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Writing Center Research: Extending the Conversation, ed. Paula Gillespie, Alice Gillam, Lady Falls Brown, and Byron Stay

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subject matter (rather than a new topic every two weeks) because growth in subject area knowledge works symbiotically with growth in the other four domains of writing knowledge. Many of these strategies are familiar to readers of *CCC*. What distinguishes Beaufort's contribution is the way her thinking emerges from this specific empirical data; creates explanatory power through the multiple lenses of cognitivist, expert knowledge, social-constructionist, and transfer theories; and envisions a productive role for the general composition course in both the academy and the workplace.

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Writing Center Research: Extending the Conversation

Paula Gillespie, Alice Gillam, Lady Falls Brown, and Byron Stay, editors
Mahway, NJ: Lawrence Earlbaum, 2002. 265 pp. \$27.50 (paper). ISBN 0805834478.

Writing Centers are intriguing and appealing sites for research. Located at the busiest intersections of academic literacy work—faculty lane here, student lane there, everyone moving at rush hour intensity—writing centers have situated themselves right in the middle of the exchange that takes place between writer and assignment, first draft and revision, editing and proofreading, faculty commentary and assessment. The writing process, with all its freighted institutional context, walks daily in the writing center door and makes itself available for discussion—and possibly for systematic research. In addition to its potential as a picture window onto writing in the academy, writing centers are inviting research sites because most centers recruit, train, and employ students as tutors to work in one-to-one conferences or small group sessions with their peers on writing. This widespread introduction of students into composition pedagogy, and the resultant sponsorship of tutor discourse in colleges and universities, is genuinely unique and calls out for the kind of close study and analysis that only thoughtful research projects engender. In brief, writing centers are interesting and vital places in the academy today, worthy of sponsoring research and of being themselves the subjects of research.

Of course this is all easy to say, perhaps too easy, as Alice Gillam gently reminds us in the first chapter of *Writing Center Research: Extending the Con-*

versation. Calling for research is one thing. Effectively answering the call is something else again. In her perceptive introduction to this discipline-building collection of new essays focusing on multiple ways of construing research in and about writing centers, Gillam points out that the “great promise” of writing center research remains “as yet unfulfilled and probably unable to be fulfilled in the ebullient terms originally imagined” (xv). Long on metaphor but short on results, the early calls for research did not, according to Gillam, lead to disciplinary recognition: “. . . no sustained conversation about scholarly research, no consensus about the writing center research agenda, no burgeoning of the formal and systematic research called for by North” (18).

The editors of this book wisely do not so much seek to fill these gaps in writing center research culture as to restructure and reinvigorate the research enterprise itself. Some of the most traditionally cherished notions of social-science-style composition research with their emphasis on researcher objectivity, rigorously scrutinized data collection, and number-crunching empirical interpretation of results are called into question by *Writing Center Research* as a viable means of extending research initiatives in writing centers. Instead of promoting “the use of technical rigorous scientific methodology that is appropriate to things, not people (Yancey 190), the calls for writing center research announced in the fourteen chapters written specifically for this collection emphasize “practitioner inquiry” rather than researcher objectivity, critical appreciation of lore and narrative as well as of empirical fact, and a stated preference for “plural methodologies” that mirror and respect local conditions rather than a naively inscribed ideal of universality and repeatability that would suggest, in turn, a theoretical consensus more rhetorical than substantive. As Paula Gillespie puts it in her chapter “Beyond the House of Lore,” which focuses on writing center as research site, “The processes of writing and tutoring are so complexly overdetermined . . . that when I begin to picture an empirical researcher making up, let’s say, a four-way grid to account for the dependent and independent variables, I picture a grid so huge it begins to look like pixels in a JPEG we can never really describe” (50). There must be better ways, and those ways become the business of this book.

