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Professionalizing the Everyday

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A Review of *The Everyday Writing Center: A Community of Practice*

R. Evon Hawkins

When I think of tutors' professionalization, I inevitably consider the texts I encourage tutors to read — not just tutor training manuals but also the theory and research that shape my understanding of our field. One such text that I've recently adopted for a new tutor training course is *The Everyday Writing Center: A Community of Practice* by Anne Geller, Michele Eodice, Frankie Condon, Meg Carroll and Elizabeth Boquet. Although I find this to be one of the most progressive writing center texts in our scholarly canon, it's likely not on many tutors' reading lists because it was written ostensibly for writing center administrators. Despite its title, this book's insights into writing center leadership are not confined to the everyday nuts and bolts of running a center but are also valuable for tutors.

Tutors, of course, know better than anyone that the "ideal" tutor/ session/client/writing center we describe in tutor training and in most writing center scholarship doesn't exist.

Geller, et al., present writing centers as training grounds for literacy leaders who are able to flexibly blend theory and practice by focusing on the learning moments available to everyone in the writing center. As a former tutor and current writing center administrator, I believe *The Everyday Writing Center* is an important text for tutors because they are integral to writing center leadership, as this issue of *Praxis* makes clear. The authors conceive of leading, learning, and collaborating as intertwined activities; this view can help tutors

move beyond thinking of what should or should not happen in a writing center and enable them to theorize what actually happens in their writing centers every day.

The Everyday Writing Center focuses on two interrelated strands: the "everyday" of the title and the "community of practice" of the subtitle. Tutors, of course, know better than anyone that the "ideal" tutor/session/client/writing center we describe in tutor training and in most writing center scholarship doesn't exist. The everyday is the difference between the carefully constructed mock tutorial and the messy, imperfect, and sometimes frustrating tutoring session that a tutor engages in multiple times a day. Rather than lament the nonexistence of this ideal, *The Everyday Writing Center* asks us to build theory and improve practice by reflecting on what *does* happen and why — not by emphasizing what *should* happen and analyzing why it doesn't. As the authors put it, we should embrace "the ability of everyday exchanges to tell us something about our writing centers as representing what Etienne Wenger calls 'communities of practice'" (6). Even our best, most elegant theories can't describe that "something," for theory divorced from experience doesn't account for the interactions between real writers, readers, tutors, students, directors, and teachers.

To be theorized, the everyday lived experiences of writing center work must be approached through what the authors term a "Trickster" mindset. In other words, the everyday is only valuable if approached through a particular lens. "Are we willing," they ask,

> to be awakened by jarring moments, by anxieties about our practices, policies, and procedures? Are we prepared to question the value of a set of prescribed and relatively stable steps that get the tutor from here to there in exchange for a philosophy that might leave tutors and writers standing alone (yet together) at a potentially fantastic crossroad? (18)

The Trickster figure, a Coyote or a Loki or a Hermes (to use the authors' examples), challenges us to see the everyday in new ways and to forgo complacency in favor of complexity.

Respect for plural identities is part and parcel of the authors' idea of a writing center community of practice constructed out of everyday lived experience.

We see the everyday complexity of our work when we consider just two of the challenges the authors pose about received theories of writing center practice: the dichotomy between "directive" and "non-directive" approaches and the assumption that tutors have a stable, univocal identity. Chapter 2, "Trickster at Your Table," asks why tutors should strive for an "ideal" technique (whether directive or non-directive) instead of responding to each client's needs and focuses on how tutor training methods can teach responsiveness instead of idealism (21-22). The road to being a Trickster tutor starts with reflecting on what we actually do in practice and *why* we do it, rather than staunchly adhering to techniques from tutor training manuals, which tutors may (falsely) hope will provide "no-fail strategies" or "quick, easy answers" (25). Trickster tutors embrace ambiguity and uncertainty. In the everyday life of the writing center, the Trickster mindset requires time set aside for tutors to reflect — to journal, to talk to colleagues, and to read writing center theory.

While tutor training manuals provide a necessary repertoire of strategies for tutors, anyone who has ever experienced an actual tutorial likely appreciates the freedom to respond to clients as individuals rather than feeling compelled to force each session into a predetermined, theorized mold. *The Everyday Writing Center* furthermore prompts us to recognize that tutors' roles outside of the writing center necessarily contribute to the sorts of tutors they become; that is, just as the ideal session doesn't exist, neither does the ideal tutor. Respect for plural identities is part and parcel of the authors' idea of a writing center community of practice constructed out of everyday lived experience: "Together, we [the authors] have come to reject the idea that writing center directors wear different hats for different tasks, and to embrace instead a style of leadership through which interactions with writers, tutors, faculty and administrators emerge from a common set of principles and a shared sense of goals" (114). This same logic applies to writing center tutors, who well know the impossibility of donning their "tutor hat" when they step into the center, as if every other "hat" they wear (parent, woman, African-American, international student, teacher, Christian) can be placed in the proverbial closet and picked up at the end of their shift.

