

## CONTENTS

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>List of Tables</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>xi</i>

1	Introduction	3
2	Valued Practices for Building a Writing Center Culture of Observation	15
3	An Activity Theory Analysis of Transcripts of Tutoring	45
4	Commonplace Rhetorical Moves of Session Notes	76
5	Blogging as a Tool for Dialogic Reflection	105
6	Problems of Practice: Developing an Inquiry Stance toward Writing Center Work	125
7	Conclusions	148

<i>References</i>	<i>156</i>
<i>About the Author</i>	<i>163</i>
<i>Index</i>	<i>165</i>

# 1

## INTRODUCTION

*The Writing Center Journal's feature "Theory in/to Practice" (T/P) offers writing center specialists a new venue for innovative work. Like the more traditional academic essays that comprise the bulk of the journal's contents, these works demonstrate an engagement with recent research and contemporary scholarly debates. Unlike traditional scholarly essays, however, T/P showcases those primary documents that manifest the scholarship of our everyday practices—those syllabi, annual reports, and other writing center documents that translate our disciplinary expertise for an external audience.*

—“Call for Submissions: Theory in/to Practice” (2010, *Writing Center Journal*)

Writing centers, by their very nature, experience high rates of turnover and, thus, are continually peopled by newcomers, both tutors and administrators. With so many novices cycling through, and relatively few long-time specialists with deep knowledge of the field, how does a writing center develop and sustain a robust community of learners? Through an analysis of an assemblage of everyday writing center documents and the activities that circulate around them, this book argues for a variety of practices that work to build and maintain a writing center learning community, firmly grounded in research and theory. Inspired by the *Writing Center Journal's* feature “Theory in/to Practice,” this book, addressed to both writing center administrators and tutors, demonstrates engagement with contemporary research and theory by showcasing primary documents that manifest the scholarship of everyday practices. Documents include a list of twenty valued practices for tutoring writing, excerpts from transcripts of tutoring consultations, samples of session notes detailing the work of tutoring, posts and comments from a writing center blog, and an assignment description for a tutored inquiry project. The purpose is to illustrate the ways everyday documents both enact and forward writing center scholarship. Each chapter includes background on a specific document and the exigencies that

led to its creation and surrounding activities. The centerpiece of each chapter is the document itself. Then each chapter offers an analysis of the document, exploring its innovations, showing how it engages current scholarship, as well as how it enhances practices and extends, complicates, and offers new approaches to longstanding disciplinary challenges. These challenges include various aspects of writing center work, from tutoring to program assessment, all converging around an overarching concern—the tie that binds these documents together—tutor education. In addition to their preoccupation with tutor education, these focal documents and the chapters that analyze them are linked by two more key concerns: (1) a set of conceptual frameworks, which adhere to advance related principles for writing center work, and (2) an inquiry-stance toward writing center work.

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

With this text-based approach to writing center scholarship, I argue for grounding the everyday documents we create, whether policy statements, websites, course syllabi, assessment plans, promotional flyers, annual reports, or the many other genres we engage to do writing center work, in conscious conceptual frameworks. With each chapter, my goal is to show the ways focal documents reflect and generate underlying assumptions about writing, teaching, and learning. Examination of everyday documents, I argue, illuminates the theories that underpin and motivate writing centers. As Nancy Grimm (2009) puts it, we need “a willingness to question foundational assumptions that typically guide writing center practice.” Informed by George Lakoff, Grimm invites writing centers to examine the “unconscious cognitive models” we use to understand our work. This orientation is not mere navel-gazing. As Grimm points out, examining conceptual underpinnings invites change. “Significant change in any workplace occurs,” she writes, “when unconscious conceptual models are brought to the surface and replaced with conscious ones” (16). This book takes up Grimm’s invitation by applying a variety of theoretical lenses to everyday writing center documents to unearth the foundational principles that animate their creation and the activities that take place around them.

