

Centering Research, Practice, and Perspectives: Writing Center Studies and the Continued Commitment to Inclusivity and Accessibility

The Oxford Guide for Writing Tutors: Practice and Research, by Lauren Fitzgerald and Melissa Ianetta. Oxford University Press, 2015. 597 pp.

Writing Centers and Disability, by Rebecca Day Babcock and Sharifa Daniels. Fountainhead Press, 2017. 356 pp.

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The birth of writing center studies as an academic field can be traced back to the late 1970s and early 1980s, when *WLN: A Journal for Writing Center Scholarship* (formerly *The Writing Lab Newsletter*) and *Writing Center Journal (WCJ)* produced their first issues in 1976 and 1980, respectively. Influential figures in composition studies like Kenneth Bruffee, John Trimbur, and Andrea Lunsford helped establish the field, which focused on various pedagogical issues early on and into the 21st century—perhaps the most well-known being the directive/non-directive instructional continuum. As the field developed, scholars like Irene Clark, Evelyn Ashton-Jones, and Jeff Brooks addressed the development and effectiveness of directive and non-directive, or non-interventionist, approaches to writing center tutoring. More recently, research informed by rhetorical analysis (Corbett), discourse analysis (Mackiewicz and Thompson), and activity theory (Hall) has helped the field paint a more complicated picture of the directive/non-directive instructional continuum, especially its complex relationship to tutor and writer knowledge and identity. And although this concern remains an important touchstone in writing centers and in the field, contemporary scholars have turned their attention to new topics, which are taken up by the books reviewed in this essay.

Both texts are grounded in the history of the field and will help new and veteran tutors alike build their understanding of writing centers and their history. Both texts also provide a wealth of insight for individuals new to and familiar with writing center research and instruction. Most importantly for writing center studies, these texts reflect the field's ongoing commitment to inclusivity and accessibility in scholarship and in the day-to-day work of writing center practice.

The Oxford Guide for Writing Tutors: Practice and Research, edited by Lauren Fitzgerald and Melissa Ianetta, is a comprehensive yet flexible resource intended for a broad audience including new and veteran writing center tutors at the undergraduate and graduate-levels, writing fellows or course-specific writing

tutors, and writing center administrators. Its central focus is on the preparation of new one-to-one teachers of writing, most commonly in tutor training courses or practicums. Importantly, the authors see tutors as active participants in the scholarly conversations happening in writing center studies. Fitzgerald and Ianetta advocate for this stance, in part, because they claim that tutors are experts on their own academic experiences and, as they draw on those experiences, tutors often recognize unexplored assumptions in writing center pedagogy and in the field more broadly. Therefore, to help tutors become active participants in the field, Fitzgerald and Ianetta argue that writing center professionals should expose tutors-in-training to research methods applied by scholars, encourage and guide tutors' research projects about writing and tutoring, and showcase tutors' research and findings in scholarly publications.

As Fitzgerald and Ianetta write in the book's preface, "this approach to tutor training...allows tutors to test their theories of *what* might work in a writing center session and helps them to move our professional conversation toward *why* such things happen" (xiv-xv). *The Oxford Guide* enacts this tutor-centered ethos by featuring a total of fifteen articles written by undergraduate and/or graduate student tutors. These articles were previously published in venues like *WCJ* and *Young Scholars in Writing* and appear in the final "Readings from the Research" section. That section complements the earlier three sections of the text, which address the history of writing centers; tutoring strategies, writing processes, and tutoring online and across different disciplines; and lastly, the kinds of research valued and conducted in the field.

The editors' choice to incorporate work written by undergraduate and graduate tutors demonstrates the field's continued commitment to promoting tutors' voices and knowledge. Fitzgerald and Ianetta's book is another marker of the field's inclusive ethos, which has been long-reflected in *WLN*'s tutor-authored column appearing in issues since 1984. That is, the field makes space for arguments and insights from emerging scholars who are not professors or writing center directors, or even graduate students in many cases. They are often undergraduates new to the field who are eager to question and critique the methods they are trained in.