The Everyday Writing Center is, at bottom, an important text for tutors because it scripts a central role for writing centers in the ideology and practices of secondary and higher education.

The complex identities of writing center tutors, directors, and clients intersect in Chapter 6, the book's most compelling and timely chapter, titled "Everyday Racism: Anti-Racism Work and Writing Center Practice." This chapter poses the disturbing possibility that writing centers are complicit in pervasive, institutionalized, systemic racism. Tutors (not to mention directors) may balk at this accusation, yet consider for a moment that racism is not limited to the overt, individual acts (a racial slur, a racist joke) we normally classify as such. If, like critical race theorists, we define racism as "race prejudice magnified, enforced, and reproduced by systemic and institutional power," we understand that racism "is characterized most particularly by the abuse of power within the institutions and systems that shape all of our lives — including the high schools, colleges, and universities in which we learn, teach, and tutor" (94-95). As an example, *The Everyday Writing Center* relates the heartbreaking story of Krista, a black tutor at a predominately-white university who left the writing center after colleagues repeatedly mistook her for a client, assuming that a black student would only be there for help (87-88). As a community of practice, the authors maintain that writing centers have not done all they could do to promote anti-racist agendas; we assume that the lack of overt racism in the writing center marks it as a "safe," "neutral," perhaps even "sanitized" space exempt from racist beliefs because "race" does not figure into the identity of an "ideal" tutor/client/session. While Krista's example may be extreme, the fact remains that racism is real and present on our campuses, and all writing center professionals need to be agents for what the authors call "transformational change," a "collaborative, process-oriented, holistic [approach] in the sense that it requires attentiveness to the systemic and institutional context from which conflict emerges" (104).

What does an anti-racist agenda have to do with tutor professionalization? Like the authors' exhortation to assume a Trickster mindset that resists reification of received traditions, the challenge to work for transformational change in the educational community at large reminds tutors that the work we do in writing

centers influences and is influenced by our institutions. *The Everyday Writing Center* is, at bottom, an important text for tutors because it scripts a central role for writing centers in the ideology and practices of secondary and higher education. The book recognizes that writing centers are enmeshed in the everyday negotiations of meaning that take place between tutors and students, between students and teachers, between students and the academy, between tutors and directors, and so on. To effectively and ethically occupy this central position, we need a community of practice based in a learning paradigm (one that focuses on helping students learn, not on university "services or teaching") and fostered by dynamic leaders (111). The authors maintain that writing center directors are what John Tagg has called "structural leaders" by virtue of their institutionally appointed roles, yet they should strive to combine with this role that of the functional leader, "those who assume a leadership role out of a sense of mission, of need, of purpose and who require the participation of others to accomplish this purpose" (11). Tutors, too, are structural leaders by virtue of their institutionally appointed roles (after all, not just any student is invited to work in the writing center) and, like directors, tutors have the option to also become functional leaders in the writing center.

At the **International Writing Center Association's 2009 Summer Institute for Writing Center Directors and Professionals**, a panel of tutors and tutor alumni from Philadelphia's Temple University stated that the biggest influence on their practices was not theory but the techniques and attitudes they observed in other tutors and in the center's professional staff. Those tutors' everyday experiences, echoed in my own memories of tutor training, are what make the philosophy behind *The Everyday Writing Center* important for tutors. "As communities of practice," the authors write, writing centers

> have a history of exploring the ways in which meaning is negotiated among mutually engaged participants… [T]his design must be based on something other than the familiar stratification between directors and tutors, tutors and writers, directors and professors, peer tutors and professional instructors. Though all of these participants come from their own many sites of practice, within the writing center they become members of the writing center community of practice and, as such, should be viewed as learners on common ground. (7)

Every day, each one of us constructs what a writing center is — for our clients, our colleagues, and ourselves. *The Everyday Writing Center* is a valuable professional resource for tutors, one that they should read and discuss together and that directors should include in tutor training courses. For writing centers to carry out their work, both directors and tutors need to operate from a Trickster mindset, attuned to the learning moments occurring every day in their centers.

Work Cited

Geller, Anne Ellen, Michele Eodice, Frankie Condon, Meg Carroll, and Elizabeth H. Boquet. *The Everyday Writing Center: A Community of Practice*. Logan, Utah: Utah State U.P., 2007.

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