

REVIEW: PERIPHERAL VISIONS FOR WRITING CENTERS

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In *Peripheral Visions for Writing Centers*, Jackie Grutsch McKinney contends that writing centers have a narrative problem: despite multifaceted work, writing center professionals present a unified public face that describes homey, nontraditional centers that are of equal service to all. Grutsch McKinney holds that not only does this “writing center grand narrative” (3) overlook the labor that goes on within, but it concurrently creates tunnel vision among professionals and researchers. This vision has pernicious consequences for those employed in and served by writing centers, and impedes the “peripheral visions” of the field that might otherwise manifest.

Arguing theoretically rather than practically, Grutsch McKinney’s six-chapter arrangement provides:

- an Introduction (subtitled “Cognitive Dissonance”) that describes the harried complexity of a writing program administrator’s day, compared with the simplified rendition of this work offered to the public;
- a theoretical overview (“Story Vision”) situating the project in the postmodern tradition;
- a deconstruction of the idea of writing centers as comfy retreats (“Writing Centers Are Cozy Homes”);
- a caution against writing centers embracing outsider status (“Writing Centers Are Iconoclastic”);
- a critique of peer-tutoring’s centrality to writing centers (“Writing Centers Tutor (All Students)”);
- a Conclusion (subtitled “The End of the Story of the End of the Center?”) offering brief advice going forward.

In the first two chapters, Grutsch McKinney outlines her method, leaning heavily on the psychologist Jerome Bruner. Following his guidance, she intends to demonstrate that our autobiographies “conform to cultural expectations,” that these introjected accounts “direct future actions,” and that “narratives are interpretations of reality” (16, 17). Many in the literature, rhetoric, and composition communities will agree, and it seems reasonable to extend these observations to the narratives of writing centers.

But despite the clear initial focus, the ensuing chapters accomplish mixed success, often struggling to present compelling evidence for the case or forcing examples into the author’s preconceived theoretical notions. This is especially evident in the book’s three primary chapters, which establish the purported master narrative of writing centers as, respectively, “cozy homes,” “iconoclastic,” and places that “tutor all students.”

In “Writing Centers Are Cozy Homes,” for example, Grutsch McKinney laments the representation of centers as places symbolized by overstuffed couches and coffee pots and conflates the idea of writing centers being described as physical and welcoming spaces. Citing various researchers who famously depict writing centers as a “garret,” “storehouse,” “Burkean parlor,” “laundry or safe house,” “skills center,” or “fix-it shop,” she concludes that “the idea of a writing center as cozy home became dominant” (22). There is a twofold problem here. On one hand, there seems little to recommend attics, warehouses, basements, or (heaven forbid) auto repair facilities as welcoming spaces. On the other, I have worked as an undergraduate, graduate, and professional tutor in two writing centers for over seven years, neither of which designed its space nor promoted its services in this “cozy” way. The argument seems to selectively read both writing center spaces and their written representations.

To defend the point, Grutsch McKinney brusquely rebuts other research. A 2009 study by Leslie Hadfield and others, in which “the authors set forth ... to imagine an ideal center for an imaginary university” and then tested the design through interviews, concluded that “tutors, students and staff ... share common ideals about what makes an ideal writing center.” Grutsch McKinney dismisses the finding as “an absurd claim” (31). The basis of this dismissal is a single conversation with her own graduate students, all but one of whom had never worked in a writing center.

If we skip the inevitable imprecise details, we are given what Grutsch McKinney feels is a more troubling “grand narrative” aspect: the idea that the “cozy home” account allows those initiated to “show themselves as insiders in the field of writing centers”

(24), thereby creating exclusive parameters for outsiders. “Cozy” spaces may: 1) delineate class distinctions, with markers such as abstract art that “seem pretentious” to those from nonwhite and/or lower-income backgrounds; 2) create a “feminized” space that is “problematic in terms of gender” (26); and 3) create a “safe haven” (27) that avoids productive conflict that can spur learning. We might concede these important points, however, and still wonder how one would design a completely neutral space that lacks any markers of gender, class or status. We are, alas, never told.

Marginalization narratives are the focus of the next chapter, “Writing Centers Are Iconoclastic,” which makes interesting observations about the work such stories have performed. According to the author, marginality is the main discourse used to establish iconoclasm: Grutsch McKinney employs an impressive array of writing center scholarship, arranging sources into accounts that deny marginality, claim post-marginal status, or embrace marginality as a tool of subversion. A consequence of this central discourse, the author contends, is *de facto* marginalization of writing center professionals: to this end, she cites statistics about the job security of writing center directors, only 41% of whom were in tenured or tenure-track positions as of 2003-2004 (52).