To help tutors contribute to the conversation, *The Oxford Guide* offers an in-depth overview of possible research methods for writing center researchers and of possible questions that can be asked and pursued using certain methods. Following section two, "A Tutor's Handbook," and its practical focus on topics like tutoring practices and online tutoring, the authors of *The Oxford Guide* provide an accessible synthesis of the distinction between lore and method in writing center studies and delineate key concepts like reliability and validity in chapter eight. Also in chapter eight, the authors describe four kinds of research in the field, including lore, theory-based research, historical research,

and empirical research, and they provide resources for readers who want to design their own research projects.

Those resources might easily be incorporated into any tutor training course that requires a research project. Fitzgerald and Ianetta offer a “Research Method Heuristic” table (194) that models a research question (e.g., “Why do so few engineering students use our writing center?”) and displays examples of general and specific questions that lore, theory-based research, historical research, and empirical research can answer. Based on that sample research question about engineering, the authors also include an example of how to brainstorm and plan one’s research. In the planning and brainstorming example, Fitzgerald and Ianetta include pointed questions (e.g., “What are the expectations of the venue in which I’ll share my research?” “Does my research plan seem valid?”) and sample answers to those questions, which demonstrate how to plan a research project (198).

To encourage readers of the book to begin planning their own projects, the authors include a “Research Method Brainstorm” template that combines the “Research Method Heuristic” and poses the same questions posed in the sample planning example about engineering. Readers are encouraged to answer those questions themselves as they begin thinking critically about potential research topics in the field. Also in section three, Ianetta and Fitzgerald explain approaches to theoretically based inquiry, historical research, and empirical research in more depth. That is, they familiarize readers with the processes of doing archival history and oral histories, along with guides of how to proceed through each research process. Chapter eleven, which focuses on empirical research, provides an accessible outline of common approaches to quantitative research and qualitative research in writing center studies, with more emphasis on the qualitative. Ianetta and Fitzgerald cover how to craft surveys that correspond well to research questions, describe the use of critical discourse analysis for analyzing tutorial talk, and define the benefits and processes of the case study method. The book also addresses research ethics. Writing center directors are sure to find the overview of ethics and the Institutional Review Board (IRB), as well as the sample informed consent forms, helpful for getting students started with their research projects.

Beyond the practical research guidance that Fitzgerald and Ianetta provide, their text also includes a section with almost 300 pages of previously published scholarship, titled, “Readings from the Research,” which includes landmark work like Kenneth Bruffee’s “Peer Tutoring and the ‘Conversation of Mankind’” and Neal Lerner’s “Searching for Robert Moore,” alongside work by undergraduate and graduate tutors. This final section is an eclectic collection of articles that focus on ESL tutoring, tutoring basic writing, motivating writers, navigating gender dynamics, and attending to what graduate student authors Mandy Suhr-Systma and Shan-Estelle Brown describe as the “everyday

language of oppression in the writing center” (508). These topics reflect a clear commitment to articulating strategies for building inclusive communities in local centers and throughout the field.

Writing Centers and Disability, edited by Rebecca Day Babcock and Sharifa Daniels, parallels *The Oxford Guide's* valuing of scholarly inclusivity by featuring work from authors beyond the boundaries of composition studies and writing center studies. Authors from around the globe (e.g., United Kingdom and South Africa) as well as from fields like educational psychology and library sciences, are represented in this collection. The book arrives a little over a decade after the Conference on College Composition and Communication's (CCCC) adoption of “A Policy on Disability in CCCC,” and the International Writing Centers Association's (IWCA) adoption of a “Position Statement on Disability and Writing Centers” in 2006. Since those policy shifts, the interest in disability within composition studies and writing center studies has continued to grow and flourish with work by scholars like Margaret Price, Jay Dolmage, and Stephanie Kerschbaum. Altogether, *Writing Centers and Disability* is a timely text that contributes to ongoing scholarly conversations about intersections between disability and writing centers. And, like *The Oxford Guide*, it reflects an ongoing commitment to inclusivity and accessibility in the field and in day-to-day practice.

