, and the WPA field at large, this collection offered me the opportunity not only to reacquaint myself with writing center studies, but also to listen in on the current conversations circulating around the issue of research within the discipline. Divided into three sections, this text situates writing centers as sites of "self-reflective inquiry," "institutional critique and contextual inquiry," and places where "inquiry" is translated "into practice" (v). More than a review of various dialogues and studies, however, the collection acknowledges its disciplinary roots as it also widens the scope and structure of theoretical and practical inquiry.

Opening with a call for "more explicit talk about what we mean by research, what should count as research, and how to conduct research," the Introduction provides an economical history of early composition studies' research patterns (xv). Offered as a way to better understand and articulate the origin of writing center studies' own research goals, this history grounds the collection methodologically and epistemologically. It reflects on past incarnations of writing center theory and practice and discusses how inquiry is currently being conceived within the discipline. Articulating the practical, theoretical, methodological, and ethical dimensions of this varied and rich body of work, Alice Gillam's commencement concludes with an invitation to its readers: follow the lead of the collection's authors, it urges, critically engage in and reflect upon the ongoing "conversation about the nature and purposes of writing center inquiry" (xxvii).

Such introductory remarks by Gillam do not, however, lead to a prescriptive or narrow view of research practices, for the picture drawn by this collection is one of complexity and variance. Moving in the first section, for instance, from Gillam's discussion of early writing center work that tended to argue for the very legitimacy of writing centers' existence, the next three essays claim writing centers as places where researchers are born (Boquet), investigate the national listserv WCenter as a location (albeit virtual) where

“real” research is conducted (Gillespie), and reflect on the myriad positive effects that arise when writing center “insiders” conduct participant-observer research (Lerner). The third section of the collection returns to the ever-present negotiation between theory and practice and continually asks its audience to recognize the tensions, pitfalls, and possibilities offered by writing center work. In Nancy Welch’s essay, for instance, she employs psychoanalytic object relations theory to analyze the stories tutors tell. Claiming that “any single story [about work done in writing centers] contains a surplus of meaning,” she contends that the critical “examination of a story’s excesses” can serve as a productive “model for reflective research” (206). As such, she asserts that narratives —or lore —contain a plethora of truths that, when acknowledged, can allow often suppressed or overlooked stories to emerge. Tutoring stories thus function as sites of inquiry brimming with illustrations of theory’s intimate relationship with practice; for the concepts emerging from these stories are not separate from the tales’ plot, but arise from within it. Ultimately, Welch’s study contends that practice cannot be contained by research, but must be kept in dialogue with it; her analysis of writing center work and theorization of writing center “lore” compel a sustained interaction between researcher and subject, and reading and text.

The middle portion of *Extending the Conversation*, with its focus on the contexts in which writing centers are situated, will be of special interest to WPA’s. Driven by institutional concerns and administrative dilemmas, these six essays encompass such diverse issues as how writing centers are discursively represented (Carino), how computer-assisted technology can impact the work of the center (DeVoss), and how the application of grounded theory can be used to study writing center work (Magnotto Neff). Here, practical advice is offered alongside theoretical considerations: Muriel Harris provides suggestions for how writing center directors can educate “campus administrators so that they realize that running a writing center requires [. . .] institutional research” (87), while Jon Olson, Dawn J. Moyer, and Adelia Falda present a “research-oriented, student-centered application of assessment that is low pain and high gain for the writing center administrator” (112).

This compilation, with its inclusive lens and forward-looking premise, offers rhetoric and composition professionals —whose institutional roles and academic interests defy the boundaries of administrator, researcher, and teacher —a comprehensive resource laden with a diversity of scholarly projects. *Writing Center Research: Extending the Conversation* provides not only a basis for informed institutional operation, but also functions as a means of investigative inspiration. It maps the state of research in writing center studies and encourages a critical exploration of this still-developing terrain.