But the link between iconoclastic narratives and dismal job prospects seems far more correlative than causal. We might suspect that the tenure statistics for directors are comparable to those of other advanced degree-holders in similar situations. When we consider Grutsch McKinney’s own statistics, a majority of directors have their graduate training in literature (52), and are thus less likely to be working in their chosen specialties; over half of directors (in early studies) lack doctoral degrees. Some control numbers would have been helpful here, and this might be an opportunity for additional research.

The final narrative string Grutsch McKinney wishes to unravel is two-part: the primary work of writing centers is tutoring, and tutoring is a service meant to serve all students. While this idea will seem intuitive to most, the author here gathers some empirical data (open-ended surveying of the WCENTER listserv users) to see if interrogating it can show us other possibilities—what we may miss by storying writing centers this way. This inquiry about perceived similarities and differences among writing centers does give the reader a better sense of who, exactly, the audience for the grand narrative might be (veteran professionals who rarely publish) beyond the writing center scholarship community. Some observations are useful: few respondents, for example,

identify workshops and secondary resources, “near universal activities in writing centers” that are “rarely seen as such” (64), indicating that the focus on one-to-one peer tutoring may, in fact, occlude other extant resources. Hence, the first part of the thesis fares well.

But Grutsch McKinney’s fidelity to Bruner’s idea that there can be no purely informational narratives—that all stories, no matter how seemingly innocuous, perform ideological work serving powerful interests—also leaves her searching for villains who never materialize. She maintains that the narrative of writing centers as a universal help “blinds us to the fact that not all students want tutoring” (72). But who in writing center work was blind to this fact? “When we say, as we do at my center,” she continues, “that we work with all students, we lie ... we know only about a quarter of students will take us up on our offer” (73). Again, this assumes that anyone literally, actually supposes that writing centers intend to serve each member of the student body. But no one believes this; nearly all services, academic or otherwise, have selective appeal.

The cumulative result, then, of chapters that are either undercooked or loosely correlated with the main argument is threefold: the reader may begin to wonder if the writing center grand narrative is really all that grand, if its effects are indeed pernicious, and if contesting it would lead to tangible benefits. We might look to the Conclusion (“The End of the Story, or the End of the Center?”), but still never find such benefits.

And it is here that *Peripheral Visions* most disappoints. Its omission of practical advice may seem amiss simply due to my misguided expectations, coming to the subject first as a tutor, with theoretical concerns a distant second. But ultimately, the book never delivers what it promises: there are no peripheral visions here, just a description of a problem with few recommendations other than a warning against schism with multiliteracy centers and centers for writing excellence (90), and the tepid suggestion that “acknowledging the problem is the first step” (86).

On the whole, then, Grutsch McKinney’s study is to be commended more for effort than execution. The perils of complacency in any field seem real enough, and assiduously rethinking our message and practice is essential. But while *Peripheral Visions* may spark interesting conversation in the writing center literature, it is difficult to imagine how it might apply to the daily operation of centers in ways appreciably different from how they already run. In a book that tantalizes with a different view, a proverbial candle, we mainly get a lot of cursing the darkness.

Works Cited

Grutsch McKinney, Jackie. *Peripheral Visions for Writing Centers*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2013. Print.

CALL FOR PAPERS: CONNECTED WRITING

Praxis: A Writing Center Journal welcomes submissions on a wide range of topics related to writing centers for its Spring 2014 issue. We also encourage submissions on the issue's theme: Connected Writing. Writing center practitioners often must negotiate across various technologies, languages, and academic disciplines in order to serve students, making the labor of connecting central to writing center theory and practice.

“Connection” is a capacious term that could encompass interpersonal relationality as well as the practical matters of Internet connectivity – both issues that become important to writing centers with the increasing emphasis on multiliteracy in writing center scholarship. How do these various senses of the word connection come together in writing center theory and practice?

Articles might explore topics including:

- Technological connections, networking, and Internet accessibility
- Inter-disciplinary methods
- Writing centers connecting with other writing centers
- Face-to-face meetings between students and tutors
- Intersecting issues of race, gender, sexuality, and ability
- Communicating across multiple languages and literacies
- Movement between various spaces, places, and locations

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