# REVIEW OF *AROUND THE TEXTS OF WRITING CENTER WORK: AN INQUIRY-BASED APPROACH TO TUTOR EDUCATION*, BY R. MARK HALL

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I wish R. Mark Hall's 2017 book, *Around the Texts of Writing Center Work: An Inquiry-based Approach to Tutor Education*, had come out earlier. When I worked as a novice writing center director in China several years ago, I was in anxious need of a book like this—one that skillfully grounds tutor education in daily routines and organically combines it with theory and research. With this powerful tool in hand, any writing center director can embark on a journey of transforming their centers to robust learning communities. With a repertoire of model activities for tutor education, Hall promotes an innovative way of conducting writing center work: an inquiry-based approach that unearths tacit assumptions, theorizes labor work, and sustains collective knowledge construction at the writing center.

Writing center directors, novice or experienced, would find it easy to adopt or adapt Hall's approach to inquire into their own everyday documents and carry out inquiry-based tutor education at their centers. Drawing on his experience working at six writing centers since 1987, Hall aims to answer the question, "[H]ow does a writing center develop and sustain a robust community of learners?" (3). To do so, he analyzes an assemblage of everyday writing center documents including a list of "20 Valued Practices for Tutoring Writing" (11), excerpts of transcribed tutoring sessions, session notes, blog posts, and a "tutor-led inquiry project" (13), through conceptual frameworks including communities of practice, activity theory, discourse analysis, reflective practice, and inquiry-based learning. Each of the five body chapters focuses on a specific document and its surrounding activities, analyzes real-world data through a theoretical lens, and then presents a model assignment for tutor education. For example, in Chapter 3, using activity theory, Hall interprets both the writer's context for writing and the activities of tutoring as activity systems. Then, by looking into transcripts of tutoring sessions, Hall explains how tutors can examine the role they adopt and the moves they take in these activity systems to improve tutoring. Like other chapters, Chapter 3 ends with an assignment for tutors: *Collaborative Activity Theory Transcript Analysis*, with clear, step-by-step instructions.

Inspired by the "Theory in/to Practice" feature of *The Writing Center Journal* (3), Hall's goal for this book is to "contribute to evidence-based theorizing of writing center work" (13). This goal has touched upon a much-criticized phenomenon in the writing center field: in Nordlof's words, "our theories often lack empirical evidence to support them" (qtd. in Hall 5). To tackle unwarranted assumptions based on perception and speculation, Hall adopts an inquiry-based approach throughout the book—one that moves beyond solving specific, local problems to unearthing tacit assumptions and beliefs that guide writing center practice—with the aim to "bring theory and practice into alignment—or at least make the tensions between them conscious, productive" (148).

Such an approach demonstrates the "double-loop thinking" that Hall borrows from Argyris, which "examine[s] both what we do and the rules and reasoning—the habits of mind—that determine what we do" (Hall 108). With such an inquiry-based stance, Hall shows writing center staff how to probe into the "why"s behind the "what"s: in each chapter, readers can find Hall's explicit deconstruction of some well-established assumptions in the writing center lore. For example, in Chapter 2, Hall reveals that underlying the persistent doubts about observing tutorials is the assumption that the primary purpose of observation is evaluation, thus causing tutors' anxiety. With the assumption brought to the fore, Hall returns to the "what"s, i.e., the observation practice at the writing center as manifested by the documents, and interrogates them through the "why"s: in Chapter 2, after a three-year study of 163 observations, Hall argues that by shifting the purpose from evaluation to learning, we can utilize observations to reflect on and improve tutoring practice by developing and revising a list of valued tutoring practices. In this way, the list of "20 Valued Practices for Tutoring Writing" can guide tutors to look for specific things during peer-to-peer observation (Hall 16); more importantly, tutors are actively engaged in the creation, revision, and discussion surrounding the list—"[t]his participation and negotiation is where learning takes place" (Hall 39). Hence, rather than avoid observation, we ought to make it "a centerpiece of our work" (Hall 26), which

counters the doubt about observation in writing center literature. Therefore, Hall's inquiry-based approach can not only reveal tensions and gaps between practice and theories but also make use of such tensions and gaps to construct knowledge and innovate practices.