Interestingly, the IWCA's drafting of the position statement on disability motivated the book, as the drafting committee included the co-editors, Rebecca Day (now Babcock) and Sharifa Daniels. In their introduction (chapter one), Babcock and Daniels write that “in formulating this [IWCA] position statement, the committee realized that the topic was too important and relevant to leave at a simple statement, so the committee decided to pursue a book-length, thoughtful, and critical exploration of disability and writing centers” (2). Babcock and Daniels' primary aim is to fill the sizeable gap in writing center research on disability. *Writing Centers and Disability* is organized into three separate sections: Narratives: Descriptions of Experiences, Advice, and Suggestions; Research on the Intersections of Disability and Tutoring Writing; and Policies, Practices, and Programs for Students with Disabilities in the Writing Center. Babcock and Daniels see their collection as valuing *lore* (e.g., anecdote; narrative) in the history of writing center scholarship, while prioritizing RAD (replicable, aggregable, and data-driven) research as essential for the field to build understandings of how disability figures into and proves consequential for writing center work.

A central argument across the collection is that personal narratives of disability matter and should be paired with more formal research on students with disabilities to “enhance practice and better serve students” (332). And while Babcock and Daniels do not provide as comprehensive an introductory

overview of writing center history and research methodology as Fitzgerald and Ianetta do in *The Oxford Guide*, each contributor to *Writing Centers and Disability* carefully outlines their theoretical and methodological approaches. This collection of empirical research by established scholars like Margaret Price provides a strong model for burgeoning graduate student and undergraduate researchers who are interested in studying the experiences of students and writing center staff with disabilities and in creating conditions within writing centers that promote accessibility.

In the first section of *Writing Centers and Disability*, narrative essays by people with disabilities who work in writing centers focus on a range of health conditions in relation to tutorial work, including cerebral palsy, brain injury, and mental health disabilities (e.g., anxiety disorders). Citing arguments by disability scholars Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson and Brenda Jo Bruggemann, Babcock and Daniels claim that these narratives have a place in their collection because listening and learning “about disability from the perspective of the disabled” is an important way for teachers to recognize and understand a need for pedagogical and institutional change and to begin thinking about how to work towards that change (8).

Chapters two to five make up section one. Chapter three by Carol Ellis, for instance, is a former writing center director’s personal narrative account of sustaining a brain injury that altered her life and led to her difficulty with learning and adapting to changing technologies important to her employment (39). Her narrative, which is one of the more intense and vulnerable depictions of mental disabilities in the collection, draws connections between how disabled individuals are marginalized in academia and how writing centers have a marginalized status in the university. In addition to narratives like Ellis’ that challenge normative assumptions and expectations about faculty ability within academia, the book includes stories about working with mentally disabled students. For example, in chapter four, Julie Garbus tells her story of working as a faculty member while experiencing postpartum depression, alongside stories of her experiences tutoring students affected by mental health disabilities including panic disorders and manic episodes. After telling anecdotes that play out in her center, she provides practical suggestions for helping students facing similar situations. Garbus recommends that writers set up ongoing appointments with the same tutor to build trust (64) and advises that tutors reconsider their typical reliance on nondirective approaches, which might confuse and overwhelm anxious students who need more direction and guidance (66). The essays in this first section offer valuable stories and suggestions for rethinking and refining pedagogical practices in writing center work.

In the collection’s second section, there is a turn to original empirical research. As Babcock notes in the book’s concluding chapter, “Research Review

and Call to Research,” before this edited collection, her past articles on deaf students were “the only formal published research studies based on observation of tutoring sessions with disabled students in the writing center” (329). Daniels and Babcock include four original research studies that draw on different methodologies. In one, Margaret Price reports results from her case study of Bella—a student with a seizure disorder and emotional disabilities (e.g., panic and anxiety disorders). Using semi-structured interviews and analysis of Bella’s written texts, Price examines Bella’s view of her identity as an English major by describing emerging themes like independence/dependence, singled out/blending in, response to authorities, and expertise in literary studies (140).