These theoretical lenses include the following: communities of practice, activity theory, discourse analysis, reflective practice, and inquiry-based learning. While these lenses are not new to writing center scholarship, bringing them together in this way sheds light on the ways these conceptual frameworks work as complimentary or adjacent

theories to underpin tutor education. All the frameworks share fundamental understandings of teaching, learning, and writing as inherently *social* activities. All understand language use in terms of *action*. All are *dynamic*. In this way, the theories that animate each chapter do not operate together in absolute consistency, but they adhere to construct a consistent set of principles for writing center work, and tutor education in particular. To illustrate their usefulness for analyzing writing center documents, I've highlighted one as a primary analytical framework for each chapter. At the same time, I occasionally draw connections to one or more of the other theoretical perspectives. While one lens affords a certain view of a particular document, I encourage readers to explore ways that the other perspectives might also be applied in order to illuminate different aspects of a document and the activities that circulate around it.

Popular books for tutor training, such as Donald McAndrew and Thomas Reigstad's (2001) *Tutoring Writing: A Practical Guide for Conferences*, Ben Rafoth's (2005) *A Tutor's Guide: Helping Writers One to One*, Paula Gillespie and Neal Lerner's (2007) *The Longman Guide to Peer Tutoring*, and Christina Murphy and Steve Sherwood's (2011) *The St. Martin's Sourcebook for Writing Tutors*, tend to be practical rather than theoretical. Even texts that do address theory explicitly, such as Robert Barnett and Jacob Blumer's (2007) *The Longman Guide to Writing Center Theory and Practice*, do so narrowly, through the field of rhetoric and composition. With few exceptions, notably Nancy Grimm's (1999) *Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times*, Elizabeth Boquet's (2002) *Noise from the Writing Center*, Harry Denny's (2010) *Facing the Center*, and Jackie Grutsch McKinney's (2013) *Peripheral Visions for Writing Centers*, writing center work remains under-theorized. For readers who ask, "Why this book now?" One answer is that there is a continued need in our field to theorize writing center work. That John Nordloff's *Writing Center Journal Article*, "Vygotsky, Scaffolding, and the Role of Theory in Writing Center Work," won the 2015 International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) Outstanding Article Award reflects this urgency. Nordloff (2014) addresses our field's "resistance to systematic or theoretical thought" this way:

While our theories often lack empirical evidence to support them, they also do not function for us *as theories should* for a discipline. That is to say, the typical role of theory within a discipline is to provide a broad explanation of the processes that underlie the surface phenomenon that can be observed. In other words, theories provide the "why" to help us understand the "what." (47–48; emphasis in original)

That's my goal: to get at *a broad explanation of the processes that underlie the surface phenomenon* of the documents showcased in each chapter and the activities that surround them.

In my experience, however, many writing center professionals and peer tutors alike tend to resist "theory." They see it as abstract, remote, and removed from the practical business of tutoring. But I'm not interested in theorizing for theory's sake. Rather, as Nordlof (2014) suggests, theory is essential to understanding the "why" behind the "what" of our activities. Identifying the same aversion to theory in the wider field of composition, James Zebroski (1994) puts it this way in *Thinking Through Theory: Vygotskian Perspectives on the Teaching of Writing*:

Theory—the word too often conjures up notions of the impractical, the superfluous, even the sophistic. Too frequently, compositionists have opposed theory to practice and have opted for practice, for "what works." But what do we mean when we assert that an activity "works"? How do we gauge apparent practicality? How do we evaluate the success or failure of a writing activity or our own teaching? The moment we begin to ask such questions, to reflect on our reflections, we are involved in theory. (15)

We can't sidestep theory. The "why" is always already present, whether we're conscious of it or not. My argument, to echo Grimm (1999), is to bring our "whys" to the surface for critical examination. To draw from Zebroski (1994) again:

Theory is not the opposite of practice; theory is not even a supplement to practice. Theory *is* practice, a practice of a particular kind, and practice is always theoretical. The question then is not whether we have a theory . . . that is, a view, or better, a vision of ourselves and our activity, but whether we are going to become conscious of our theory. (15)