One of the underlying themes of *Writing Center Research* seems to be let’s stop pretending to do what we really can’t do, and maybe don’t even want to do in the way of research, and focus instead on what we can do and on the problems and questions that most interest us. Each of the fourteen chapters of *Writing Center Research* emphasizes, in its own way, the value of the researcher as self-reflective participant deeply embedded in the complex, institutional

realities of writing centers. In Neal Lerner's chapter, "Insider As Outsider," for instance, he argues that research in writing centers is almost always a case of split loyalties and ambitions—Dr. Observer and Mr. Participant, as he humorously puts it. Muriel Harris, citing Donald Schon in her chapter on "Writing Center Administration: Making Local, Institutional Knowledge in Our Writing Centers," argues for the value of institutional knowledge made by the writing center administrator as reflective researcher, "who notes results, reflects on new practices, and if needed, readjusts and tries again" (84). Kathleen Yancey in "Seeing Practice through Their Eyes," an essay on tutors as researchers, suggests building reflection into the process of data collection itself, engaging tutors in reflective letters, e-mails on writing center practice, tutor logs, formal writing assignments that build on reflective activities, and portfolios that include a cumulative, reflective text. In "Capturing Complexity: Using Grounded Theory to Study Writing Centers," Joyce Neff introduces into writing center research a methodology that "maintains a critical tension between empirical data and explanatory analysis" (135) by requiring an ongoing dialogue between data and theory. Called "selective coding," the processes of grounded theory research "encourages a researcher to examine multiple viewpoints, assumptions and interpretations" rather than forcing a choice between description and theory (142–43).

Defined originally as service rather than research units, writing centers and the professionals who work in them have struggled over the years to find ways to incorporate research systematically into already daunting instructional and administrative loads and sometimes fiscally uncertain futures. This volume attests to the persistence and imaginative energy that has gone into that struggle and reaffirms the promise of writing center research while it shrugs off the inherited burden of a naïve empiricism. It provides more than simply another round of calls for more research in writing centers, though it does that in particularly meaningful ways. It also, and more importantly, demonstrates specific and insightful research modalities that can be incorporated into the ongoing dailiness of writing center life, not merely added on top of an already stressful list of things to do.

Even though *Writing Center Research* is not, strictly speaking, a how-to book, interested readers are sure to find among its chapters, each written by recognized veterans of writing center work, a project or a methodology that appeals to the particular circumstances of their own writing center and the training and temperament of staff and directors. From efficient, student-centered research into assessment issues to research on computer literacies, from

Althusserian readings of the subjectivity of tutor talk to analysis of its gaps and absences, *Writing Center Research* provides the interested researcher with inspiration and research models aplenty. Even those not interested in pursuing research in writing centers will find reading this often ingenious and thoughtful book a satisfying introduction to writing center theory and practice and to the issues of research in composition generally. If your writing center bookshelf is getting a little squeezed with all those recent writing center books and your back issues of the *Writing Lab Newsletter* and the *Writing Center Journal*, you might just begin a new shelf with *Writing Center Research*. It is sure to fulfill its goal of extending the conversation.

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Multimodal Discourse: The Modes and Media of Contemporary Communication

Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen
New York: Oxford UP, 2001. 142 pages. \$21.95 (paper). ISBN 0340608773.

Beginning with his work in critical linguistics in the late 1970s, Gunther Kress has influenced a number of scholars in composition studies. The turns in Kress's thinking parallel certain developments in composition theory. In his early critical linguistic analyses, Kress and his collaborators theorized that ideological assumptions could be identified directly in texts, but he later adopted a semiotic approach that includes context and social practice. When Kress moved to the study of images, he and his coauthor, Theo van Leeuwen, began by focusing on visual modality in an effort to identify grammatical rules (*Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. London: Routledge, 1996). In their recently published *Multimodal Discourse*, Kress and van Leeuwen write in the preface that their initial intent was to write a guide to the "languages" of writing, music, images, gestures, and so on, but after several efforts they realized that they needed a metatheory of multimedia and that this theory had to be grounded in communicative practice. The necessity to look to communicative practice is the direct result of the predominance today of multimedia genre that combine text, images, and graphics, often with sound and video—all made increasingly available through digitization.