

## Review of *Two-Year College Writing Studies*

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Jensen, Darin, and Brett Griffiths. *Two-Year College Writing Studies: Rationale and Praxis for Just Teaching*. Utah State UP, 2023. 200 pages.

In *Two-Year College Writing Studies*, Darin Jensen and Brett Griffiths have curated a collection of essays they describe as “a love letter to the two-year college as an ideal” (22). Its authors write about history, pedagogy, theory, and administration, all within the unique contexts of two-year colleges. It’s written for stakeholders at those institutions, and as a writing teacher at a rural community college, I am Jensen and Griffith’s target audience. However, this book deserves a wider readership among our profession because its contents offer essential contributions to writing studies’ ongoing conversations about labor, professionalization, and linguistic justice. I cannot, of course, fairly review a love letter written for me or the ideals I share with the authors, but I will describe its contents with joy and, I hope, convey some of the lessons that teachers working with America’s most diverse writing community hope to share with peers who would listen.

For those unfamiliar with composition at two-year colleges, *Two-Year College Writing Studies* is a good introduction. The authors take care to describe the unique context in which their contributors’ knowledge is produced, and make substantial efforts to translate the often informal work of two-year college teacher-scholars into robust theory and praxis. The task is formidable. It’s well known that the majority of community colleges don’t have formal writing program administrators or research demands, despite the fact that their faculty teach the majority of first-year writing classes in the United States. It’s reasonable to say they know the most about teaching “basic” writers and running first-year writing programs for diverse populations. However, they are not central to conversations about either. One need only browse reading lists in most graduate programs to see it. Indeed, this disparity between the labor and scholarship about the labor is a visceral tension throughout the collection. The rationale for *Two-Year College Writing Studies*, from its sober voice, to its text selection, to its organization, all feels informed, haunted even, by the depreciated status of the two-year college, its student populations, its faculty, and their expertise. In this sense, the collection fills a gap in writing studies canon. It acts as “a set of counternarratives threading through our discipline and cuffing at the margins of our profession” (162), making an argument that two-year college

teacher-scholars are and always have been a cornerstone for the writing studies field.

*Two-Year College Writing Studies* isn't the first collection to frame the work and scholarship of two-year college instructors as central to larger disciplinary conversations. It's a continuation of Mark Reynold's and Sylvia Holladay-Hicks's collection *The Profession of English in the Two-year College*, Patrick Sullivan and Christie Toth's *Teaching Composition at the Two-Year College*, and dozens of other essays, published primarily in *Teaching English at the Two-Year College*. Reynolds writes the book's foreword, and all of the contributing essayists have published similar work before. In fact, faculty at two-year colleges have vied for a place in disciplinary conversations since their inception more than a century ago. Given the historical context and exigence of the collection, it emanates an ethos of de-centering knowledge that can be felt most vividly by the teachers who live and work in the spaces Griffiths and Jensen describe. Overall, the book lingers on context and conditions. In their own words, the collection "seeks to create a space that allows the most diverse of institutions . . . to be examined so our practices and selves can serve our students and the institutions' democratic potential" (22).

The book contains seven essays, bookended by an introduction and afterword by the editors. As a body of work, its contents begin by establishing historical context. Patrick Sullivan, a household name in two-year college scholarship, uses the first essay to paint two-year colleges as social justice institutions that struggle to fulfill their promise. Sullivan builds on the 1947 Truman Commission on Higher Education to argue that the establishment of a robust and comprehensive community college system in the United States was an "extraordinary historical moment" (27) in American democracy. He further argues that civil rights activism in the 1960's and 70's by African American and Latinx activists led to federally (well-) funded community colleges in the United States. Sullivan's history establishes a secondary argument: that community colleges have fallen short of delivering equitable and accessible education. Structural racism still harms outcomes for marginalized student populations, neoliberal ideology diminishes working conditions for teachers, equitable assessment remains largely out of reach at institutions with excessive administrative oversight, and the same austerity that has affected most institutions of higher learning has been especially hard on community colleges. Sullivan's history of the community college is, like all history, highly rhetorical. It recalls a community college golden age that may not have existed. But he is right about the distinct position community colleges and their stakeholders find themselves in, and paints a vivid picture for fellow writing teachers at other institutions.