When I use the word *theory*, then, throughout this book, I refer simultaneously to its multiple meanings and functions, which are entangled: first, as Nordlof (2014) puts it, theory is *explanatory*. Second, theory is a *heuristic*, a tool of discovery and invention. Third, theory includes the *principles* that guide practice. Fourth, theory is the *unacknowledged or implicit values, assumptions, and beliefs* that underlie everyday routines. This fourth meaning is closest to Grimm's (1999) alternative term, "conceptual frameworks," which I use interchangeably with *theory*. I prefer Grimm's phrase because it forwards the image of underlying structural supports, like the beams that shore up a building. In this sense, conceptual frameworks are the foundational assumptions that determine how we act. Buried shallow or deep, again, they are always already there, whether we choose to investigate them or not. The challenge is to excavate our frameworks for careful examination to determine exactly *how*

they organize and structure what we do. *Conceptual frameworks* also suggest a fifth function of *theory*, this time as a “frame” or “lens” through which to look. This metaphor draws our attention to both the affordances and the constraints of any framing device: none can encompass the entire picture. Rather, they all narrow and focus our attention to a *particular view*, allowing us to see some things while ignoring others. Conceptual frameworks, then, are tools for seeing and analyzing writing center work. Lauren Fitzgerald and Melissa Ianetta, in *The Oxford Guide for Writing Tutors: Practice and Research*, make a persuasive case for theorizing writing center work in their chapter “Looking Through Lenses: Theoretically Based Inquiry” (Fitzgerald and Ianetta 2015). Here they point out the ways that theorizing can provoke new questions and novel ways of re-seeing writing center work. For these authors, theorizing is not an end in itself. Rather, “we’re concerned with the verb *theorizing*,” they write, “the actions associated with using theory, rather than with the noun *theory*, which would entail focusing on and explaining previously existing theoretical constructs.” In this way, Fitzgerald and Ianetta argue, “interpreting and applying theoretical texts can be considered a research method” (212). This is the stance I take toward theorizing in this book, as a research method for unearthing the values, assumptions, and beliefs that inhabit and animate everyday writing center documents.

It’s their everydayness, I think, that makes the mundane documents of writing center work so inviting for theoretical inquiry. Their ordinari-ness and ubiquity make them easy to overlook. At the same time, the theories that underpin the creation of writing center documents are also easily neglected. In *Science in Action*, Bruno Latour (1987) shows how a hypothesis or speculation either becomes a fact or remains merely a curiosity. He calls *fact* “ready-made” science—as in “already-made”: it is “black-boxed,” Latour says, certain, unproblematic, and stable, and it provides a foundation for future work. He refers to *speculation* as “science in the making” or “science in action”: it is, Latour tells us, “rich, confusing, ambiguous and fascinating,” and its future is uncertain (15). Your computer is one example of *already-made* science: its operations are taken for granted, certain. When you turn on a computer in the morning, you don’t wonder *how* it works or *why* this way and not some other way; instead, you simply rely on it to get your other “work-in-the-making” done. By contrast, speculation is “science in action,” ideas that are not yet “black-boxed,” fixed, and certain. Latour’s idea of “black-boxing” is a useful way to think about conceptual frameworks. We need, constantly, to take our frameworks out of the black box to name and critique them. For the more routine practices become, the less available they are for

reflexive, critical examination and change. To get at the “why” beneath the “what” of writing center work, as Nordlof (2014) puts it, we need to put our theoretical lenses up for study.

While the frameworks in this book operate together to explicate many aspects of writing center work, like any frameworks, they are limited. With that in mind, we need to interrogate any writing center theory for its benefits and costs. We need to avoid allowing any perspective to rise to the level of dogma, turning the work of tutoring into rights or wrongs. Rather, we need to keep an eye out for gaps. Any theoretical perspective must be adopted with caution, with doubt. But to do writing center work effectively, we must have a coherent, conscious, explicit theory of teaching, learning, language, and literacy. In short, this book argues for a stance of openness and curiosity toward conceptual frameworks, the underpinnings of writing center work, and at the same time skepticism. The document-based exploration that follows, then, invites readers to reflect on theory and practice in a spirit of inquiry, looking for and carefully considering other frameworks beyond the few described in this book to support the work of writing centers. My applications of various frameworks for analysis, then, are intended as illustrations. I encourage readers to consider other theories too, which might better—or differently—serve your own purposes. After all, the shoe I use to pound in a picture hook may work just fine for me, but you may prefer a hammer.

