

REVIEW OF *RADICAL WRITING CENTER PRAXIS: A PARADIGM FOR ETHICAL POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT* BY LAURA GREENFIELD

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I vividly remember the first time I came to a writing center. I was a graduate student in the United States, and in my home country, Ukraine, the notion of writing centers is relatively new. I had a particular agenda in mind for my first visit: I needed help with cohesion and coherence because of the complicated nature of the English language's system of reference. Not only did I receive the writing support I needed, but I also had a genuine conversation with a tutor about my background, my studies, and my future endeavors. Now, four years later, I am taking a graduate course titled *Research on Writing Centers and Writing Program Administration* and hoping to establish an English writing center in my hometown, Ivano-Frankivsk. With this goal in mind, Laura Greenfield's book, *Radical Writing Center Praxis: A Paradigm for Ethical Political Engagement*, is of particular interest to me. In her book, Greenfield envisions a radically new writing center where all staff members are agentive in social justice work, not only within the walls of the writing center but also beyond its boundaries. To accomplish these goals, Greenfield must address the question of what a radical agenda is, and what it means for writing centers to adopt one.

In the text, Greenfield argues that the writing center field's current practices have to be drastically transformed because "despite our many successes, the collective influence writing centers are having on the world is simultaneously violent" (Greenfield 9). Here, it is worth noting the explicit definition Greenfield gives for radicalism as a central concept in the book:

Radicalism in this book refers to the belief that (1) the truth is a human construction; (2) power is not possessed but exercised, and therefore power is neither inherently good nor bad; and (3) authority resides not in people or entities but in ethically engaged praxis (reflective action). (59)

In arguing for transformation, Greenfield proposes a radically new paradigm for writing centers by bringing together the topics of social justice, antiracism, peace, systems of oppression, power, violence, and ethics.

The book is organized by two main themes: theory and practice. In terms of theory, the author critiques conservative and liberal approaches in writing center practices. In particular, the first chapter outlines a

historical account of theoretical values in the field, while the second proposes theoretical grounds for a new paradigm based on radical politics. The next three chapters propose a practical approach to transform the field by providing answers to why, what, and how the field can benefit from a radical lens through which to view current practices. Throughout the text, Greenfield asks her readers several questions: what is the goal of the writing center? Who is it serving? How can writing center administrators and tutors introduce changes that benefit not only the writing center but also diverse communities at large?

Greenfield is not the first author to call for the transformation of writing centers. Harry Denny et al. and Romeo Garcia have also expressed their views on current practices and ways to change them. Denny et al. conclude, "writing centers are places where inequality—unequal access to educational resources—is made manifest" (69). Similarly, Garcia interrogates how "whiteness shapes the imagining of both centers and practices as 'safe' and 'inviting'" (34). Greenfield, in her turn, invites readers to reflect on marginalized practices the writing center often perpetuates. These critical concepts are meant to help the reader question the status quo and bring the writing center's vision to a new level of promoting peace, equality, and accessibility for all. Additionally, Greenfield argues that radical transformation will give voice to marginalized and oppressed groups, which, according to Greenfield, is the only way to change the writing center field. To assist this process, methods of tutoring that emphasize individualized instruction should be replaced by more collaborative ways of learning, such as workshops, projects, shared research, writing circles. Greenfield also questions current terms such as "tutor" and "session," asking whose agenda they serve and why we use these terms. In her vision of the radicalized writing center of the future, there might not be such terms, or they might transform into something yet unknown.

Greenfield's ultimate plan outlined in *Radical Writing Center Praxis: A Paradigm for Ethical Political Engagement* is that "The writing center field, because of its size and will. . . holds mighty potential to change the world" (13). While this is an ambitious goal, I find it utopian by nature. Additionally, the lack of detail in

many of the book's directives and examples poses problems. For example, as evidence of current writing center practices that promote violence, Greenfield offers an example in which a student brings a text containing violent views to the writing center. Current practices used in writing centers, according to Greenfield, will view the subject matter of the text as a writer's choice and will not address the content. Therefore, Greenfield argues, writing center practices might cause or allow students to go into their communities with a political agenda that promotes violence rather than peace. However, the author does not specify what kind of violent views are expressed in the paper or whose views the student's text represents. Thus, in this example, there are few details and little evidence to support the claim that writing centers are influencing the world in violent ways.

Moreover, while the book's intended audience is writing center directors, stakeholders, students, and tutors, these stakeholders are not urged to take on this change themselves. But if not these individuals, then who? Readers may find the lack of clarity on this point problematic, as an absence of clear vision, strategies, and, most importantly, people in charge, will not accomplish any goals. The author calls to "start from ground level and rebuild the writing center anew, imagining radical possibilities for our work unencumbered by the trapping of the past" (85). However, creating a new paradigm for writing centers completely from scratch by forgetting their rich history could lead to bad outcomes.

Although the book calls for its audience to take risks and assumes that radicals create "a just and peaceful world" (Greenfield 15), from my personal experience of participating in two revolutions in Ukraine (the Orange revolution in 2004 and the Revolution of Dignity in 2014), the radical movements, though they may have a positive agenda, do not always bring a positive change. Radical changes in Ukraine have led to an unstable political and economic situation for the past 15 years. Furthermore, in the examples I cite here, even though radicals opposed to the government technically won, the Russian Federation used the unstable situation in the capital of Ukraine to its benefit and annexed the Crimea peninsula in 2014. In terms of literacy, many Ukrainian channels, as well as internet propaganda, have spread fake news to convey false information to the population. It is no wonder that nowadays media literacy courses are being implemented in the universities in Ukraine to fight the armies of fake news and propaganda. In other words, radical changes can sometimes lead to severe problems

for the people who supported and advocated for those radical agendas in the beginning.

Does this mean that writing centers should be resigned to the status quo and set aside transformative ideals like Greenfield's? No. It means that every change, especially a radical one, needs a clear vision of the goals for the changemakers. Therefore, Greenfield should carefully consider the consequences radical changes can lead to and whether her agenda's advantages will outweigh some of the challenges that will follow. These challenges include, for example, changing the language of the writing center field. However, whether new words result in better practices is unclear. Also, it is important to remember that there are many ways to bring about transformation. Garcia discusses reflection and reflexivity as a means of interrogating our own biases, beliefs, assumptions, and identities as they impact writing center practices. These are powerful ways to dismantle various individualistic systems of oppression and power dynamics as well, but they are mentioned only briefly by Greenfield. In my example of the Ukrainian media literacy problem, reflexive practices and critical thinking would help people to recognize fake news and corruption being perpetuated through various media channels. As a reader, I wondered what Greenfield thinks about the concept of reflexivity as a way to evoke radical change from within for those involved in writing center praxis.

*Radical Writing Center Praxis: A Paradigm for Ethical Political Engagement* is an influential book that invites all writing center administrators, tutors, faculty, composition instructors, graduate students, and other stakeholders to revisit and challenge their common theories and practices. While many readers will find the author's idealism inspiring, the plausibility of the radical changes proposed in the book also remains problematic.

#### Works Cited

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