The next three essays highlight several examples of classroom pedagogy used to effectively teach in the historical contexts summarized by Sullivan, contexts where students are often marginalized and provided with inadequate resources to meet academic expectations. In the first, Bernice Olivas asks how the social justice mission of the community college can be translated to praxis in the classroom. She astutely observes that one of the most pressing challenges for community college students is their alienation from performing academic identities, of not feeling like “college students.” To address the issue, Olivas argues that the writing teacher must also be an identity agent. She grounds this practice in identity control theory (ICT), and adopts a pedagogy focused on self-reflection, separation of judgment and observation, the use of dialogue, and a focus on building alliances and common ground with students. Her courses ask students to examine writing identities and misconceptions, privilege, marginalization, and the ways college writing might affect them. It’s not uncommon for first-year writing courses to directly address the student’s writerly identity, but in Olivas’s case, and for all community college teachers, identity agency directly affects student success. That is, addressing academic identity must accompany cultural identity and writerly identity. Her work reminds us that many community college students face the additional challenge of cultivating an academic self before they can undertake the rigorous work expected of them in higher education. Given this challenge, the composition teacher bears the responsibility of preparing students for more than writing—they are identity agents for their students.

In a similar vein, Emily K. Suh’s contribution to the collection addresses the ways in which instructors are ineffective identity agents. Using Bourdieu’s concept of *symbolic capital*, i.e. socially assigned resources and experiences with nonmonetary value (62), she posits that teachers sometimes fall short of helping students translate the assets they bring with them to college into academic success. Her essay employs two case studies from immigrant students who relied on cultural norms and personal circumstances to navigate college in the absence of traditional academic skillsets. Ultimately, the students were limited by relying only on their prior knowledge and experience because teachers failed to create collaborative plans that could help the students utilize their symbolic capital in the context of academic expectations. Suh’s case studies are uncomfortable to read because, for most two-year college writing teachers, they are all too common. Fortunately, she offers optimism in the form of lessons learned that readers might use to bridge the gap between symbolic capital and academic literacy. First, says Suh, teachers must recognize the symbolic capital that their students possess. Next, they must help them distinguish between prior knowledge and

aspirational identities. Finally, teachers must collaborate with students to make meaning from their experiences within an institutional context (74).

In the next essay, Jamila M. Kareem applies critical race theory (CRT) to composition studies' "critically conscious practices" (79). She exposes embedded racial ideologies and offers a way forward for a more raciolinguistically just method of teaching composition, with lists of exercises, readings, and module designs. Kareem argues that the CCCC *Students' Right to Their Own Language* (SRTOL) fails to go far enough to disrupt dominant raciolinguistic narratives and images. Similarly, she critiques the CCCC *Statement on Second Language Writing and Multilingual Writers* (SOSL), arguing that while it does expose students to criticisms of raciolinguistic attitudes, it does not encourage students to use their own language practices in critical reflection. Kareem looks most favorably at the CCCC 2020 *This Ain't Another Statement! This is a DEMAND for Black Linguistic Justice!* She argues that where others have fallen short, the document has the potential to promote systematic change among administrators, especially at two-year college institutions. Kareem then offers more linguistically equitable instructional practices to the reader. These include an "academic cultural language statement" that promises students she will not assess non-dominant English differently than standard English, so long as they are aware of the linguistic, grammatical, and rhetorical effects of their work. She also teaches multiple raciolinguistic rhetorical traditions, including African American, Latinx, and Indigenous, and western rhetorical practices. Lastly, she assigns readings on language ideology and myth. Kareem's suggestions imagine a richer and more translingual approach to writing. Her comparative rhetorical model should prove especially useful for first-year writing teachers, especially those without composition training, because it escapes the typical Aristotelian box consisting of logos, ethos, pathos, and the rhetorical situation.

Three concluding essays consider how the unique positions of community college writing programs and/or departments influence decisions at the programmatic level. Rhonda Grego thinks about the ways that departmental administrators can professionally develop their faculty and equitably assess student work within thirdspaces, or knowledge making spaces distinct from formal institutional and classroom activity. As she transitioned from instructor to Dean of Humanities at her institution, Grego quickly recognized that she needed to satisfy institutional assessment standards without imposing de-professionalizing assessment rubrics on her faculty. Given the limitations for professional development at her institution, she utilized writing studio models and individualized assessment journals to provide students and faculty with a place both outside the classroom and

beyond the confines of institutional structure in which to consciously reflect on their own practices. Thirdspace thinking seems especially important for writing departments at community colleges and institutions who cannot always provide adequate resources (time, space, funding) for faculty to cultivate professional identities.