#### AN INQUIRY-STANCE TOWARD WRITING CENTER WORK

In addition to theorizing writing center work, there is also a continued urgent need for research in writing centers. Calls for further and more rigorous research are not new in the field of writing center studies (Babcock and Thonus 2012; Driscoll and Perdue 2012 and 2014; Fitzgerald 2014; Gillam 2002; Grimm 2003; J. Harris et al. 2001; Lerner 2014; Neuleib and Scharton 1994; North 1987; Pemberton and Kinkead 2003; Thompson et al. 2009). But these calls have recently become louder and more insistent. Dana Driscoll and Sherry Perdue, for instance, point out that fewer than 6 percent of articles published in the *Writing Center Journal* between 1980 and 2009 include replicable, aggregable, and data-supported (RAD) research. In a recent follow-up study, they explore the reasons for this lack of RAD research. One problem is that “while we are collecting a lot of data,” they point out, “over half of WC [writing center] administrators see that data only in terms of how it might be described to external stakeholders or upper administrators, not necessarily as data that can be used by the field to better

understand its practices and to develop more data-supported best practices” (Driscoll and Perdue 2012, 117–18). A wealth of writing center data is bound up in a myriad of everyday documents, which cry out for study. But as Anne Ellen Geller and Harry Denny note, many writing center professionals do not view contributing to the scholarly conversation as central to their professional lives (Geller and Denny 2013, 118). Even among writing center practitioners who do value making scholarly contributions to the field, exigency, time, and resources to carry out research are often lacking, confounding the growth and development of knowledge making in writing center studies. Many writing center administrators, it seems, spend so much time designing and managing the documents that mediate writing center work that pursuing scholarly research projects too often takes a back seat or falls by the wayside altogether. One goal of this book, then, is to make a case for inquiry into everyday writing center documents in order to identify and analyze the theories that inform their creation and use.

Along with a push for more empirical research from writing center professionals, there is also a growing chorus of calls for more student-led research. Jackie Grutsch McKinney’s (2016) new *Strategies for Writing Center Research* is a spirited and accessible methods guide suited to both seasoned specialists and novice student researchers. Likewise, *The Oxford Guide for Writing Tutors*, which includes a number of studies authored by students, also reflects the move to valuing both RAD research and student voices in writing center scholarship. With this mission in mind, at a recent IWCA conference, Ianetta (2015) described her process of launching novice tutors into forming research questions and taking steps toward Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval during the first meeting of her tutor-education course for beginners. She was motivated, she explained, by her view that our field has not made enough space at conferences and in scholarly publications for research conducted by student peer tutors. A second edition of *The Oxford Guide* would contain an even higher percentage of student-led research, Ianetta promised. While I am happy to see this positive turn in the field, we need to take care to cultivate a culture of inquiry, with deep and sturdy roots, particularly among novice tutors, in which high-quality RAD research has adequate time to mature and flourish. Novices need to become acquainted with relevant conversations in the field before framing research questions. Research, for both novices and veterans alike, needs time to percolate. To that end, I propose a more gradual unfolding of inquiry, driven by some problem or question, which emerges out of sustained work in writing center research, theory, and practice over time. Thomas M. McCann



(2014), in *Transforming Talk into Text: Argument Writing, Inquiry, and Discussion, Grades 6–12*, directs us to John Dewey for a definition of *inquiry*:

In *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, Dewey, (1938) defines *inquiry* in this way: “Inquiry is the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole” (pp. 104–105). I understand Dewey to mean that inquiry begins with the recognition of an area of doubt, an “indeterminate situation.” This recognition leads to the expression of a question or questions (i.e., a *problem*) that set off an investigation or the purposeful seeking of a solution to resolve the doubt, at least by arriving at a tentative conclusion and by shedding some light on some areas that previously had been dim. The investigation relies on reasoning and the command of techniques, operations, or procedures that will support illumination. For Dewey, the inquiry process might result in something more “determinate.” At the same time, inquiry into one question often triggers other questions and an inquiry cycle continues. (27)

