

REVIEW OF “THEY’RE ALL WRITERS”: TEACHING PEER TUTORING IN THE
ELEMENTARY WRITING CENTER,
BY JENNIFER SANDERS AND REBECCA L. DAMRON

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Sanders, Jennifer, and Rebecca L. Damron.
*“They’re All Writers”: Teaching Peer Tutoring in
the Elementary Writing Center.* Teachers College
Press, 2016. \$32.95.

“*They’re All Writers*”: *Teaching Peer Tutoring in the Elementary Writing Center* by Jennifer Sanders and Rebecca L. Damron is a significant contribution to writing center scholarship considering the dearth of publications on K-12 writing centers. Specifically, although some book-length works are available for writing centers at middle and secondary levels (Farrell; Fells and Wells; Horan; Kent), *They’re All Writers* might be the first publication on elementary writing centers. It tells the story of the Skyline Elementary School Writing Center that opened in January 2011. The book’s stated aim is to “provide elementary classroom teachers with the background knowledge and practical instructional materials needed to implement a writing center curriculum” (8). Teachers designing—or desiring to design—a new writing center at elementary level will be interested in Sanders and Damron’s latest work, as would writing center directors, tutors, researchers, and anyone involved in writing center scholarship. In seven chapters, the authors move from the historical and theoretical background of writing centers to practical and pedagogical implications for establishing and managing an elementary writing center by drawing on experiences from such a center. Useful resources in the book that readers will appreciate contain books, websites, appendices with supporting materials for tutoring lessons, and student writing samples for tutoring practices, as well as an index of the key concepts for locating information.

They’re All Writers begins with an introductory chapter titled, “Writing Centers in the Elementary School.” Here, Sanders and Damron introduce the Skyline Elementary School to readers. They describe the demographics of Skyline Elementary students, the challenges teachers experience in teaching writing, and the story of how Skyline got its writing center. The chapter also summarizes the goals and overall organization of the book, and it ends with operational definitions for the concepts of peer conferencing, peer

tutoring, and coaching, with the last two being used synonymously throughout the book. What I like most about reading this chapter is seeing how Skyline Writing Center became an example for another elementary school that implemented the idea of an elementary writing center by modifying and adapting the Skyline Writing Center model. By providing a guide to developing a framework of peer tutoring for elementary writing centers in *They’re All Writers*, Sanders and Damron have made a big step towards spreading tutoring practices to other elementary schools.

In chapters two and three, Sanders and Damron set the theoretical framework for *They’re All Writers*, and they provide a history of writing centers in the United States. Drawing on research that informs process theory of composition, the authors present a set of tenets of writing process theory and pedagogy with the purpose of developing teachers’ theoretical understandings of writing. The authors integrate these tenets of the writing process theory and pedagogy in developing lesson plans for training and guiding the writing tutors. After building a framework from the writing process theory and providing the historical background of writing centers, the authors summarize the core principles of writing centers. These core principles are drawn from the International Writing Center Association’s position statements on writing centers (“IWCA Position Statement on Secondary School Writing Centers”), and they provide the authors with solid foundations to create a guideline for the task of elementary peer tutoring.

In the next two chapters, Sanders and Damron move into the basics of establishing and maintaining an elementary writing center, and they report the findings from a conversation analysis of the recorded and transcribed tutoring sessions that took place in the Skyline Writing Center. The authors first provide useful information about the basics that need to be considered when starting a new writing center—from decisions about the physical space and staffing to keeping records—and then they document student learning in Skyline Writing Center by describing what students talked about in peer tutoring sessions and

which type of knowledge they constructed during these sessions. Analysis of student dialogues in tutorials showed that the students spent most of their time on discussing the content of the writing and ideas. Writers engaged in deep conversation with tutors about issues of content, organization, structure, and formatting, as well as grammar and conventions. In light of empirical findings revealing that successful peer tutoring can take place in elementary levels, the authors evince the significance and power of elementary writing center practices.

Chapter 6, “Teaching Children to Become Writing Coaches,” includes the most direct pedagogical implications for training tutors in an elementary writing center. The chapter guides readers through designing tutoring lessons. It contains eight-week lesson plans that Skyline Elementary teachers used to train students for how to talk to their peers in tutoring sessions. Each lesson plan follows a certain format that includes length of the lesson, description of writing component, learning objectives, the Anchor Standards addressed, resources and materials, lesson overview, the engagement, student practice, and teachers’ reflections (if any). Each lesson plan addresses one or more of 10 Anchor Standards for Writing designed by Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts for students at elementary level (“English Language Arts Standards”). Resources and materials for classroom activities—pencil, paper, charts, drafts, books, etcetera—are described in each lesson plan, and copiable handouts are included at the end of the chapter. These resources and materials might be used with minimal preparation to support teaching tutoring. Readers are often reminded to adapt these lessons to meet the needs of their own students, rather than to strictly follow them without modifications. This chapter might have been better placed preceding the previous chapter on peer tutoring sessions because readers might first wish to understand the foundations of Skyline Writing Center tutorials and the expectations from Skyline Writing Center tutors before hearing about how effective Skyline Writing Center tutorials were.

The final chapter, “The End of the Beginning,” reports three major themes related to elementary writing centers: 1) the democratizing power of peer tutoring, 2) the function of peer tutoring as a socialization process, and 3) the student-centered approach in writing center practices. Sanders and Damron discuss each theme in light of examples from Skyline Writing Center. They suggest that peer tutoring at Skyline is a democratizing and socializing process by which students are provided with equal educational opportunity to develop leadership and interactional

skills. The act of peer tutoring at Skyline also shifts the passive role of students in the learning process to one in which students take initiative in the process of knowledge construction.

They’re All Writers gives teachers myriad resources and ideas for how to establish and operate an elementary writing center. The book’s reader-friendly, conversational tone, and positivity about elementary writing centers are among its greatest strengths. Another strength is that the lessons and ideas shared here can also be applied at the middle-school level because the framework of peer tutoring for elementary grades might meet the CCSS for writing in the middle grades. Teachers designing elementary- and middle-school writing centers will be inspired by Sanders and Damron’s book, which will serve as a helpful guide for establishing, running and sustaining an elementary- or middle-school writing center. I believe that this book will encourage many teachers to start their own writing centers in response to the specific needs of their own institutions.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. Ben Rafoth for his guidance and encouragement to publish this review.

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