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A Pragmatist Approach to Writing Center Staff Education

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by Beth Carroll

Pragmatist philosophy puts writing center theory into action.

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When I began collecting materials to teach my first writing center staff education course, I realized just how tricky it would be to give new consultants everything they would need to be prepared for the work of the writing center. Although some of the available staff education manuals offer solid, practical advice and although other texts give nice overviews of writing center theory, I found myself doubting whether these guides would adequately cover the necessary ground for new consultants.

I do not mean to suggest that these guides do not offer important and useful information; the fact is, they do. Rather, the problem I sensed was the disconnection between the guides and the more interesting research coming out in the field: Nancy Grimm's critique of our "good intentions" in helping writers master academic discourses, Beth Boquet's notion that the off-task moments and the "noise" of our writing centers hold transformative potential, and Nancy Welch's argument that playfulness and creativity should be cultivated in our sessions. Much of the recent work on writing centers suggests that we should be questioning the assumptions we hold about the goals and methods of writing center work, particularly the assumption that helping a student produce a satisfactory text for a course is the ideal outcome of a session. The problem with organizing a course around these compelling theories, though, is the lack of attention to the practical matter of what these postmodern sessions might actually look like. I was left unconvinced that either

the practical guides or the postmodern theories alone would work to prepare new consultants. I knew I needed both. And something more.

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As I faced the challenge of bringing together the highly theoretical calls issued by current writing center research and the practical how-to of a session offered by many of the staff training guides, I found in pragmatic philosophy a useful framework for bringing together the practical with the theoretical. Pragmatism, particularly the type offered in the theories of C.S. Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, gives neither a formula nor a theory but a framework, a method for putting theory into practice and a method for testing conclusions. I then organized my course around a set of pragmatist principles from which to test theories and practices by asking consultants to focus on outcomes; in short, I asked them to reflect on their own experience, to hold in tension the theories we read, the practices offered in the guides, and their analyses of what happened in their writing center sessions.

A pragmatist orientation to writing center work focuses on several principles, which I articulated early to the new consultants. We came back to them many times through the course, looking for ways to apply them to our work in the writing center and in their intellectual reflections on that work. I will explain below some of the pragmatist principles I found most useful and give brief examples of how I used -- and continue to use -- them in the course.

First, pragmatists argue that seemingly oppositional ideas are brought into a non-oppositional relationship if we inquire into their underlying principles. For example, in my staff education course we read several perspectives on particular debates, such as the effectiveness of directive and non-directive approaches to peer tutoring, not to discover which approach is "right" or "true," but rather to discover where they overlap and how context determines when one approach might be more appropriate than the other. Using pragmatism, we can also mediate the binary of theory and practice by refusing to separate the two: according to Peirce, ideas are defined by their consequences. We need only look to the effects of theories, and there we will find their value. In the course, we read Grimm's postmodern theories of writing center work, and we ask ourselves what they might look like in practice, and we challenge ourselves to imagine their usefulness. We read from practical guides, and we aim to articulate the theories underlying the practices offered.

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Second, according to pragmatic philosophy, context determines the truth or usefulness of any idea. Following Peirce and James, we ask ourselves what differences make a difference. In writing center work, differences of identity, belief, and behavior–of consultants and writers–often make huge differences in outcomes of sessions. I ask the consultants to analyze their most successful and unsuccessful sessions to see what kinds of differences might have contributed to the outcomes.

Third, human experience should be the test of any conclusion: ideas are defined by their consequences, which are known only through experience. As

James explains, we must be ready to let go of our beliefs the moment experience is against them. Dewey points out that experience must be articulated, then shared with a community, then revised as new experiences and perspectives come to light. In a writing center course, this means providing many opportunities for naming experience, discussing it with others in the course, and rethinking conclusions based on new experiences and the experiences of others.

Through teaching this course and reflecting on its usefulness (also a pragmatist move), I have come to believe that new consultants need practical strategies in order to imagine their work in a writing center. But what they also need is knowledge of current theories that challenge, confirm, or extend some of the more practical approaches, as well as a method for discovering what this knowledge means to their work in the writing center. Pragmatism offers consultants a framework--based on sensitivity to difference, context, and their own experience--and a method for discovering for themselves their own philosophies and approaches to their sessions. What pragmatism offers us also is a framework for the course, a way to bring together a range of readings, focus class discussions around our experiences, and test conclusions we draw about the work of the writing center.

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