One reviewer of an early draft of this manuscript posed the question, “What would your ideal tutor-education program look like?” Initially, I balked. That’s not my project, I thought, to forward an “ideal.” But, if pressed, I’d say that my ideal tutor-education curriculum would be animated by the spirit of inquiry valued by Dewey and McCann. But what does such a writing center culture of inquiry look like, exactly? This book aims to show readers, through the five focal documents and activities around which each major chapter is organized. As products of an inquiry stance toward writing center work, these documents emerged not as parts of carefully designed, formal research projects but as responses to persistent doubts and questions about tutor-education, which have emerged over time. The projects described here are, however, no less “research.” With evidence gathered from a local writing center context, theoretically grounded methods of analysis, and involvement of peer tutors themselves, each chapter illustrates principles of inquiry-based teaching and learning. By first growing the habits of mind of an inquiry stance toward writing center work, I argue, tutors are then better equipped to develop primary research projects of their own, organically, not on demand. Drawing from and amending McCann’s (2014) “features of inquiry,” then, each chapter is bound together by the following features:

- A compelling **problem** or area of doubt, without a definitive, prescribed answer.
- **Data**, from both primary and secondary sources, including a **focal document or documents**.

- **Procedures of investigation**, explicit methods of gathering information and analyzing data.
- **Conceptual frameworks for analysis**, theories that illuminate the *why* behind the *what* and the *how* of writing center work, the underlying values, assumptions, and beliefs that shape practice.
- **Interaction with and among peer tutors** to build data sets, practice thinking strategies, and develop the habits of mind that characterize an inquiry stance toward writing center work.
- **Report of conclusions**, including creation of related assignments, activities, and products, as well as identification of new areas of doubt and further lines of inquiry.
- **Transfer and application**, putting inquiry-based discoveries to use in everyday writing center practice and applying the principles of inquiry-based teaching and learning to new situations. (27–28)

Because the documents vary in type and function, individual chapters do not lend themselves to a consistent, lock-step pattern of organization, which might be expected by the bulleted list above. Rather, I encourage readers to look for these features of inquiry as underlying principles, which are always present, but enacted and articulated with variation, and with different features foregrounded or backgrounded chapter by chapter.

## WHAT TO EXPECT

Examined through the lens of “communities of practice,” the focal document of chapter 2, “Valued Practices for Building a Writing Center Culture of Observation,” is a list of tutoring practices, which serve as a rubric for observing tutoring. Writing center literature on observing, however, reflects persistent doubts about whether or not to observe in the first place. The presence of an observer, the narrative goes, changes the nature of the consultation, generating anxiety in both tutors and tutees. As a result, effective tutoring may be compromised. To avoid disrupting consultations, the literature suggests, administrators should sidestep observations altogether, opting instead for less threatening modes of evaluation, such as mock tutorials and participant observations. Underlying much of this conversation about observing is the assumption that its primary aim is summative evaluation of individual tutors. By contrast, this chapter details a three-year study of 163 observations, focused on formative feedback. Analyzed through the lens of communities of practice, at the center of this initiative is the primary document “20 Valued Practices for Tutoring Writing,” which structures systematic observations, organizes program assessment, and prompts

tutor education. Based on the use of this document, our analysis of data suggests that rather than avoid observations, or substitute them for inauthentic alternatives, we ought to make direct observations a centerpiece of our work. While we should not ignore observation anxiety, shifting the purpose from high-stakes individual evaluation to formative feedback and program assessment may reduce it. This enables a culture of observation, in which observations are no longer one-off occasions for high anxiety, but ubiquitous and central to program improvement, and especially tutor education.

Chapter 3, “An Activity Theory Analysis of Transcripts of Tutoring,” draws upon Vygotsky (1978), Engeström and Miettinen (1999), and other leading theorists of cultural historical activity theory, including David Russell (1995), whose review of writing research, which makes use of activity theory, suggests implications for writing center work. With the primary document of the session transcription, this chapter shows readers how to locate the “moves” that tutors make—what work gets done and how—through an activity theory framework. This chapter demonstrates how tutors may apply this conceptual framework as a heuristic for working together with writers to learn the context for writing, including its motive, objective, tools, subjects, rules and conventions, community of practice, and division of labor. Teachers have lots of tacit knowledge about writing in their disciplines and about their particular expectations, which are rarely made explicit to students. Activity theory provides a framework for peer consultants of writing to determine what a writer understands about a specific situation for writing, and what more she needs to learn in order to accomplish her writing objective. In addition to its usefulness in helping to understand the context for writing, this chapter proposes that writing center workers consider the tutorial itself as an “activity system,” examining, in particular, their role in it—and the ways their perspective of the activity may coincide or conflict with that of the writer—and with what consequences. To put it another way, as a framework for understanding and doing writing center work, activity theory is useful for unearthing both the context for writing and the activity of the tutoring session itself.