Price concludes that Bella’s experiences reinforce the need for writing center practitioners to ask how each individual student learns best, and what tutors can do to best facilitate that learning. Another chapter by Babcock discusses her study using grounded theory to analyze transcripts of several tutoring sessions between deaf students, hearing tutors, and interpreters, and to examine follow-up interviews (192). She finds that deaf students focused more on grammar errors in their sessions than hearing students and suggests that when tutors are nondirective, deaf students might become more confused and frustrated (209). Babcock importantly points out how directness or what she calls “straight-talk” is one cultural value of the deaf community, which can conflict with the writing center pedagogical emphasis on non-directive feedback (210). Also in this second section, writing instructor Marshall M. Kitchens and his student Sandra Duhkie study the use of voice recognition software Dragon NaturallySpeaking 7 (DNS) for helping students with cognitive disabilities. They highlight the tutoring relationship between Micah, an adult with a cognitive impairment, and Sandra, a student enrolled in a college composition class. The piece chronicles what Micah and Sandra learn about the technology, its affordances, and its shortcomings, as they collaborated with one another and helped Micah complete tasks like sending emails and building multimedia presentations. Although it is certainly not generalizable to all contexts, this article might help tutors-in-training better understand and think critically about the affordances of voice recognition software and applications within tutorial contexts. Ultimately, the strength of this section is its modeling of approaches to empirical research projects on disability in the writing center context.

The final section of *Writing Centers and Disability* shifts its focus to policy in the writing center and academy. Four chapters discuss policies, practices, and innovative programs for students with disabilities in the writing center. For example, in chapter ten, UK scholars Sue Jackson and Margo Blythman recount their programmatic advances in working with mentally disabled students through their student support program at University of the Arts London. They

look closely at strategies employed by their program to support four different students with a range of conditions such as obsessive-compulsive disorder and depression. The positive benefits they saw support their argument in favor of collaboration between academic departments and student health units in the academy. Later, in chapter thirteen, Sharifa Daniels and Doria Daniels discuss disability in South African higher education and examine inclusive practices of the writing center at a South African university. Whether these reports situated in local sites can be generalized to other settings is an open question and a notable but reasonable limitation with this kind of work. Nonetheless, this work forms a nice foundation for administrators when developing policies in the writing center and university.

Finally, another way that *Writing Centers and Disability* and *The Oxford Guide* each reflect an ongoing commitment to inclusivity is how they engage and challenge readers. In other words, readers are invited into the scholarly conversation initiated by each author in these collections. In Babcock and Daniels' book, the end of each chapter provides readers with a few critical questions that are meant to help generate further reflection and discussion about writing centers and disability. For example, at the end of her case study, Price asks readers to reflect on the themes that organize her analysis: "How might these themes create tensions for disabled students working with writing center tutors? How might they provide a source of enriched communication and collaboration between tutors and learners?" (161). Such questions make the collection relevant for both advanced scholars and undergraduate tutors-in-training who are concerned about practice and research. Fitzgerald and Ianetta also structure the reader's experience with "For Discussion" questions at the start of each chapter that aim to help reading comprehension and facilitate class discussion. "For Writing" questions dispersed throughout each chapter are more formal and may be used as starting points for journal entries or blog postings in which readers make connections between concepts. "For Inquiry" questions push readers to think generatively and critically about their plans for original research as well as how that research would fit into their current understanding of writing center work and the field.

About four decades since the emergence of writing center studies as a discipline, its ongoing commitment to issues of inclusivity and accessibility is clearly represented in both of these recent publications. The field, and the people who work in it, see the value of including many voices from varied scholarly backgrounds and experiences as well as from across the globe. By centering research, practice, and a multitude of perspectives, these texts offer exciting new directions for established and emerging scholars.

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