It is noteworthy that the inquiries that Hall advocates are collective ones that engage tutors in different phases of inquiry such as problem-raising, document creation and revision, and the presentation of findings. A case in point is the use of blogging as a tool for dialogic reflection in Chapter 5. Having realized that filling out the Reflection Sheet has become "a mindless routine" (110) and "enlists tutors in self-surveillance" (111), Hall invites tutors to input their thoughts during staff meetings, where one of the tutors goes straight to the heart of the matter: "The reflection isn't on the page. It's in our discussions" (112). With this precise diagnosis of the problem, Hall and his tutors create an internal writing center blog as a venue to conduct dialogic, reflective writing among novice and veteran tutors. Instead of writing isolated introspection which often fails to be reflective, tutors now participate in online discussions in "Weekly Reflections" and "Question & Answer" forums (113), where tutors move beyond an "I-centered" approach (118), and instead, engage with each other's reflections in their writing center community of practice. This dialogic approach prompts tutors to "tur[n] reflective writing outward" and facilitates "reciprocal teaching and learning among tutors" (121). Thus, the collective, inquiry-based approach is advantageous because it provides tutors with rich opportunities to grow as individuals and helps sustain the writing center as a learning community where knowledge is constructed collaboratively.

Furthermore, the engaging, collective nature of Hall's approach is reflected by his efforts to "cultivate a culture of inquiry" and promote tutor-led research (9). For instance, in Chapter 6, Hall demonstrates how he utilizes the "Problems of Practice [of] Inquiry" assignment to facilitate tutor-led inquiry projects, which consist of question-posing, collaborative conversations, resources collection, and going public. Tutors' inquiries range from topics such as facilitating reading when tutoring writing to collecting commonplace genres in the university. Some inquires later found their ways to publications, which proves it feasible and significant for directors to follow Hall's call to "imagine a writing center tutor inquiry movement" and transform the center into a research site (147). Additionally, the fact that Hall collaborated with a tutor in one of these projects inspires us to consider the possibility of turning such inquires into tutor-director collaborative research projects, which, if done well, can efficiently and seamlessly combine directors' research agenda and their tutor education agenda.

Another feature of this book that I consider appealing to readers is Hall's true and down-to-earth depiction of writing center life, the everydayness, and the imperfections. Scattered throughout the book are details about the difficulties and flaws that one might find common in real-world writing centers but less common in literature. In particular, Hall has adopted an honest and courageous attitude toward his mistakes, e.g., acknowledging that "the way I was going about defining and solving the problem was part of the problem" (110), as well as his earlier failure in reforming the writing center, which resulted in "a handful of newcomers appeared indifferent, while a number of long-time consultants revolted" (151). Frank and genuine depictions like these paint a whole picture of what directors have on their plate and provide them with faith in the face of setbacks. On the other hand, his word choices of "everyday" and "mundane" to describe the focal documents lead directors to realize two things: first, we have often been too busy or insensitive to excavate the treasure in our everyday documents; second, precisely because these documents are so common, we all have access to them and thus the opportunities to inquire and theorize.

Overall, Hall has achieved three things at one stroke in this book: a discussion of everyday practice, tutor education, and research. In reality, it is common to view them within a hierarchy: only by securing the labors and maintaining tutorials can a writing center stay functional; then, additional efforts, energy, and time can be invested in tutor education to improve the practice; on a higher level, research is conducted to theorize the practice in the local context to construct knowledge. However, Hall's book shows busy writing center directors how to combine these three goals: with tutor education as nexus, one can shift the everyday documents into gateways to critical, collective inquiries, which can not only help interrogate and innovate the everyday practice in the writing center, but also produce tutor-led/tutor-director collaborated research, all in a highly efficient and meaningful way.

Acknowledgements

Works Cited

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