In their essay “The Painful Eagerness of Unfed Hope,” Kirsten Higgins, Anthony Warnke, and Jake Frye resist what they call “good enough” assessment practices—or the mentality of meeting minimum institutional mandates as a response to working in austere conditions. They argue that following a “good-enough” schema leads to reification of the status quo. Despite noble intentions, argue the authors, when faculty entertain assessment practices that only meet minimum requirements, they ultimately “structure in and perpetuate inequities that undermine our students and profession” (129). For Higgins, Warnke, and Frye, the status quo equates to ineffective and unethical assessment grounded in ideologies that seek to improve student success by quantifying their performance. Normative assessment is, in their words, a neoliberal anxiety that is “an outcome assessment’s pathology even as it purports to be its cure” (132). As an alternative to the “good enough” mentality, the authors suggest dispositions of disruption and rhetorical attunement. Disposition entails professional engagement with disciplinary traditions in order to critically assess and de-normalize the status quo. Rhetorical attunement involves a conscious effort of listening, observing, and “paying attention to what often goes overlooked or undervalued in our institutions” (136). They conclude by offering explanations for how this might be put into practice. Higgins, Warnke, and Frye propose that all assessments be grounded in ecological snapshots of student demographics, that faculty take a translingual approach to students’ language goals, and for assessors to reorient their understanding of language as a multiplicity of practices. The chapter marks an ideal rather than a study, but it’s one that many readers who may feel stuck in the mud with assessment may find encouraging. Their work imagines what a future in writing assessment could look like. While they admit that their solutions may not be possible in all institutions, the essay creates a powerful primer for critical reform.

Yet, the editors understand that even the best ideas face limitations beyond faculty members’ control. In the collection’s final essay, Joanne Baird Giordano and Holly Hassel describe their successful implementation of a faculty and discipline-based writing program, only to have it gutted when their state legislature decided to consolidate higher education and place all community colleges under university control. Giordano and Hassel remind the reader that community colleges are particularly susceptible

to state and national political mandates, and must always respond to whichever direction political winds blow. This sensitivity to political whims requires college faculty to be activists themselves, argue the authors. However, they add that some issues faculty face cannot be addressed with individual activism, and require strategic organizing at a national level. Ultimately, they advocate for organizations like the Two-Year College English Association (TYCA) as a resource that gives “two-year college faculty the ability to address imposed mandates in ways that can limit harm to teachers, students, and their communities” (158). The essay reminds us that while all community colleges exist in unique ecologies, faculty must engage with larger knowledge networks in order to establish a more robust professional ethos capable of weathering politics that don’t always have students’ or teachers’ best interests in mind.

*Two-Year College Writing Studies* is only a snapshot of the rich, complex, and century-old profession of two-year college writing instruction. It is a love letter, as Jenson and Griffiths claim, but reads like a disciplinary introduction. Because of this, its 174-page length feels brief, as if each of the essays only scratches the surface of what their authors could provide to a reader. The collection offers resources for two-year college instructors to think about their historical context, how they might address longstanding issues in open-access classrooms, and new ways they might work as disciplinary experts at an administrative level. However, any reader seriously interested in tapping into the body of knowledge two-year college writing studies has cultivated must look beyond. *Two-Year College Writing Studies* is a starting point for academics who want to know more about two-year colleges, and is especially relevant for WPAs at universities and teaching colleges who are increasingly tasked with constructing concurrent enrollment courses, reforming basic writing courses, and addressing diverse classrooms filled with underprepared students. The collection also serves as a reminder of the classroom, administrative and activist possibilities for faculty who already work in those spaces. Its essays provide pathways for disrupting fossilized and harmful assessment and placement practices. It offers guidance on professional development where taken-for-granted resources in other contexts may not be available. Lastly, it offers more equitable, just, and effective possibilities for praxis in the classroom. Jenson and Griffiths’ book should be read by anyone who teaches writing, but cannot be taken as a definitive guide. It is only the beginning, and as the authors remind us, the work continues, and the next step begins with the readers.

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