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## Grounding Writing Centers in Theory

Pat McQueeney

Rev. of Intersections: Theory-Practice in the Writing Center. Ed. Joan A. Mullin and Ray Wallace. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1994. 196 pages. Paper: \$19.95 (\$14.95 members).

Those who have participated in writing center conventions will immediately appreciate the title of Joan A. Mullin and Ray Wallace's collection of 15 articles. The title, Intersections: Theory-Practice in the Writing Center, identifies the tension that simultaneously is the life blood and bane of writing centers. Writing centers are historically places of practice; yet to earn legitimacy within the broader academic community, center practitioners are pressured to demonstrate their programs' theoretical grounding. Most writing center literature to date has focused on practice—on pedagogical and administrative issues, specifically. As a “first book on writing center theory” (Mullin vii), this collection offers practitioners a fresh perspective from which to re-view their work and to link it to the research and scholarship of their

academic colleagues. As Mullin notes, such theory-based exchange can also legitimize writing center work to theoretically based colleagues and afford these colleagues means by which to link their scholarship to years of productive writing center work (viii).

The range of this collection is broad, covering creative writing workshops as Katherine H. Adams and John L. Adams describe, and ethnographical research strategies, reported by Janice Witherspoon Neuleib and Maurice A. Scharton. Explicit and implicit theories intersect, for, as Eric Hobson emphasizes in the initial essay, “no single theory can dictate writing center instruction” (8). Intersections situates practice in contemporary critical theory, ranging from social construction (Christina Murphy) and text linguistics (Ray Wallace) to feminist theory (Phyllis Lassner). Occasionally, theory is layered on practice, but more often the essays foreground theory that is already implicit in writing center work—especially collaboration and

individualized instruction theories, as Hobson notes (4).

The discussion of collaboration through the writing center prism allows this collection to stand as a useful contribution to that strand of inquiry. Sallyanne H. Fitzgerald's article on collaboration in terms of whole language theory and Tom MacLennan's use of Buberian theory to discuss collaboration are two of several essays in this strand, which includes tutoring as a central focus. In addition to Alice M. Gillam's essay on peer tutoring and collaboration, Mullin examines assumptions about the place of tutoring, and Jay Jacoby and Phyllis Lassner, in separate articles, explore the relationships of tutor and writer.

Discussions of individual instruction theories are tied to tutoring but also constitute their own strand. In addition to Fitzgerald's examination of whole language theory, readers will find Julie Neff's article on students with learning disabilities, Muriel Harris' essay on cross-cultural differences, and Pamela Farrell-Childer's discussion of affective education useful in addressing students' learning needs.

Not everyone will agree with my praise of the multi-faceted nature of this collection. Writing center specialists committed to practice may fear that students will be de-centered by theory. Conversely, theoretically-conservative academic colleagues may not be readily receptive to a pragmatic, multi-theory approach of the sort that "reshape[s] theory to fit our particular needs in the particular historically located situations in which writing center practitioners find themselves" (Hobson 8). Sometimes, an attempt to link to a colleague's theoretical interests is more threatening than no attempt at all.

That doesn't mean that we shouldn't try to promote such a dialogue. And in that spirit, I take up Mullin's challenge "to continue the conversation . . ." (Mullin xiii).

In the process of focusing on student-tutor relations, several essays in this collection marginalize or exclude faculty altogether. If, however, *Intersections* seeks to extend and expand the writing dialogue, faculty need to be included actively and positively in the conversation. Perhaps it is through theory that we can take a positive next step in this conversation. We can follow the lead of Mary Abascal-Hildebrand, for example, who uses Gadamer's theoretical frame of translation in her essay to discuss faculty as well as tutor and student relations.

Ultimately, it may be that this collection makes its most substantial contribution to the literature by providing a variety of theoretical frames that can serve as conversational intersections for writing professionals—writing consultants, composition specialists, and writing program administrators as well as writing center practitioners—about commonly valued, but differently experienced, discourse issues.

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## **To Air Is Human**

Shakespeare was born on April 23, 1564 in Stratford England. He also died on the same date. As far as his birth date is concerned there is a bit of confusion if he was really born on April 23 or if because of an upcoming feast it was delayed a few days.

It's like the old saying: "Familiarity breeds content."

*Contributed by Gayle Gaskill.*