Examples of tutor reports, or session notes, are the featured documents in chapter 4, “Commonplace Rhetorical Moves of Writing Center Session Notes.” According to James Gee (2005) in *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method*, “Whenever we speak or write, we always and simultaneously construct or build seven things or areas of ‘reality.’ Let’s call these seven things,” says Gee, “the ‘seven building tasks’ of language” (11). These tasks include “significance,” “activities,”

“identities,” “relationships,” “the distribution of social goods,” “connections,” and “sign systems and knowledge.” Analyzing seven hundred notes from tutoring sessions, I examine how language builds reality in the writing center and what these realities tell us about tutors’ underlying conceptual frameworks and identities. Studying session notes, I argue, can illuminate the social language of writing centers in general, and our own local writing center contexts in particular. As everyday artifacts of writing center work, excerpts from this corpus of session notes chart that social language, as they demonstrate the ways tutors take up—or don’t take up—its situated meanings and patterns, become enculturated into that language, and adapt the genre to their own ends. Through the commonplace rhetorical moves enacted in session notes, tutors enact shared principles of the local writing center community of practice and construct identities, both for themselves and for the writing center as an institution.

Chapter 5, “Blogging as a Tool for Dialogic Reflection,” showcases as its primary document posts and comments from an internal writing center blog to highlight the value of reflective practice among tutors. Engaging the long-standing scholarly discussion on reflective thinking and writing among writing center workers, this chapter argues that, to be more broadly useful for tutor education and professional development, reflections need to be shared in dialogue with other consultants. Such dialogic reflection is a powerful tool for tutor learning.

Chapter 6, “Problems of Practice: Developing an Inquiry Stance Toward Writing Center Work,” takes as its primary document an assignment for a tutor-led inquiry project, which serves as the basis for ongoing tutor education for experienced consultants. Whereas a novice tutor-training course is designed and implemented by the writing center director, following that class, this inquiry project invites experienced consultants to determine for themselves what new questions about various aspects of writing center work to study. Grounded in the scholarly conversation about inquiry-based learning introduced here in the introduction, this chapter, like chapters 1 and 3, emphasizes collaborative learning among consultants to build a coherent writing center community of practice.

Guided by an inquiry stance and supported by data, this book seeks to contribute to evidence-based theorizing of writing center work, arguing for tutor education focused not merely on instrumental strategies, but on developing conceptual frameworks—habits of mind and critical lenses to inform writing center work. One way for tutors to learn writing center theory is to engage with authentic documents generated

within a writing center itself. The mundane documents of everyday writing center work, like the focal documents of each chapter that follows, both reflect and create the conceptual frameworks that guide writing centers, and our design and implementation of tutor education in particular. To put it another way, the documents and associated activities that organize and structure our work are a “what” that cry out for further scrutiny of the theories that provide the “why” behind them. While novice tutors are especially eager for a bag of tricks—a set of how-to’s for tutoring—when that bag runs out, consultants are left without principles and propositions for generating effective practice. By contrast, conceptual frameworks provide critical lenses with which to judge the effectiveness of writing center work—including everyday documents—and to invent an endless array of flexible practices-in-action. By examining key conceptual frameworks via analysis of the primary documents presented in each chapter, this book argues for a more conscious theoretical stance toward writing center work. That is not to say that theory is privileged above practice. Rather, the two are inseparable. The one is always informed by and informing the other. Writing center administrators and peer tutors alike always have reasons for working the way they do. The challenge is to make those reasons conscious, explicit, to call them up for examination and, perhaps, revision. Deliberate interrogation of our everyday writing center documents, I argue, is one way to do that, and thereby to engage in scholarship.