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Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times, by Nancy Maloney Grimm

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victimized, or underappreciated, but rather acting—taking control—to create respected spaces within the academy for themselves and their work.

Ultimately, the two books represent two complementary aspects of the WPA's professional and personal life. There's no doubt that many WPAs labor under conditions in colleges and universities that appallingly devalue their contributions. There's no doubt that many WPAs work far too hard, have too many responsibilities, and juggle too many pieces of fruit. Sometimes they can make lemonade out of the lemons, as *The Writing Program Administrator as Researcher* shows; sometimes, as some of the essays in *Kitchen Cooks, Plate Twirlers, and Troubadours* suggest, they're stuck with the lemons. What makes the difference lies, it seems, in the extent to which WPAs perceive themselves as having control, or the possibility of gaining control, over their professional and personal lives. Both these books may help in that perception: one by offering stories that, as Diana George notes, "[tell] us something of ourselves" (xiv) and our situations, the other by offering various methods for increasing control over those situations.

Works Cited

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Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times

Nancy Maloney Grimm

Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann-Boynton/Cook, 1999.

140 pp. \$26.00. ISBN: 0-86709-487-7.

Nancy Grimm's *Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times* wants to make you uncomfortable. It wants to take your hard-earned writing center naiveté away. It wants to pull the comfy rug of "modernist" assumptions about literacy right out from under your writing center's conceptual underpinnings, and it wants to sow in its place the seeds of a postmodernist sensi-

bility, one that theorizes writing center identity in the context of troubling cultural differences rather than seeing it as a literacy welcome wagon. It wants you to take your personal collection of good writing center intentions, the warm and fuzzy ones that have to do with helping and service and community and peership and the “conversation of mankind” and see them for what they are: the problem not the solution. It wants you to interrogate your most cherished assumptions about why you earn your paycheck as a writing center worker (and why you feel as good about it as you do, considering the amount) and throw them in the recycling bin of history. With the best of intentions, Nancy Grimm is after your innocence! It is surely one of the more engaging paradoxes of this paradoxical and engaging book that surrendering it to her is such a complexly satisfying experience.

What does a postmodern sensibility mean for writing centers? According to Grimm it means, for one thing, shrugging off the burden of “the literacy myth” as the authorizing narrative of writing center work. The literacy myth inhabits writing center culture in the form of the unquestioned belief that there is one literacy God, one officially authorized way of writing (and thinking) that is universally acknowledged and reverently enshrined in institutions of higher learning where it can be safeguarded, managed, metered, and dispensed to those deemed sufficiently sanitized—in writing centers no doubt—to receive it. Through long and pervasive usage, Grimm argues, what is in reality merely a “myth” appears in practice as “common sense.” What is historically and socially constructed disguises itself as ordinary and “natural.” Under the secret allure of the literacy myth the writing center devotedly does the naive and even destructive work of preparing students, not for the self-reflexive work of literacy, but for assimilation into the language code of mainstream America.

In *Good Intentions* Grimm argues that we have to wake up from the enlightenment dream of an objective, rational discourse, and we have to get “unstuck” from our sentimental versions of collaborative learning, in order to establish writing centers based on social justice. Rather than attribute writing problems to individual students, we should locate the problem in social conflict. Instead of neutralizing difference to render ourselves congenial within the institutional establishment, we should teach ourselves, our tutors, and our students how to investigate and negotiate differences of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, culture, and ethnicity. In postmodern writing centers, we should be helping students articulate these differences rather than mediating between them and the institution. Instead of training tutors for “strategic know-how,” tutor-training programs should insist on conceptual and theoretical understanding.

Rather than remediate individual students so that they, too, can join in the conversation of mankind, we should be restructuring that very conversation. "We need," Grimm asserts, "to hold ourselves responsible for changing the cultural practices, the institutional conditions, the unconscious habits that contribute to structural oppression" (108). Obviously, doing postmodern work for postmodern times isn't going to be what you call *easy*.

While I find myself rooting for the rhetoric of *Good Intentions*, I also find myself wondering if this highly theorized, postmodern world view doesn't amount to just more "good intentions" mythology for writing centers. Is social justice really a working basis around which to organize writing center life? It may be altogether too easy to say yes, and it may be impossible to say no. Such is the writing center predicament, from which even the best intentions cannot entirely rescue us. Paradox and predicament are the milieu of literacy work, as Nancy Grimm knows better than most of us. As sites for important literacy events, writing centers are at the margins of academic life, yet it turns out that the margins are also the cutting edge. Writing centers are regularly authorized by powerful institutions to provide access to the resources of the English language, but far too frequently these powerful agencies fail to supply the fiscal stability and professional stature necessary to do the work that they mandate. Writing center faculty and staff want very much to get to the center of institutional life so that they can continue to do the academy's most disrespected work way out at the border crossings. It is not entirely surprising then that Grimm seriously suggests that writing centers need not only a new ideology but therapy as well!

Good Intentions: Writing Center Work in Postmodern Times provides us the first comprehensive, postmodernist critique of writing centers. It is a deeply felt, intelligent, and intricately argued book. Nancy Grimm knows the territory she traverses as only an insider can, but unlike most insiders, she is not seeking to immolate herself on the pyre of respectability. Those good intentions she is undermining, after all, are her own. She's taking the cute blue ribbon of writing center service out of her hair, and she's calling for a systematic revolution. She wants you to change what you do, and she has some compelling reasons. Insider or outsider, writing center worker or composition teacher, if you are interested in writing centers, you should read this book, annotate it, argue with it, talk with your writing center colleagues about it. In any case, I don't think you will be able to ignore it.

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