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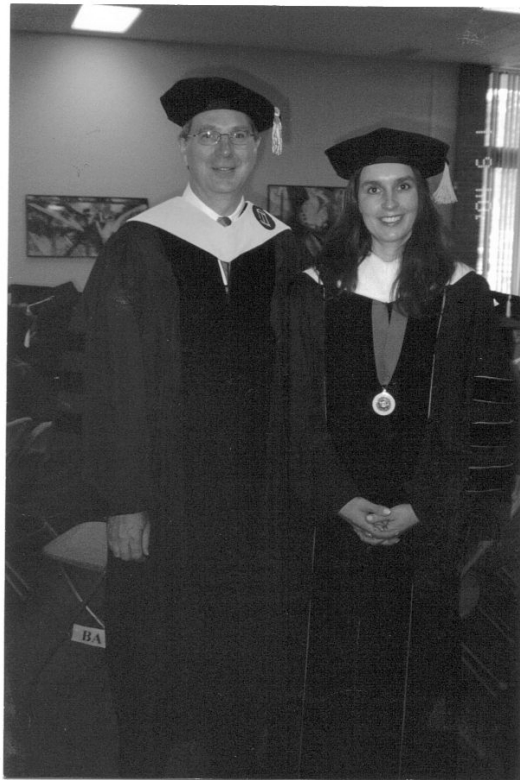
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An Interview with Ben Rafoth on Writing Center Research, Dissertations, and Job Opportunities

Fall 2009 / Training

by **Rebecca Day Babcock**, University of Texas of the Permian Basin

Ben Rafoth discusses current trends in the writing center field



Rebecca Day Babcock and Ben Rafoth

Ben Rafoth has directed the writing center at **Indiana University of Pennsylvania** for the past 20 years, and he currently directs the graduate program in Composition and TESOL there. He has edited *A Tutor's Guide: Helping Writers One to One* and *ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors*, with Shanti Bruce. Rafoth served as the Treasurer of the **International Writing Centers Association**, and in 2002 he was awarded the Ron Maxwell Award from the National Conference of Peer Tutoring in Writing, one of the highest honors in the writing center world. Rafoth is one of the original founders of the writing center movement, and a mentor of writing center researchers, theorists and practitioners. I wanted to speak more in depth about current issues in writing center scholarship, so I interviewed him in his office adjacent to the writing center on IUP's campus.

Interviewer: Thanks for agreeing to speak with me today. I would like to begin our talk with the topic of *research*. What, in your opinion, are the *most interesting or promising areas of inquiry right now*, either current or potential,

in the field of writing center research?

Prof. Ben Rafoth: Oh, that's a good question. Well, I think that one is *online tutoring*, and how we can make use of the available technology in ways that are really sound pedagogically, and not just quick or easy or efficient or cheap. And you know, there are definitely movements in that direction, for example, with Smarthinking [1]. I think a lot of schools now have started to eye Smarthinking as an alternative to their writing centers, because they see it as a lot more cost-effective, but the real question is not whether or not it's more cost-effective, but whether it's any better or at least as good. So, I think one area of research would be to see *whether these commercial ventures are really effective in helping students*. I think another thing related to that is to figure out *just exactly what these online tutoring sites are doing*. I've talked a little bit about it with someone who works for them and I think there's quite a bit to be done just describing what it is that they do, and then at some point, it would be good to write up a formal descriptive study along those lines [2].

Within some of our writing centers we have online ventures where we do email attachments. That's something I get a lot of here at IUP's writing center, and we also do real-time exchanges. I think it's also important to see how the technology is working when it's homegrown, when it's local, and what kinds of advantages that brings. So there's one area where more research is needed.

I think *the relationship between writing centers and the curriculum* [3] is always ripe for research. I think that there's not been nearly enough research in that area. I think the writing center does primarily serve the curriculum, and that's not to say that we simply should be doing whatever teachers tell us to do, or that they just send their students here with specific agenda, as if we don't have some ideas of our own about how to help students become better writers. But I think that writing centers generally just need to be more clear about the goals of instructors, and what instructors are doing in their classrooms.

I think research into effective tutor training programs would be beneficial for all of us who are working on a peer model, which I think is about one of the hardest to do.

On the other side of it, of course, instructors need to be more in tune with what's going on in the writing center; there just needs to be a *closer working relationship* between the two. For example, students need to have a better idea when they come to the writing center of exactly what it is they're coming for help with. Sometimes they're coming to the writing center just because they have to--they're told they have to come here. Or because they've gotten some bad feedback on their writing and they're frustrated and they really don't know what else to do. So, they come to the writing center. Or, their instructors don't know what else to tell them, and can't really be more specific about why they're unhappy with their writing. So there's a process of *education about writing*, and more specifically, a process of *education about what the writing center does*, and how tutors can be helpful. So, I think we need to research programs that are doing that successfully, how they've established *collaborative relationships with faculty* and how they translate that into tutoring, to helping students right there in the tutoring session. How does that play out in a way that is beneficial to the student?

Interviewer: Do you just mean in English, or in all disciplines?

Rafoth: Yes, English and all disciplines, because we're always serving students from a variety of majors. I think in the IUP writing center we probably have more English faculty than any other as a group sending students here.

Interviewer: It's not so surprising when the other faculty don't know what the writing center does, but you would think English faculty would have some idea. Are there any other areas that are ripe for research?

Rafoth: I think a third area is in *tutor training* for writing centers that work on a *peer model*, like we do here at the **IUP Writing Center**. We use peer tutors opposed to professional tutors or adjuncts or whatever. In my position I'm constantly training tutors. Every semester we have tutors graduate or begin student teaching. So, with that degree of turnover, I'm constantly training tutors, and it's a challenge to work with the new tutors and yet at the same time provide something beneficial to the existing veteran tutors without repeating the same thing they've heard before.

Another thing about the peer model is that we don't have students from only one major. That's not even a desirable thing, so I try to recruit tutors from other majors. Currently we have someone from psychology, someone from speech pathology; we have religious studies majors, journalism majors, but most are English majors, or English Education majors. But that presents also another challenge to tutor training, which is *instruction in the vocabulary used for talking about writing*.

I think *research into effective tutor training programs* [4] would be beneficial for all of us who are working on a peer model, which I think is about one of the hardest to do. It seems to be easier to have a writing center where your staff is fairly stable. The peer model has tremendous benefits; I wouldn't trade it for anything because I think the students relate best to students and there are some real clear advantages. I would like to know how I could do a better job--within the limited resources that I have--for how I might more effectively train tutors. Sometimes I read descriptions of complicated or intense tutor training programs and think, "Yes, but I only have six hours of release time to do this." I really don't have any additional money to pay tutors for extras such as going to conferences, for example.

Interviewer: Is there anything that's going on right now, any research projects that are going on in your writing center, or plans for the near future?

Rafoth: Well, there is an online study that I am working on. We have quite a good record, that is, a paper record or a digital *record of students who've submitted papers online*, asked for feedback, received feedback from tutors, and then agreed to be interviewed in a follow-up interview, or, after they turned that paper in and it was graded and they received it back from their instructors. What I'm looking at is *how the tutor responded to the paper and what the writer got from the tutor's response*. That is to say, does the student understand what the tutor said? Were they able to act on it or were some of the things the tutor said a problem for the writers? Were they confused by them? Were they, I don't know, offended by them? These are all things I'm turning up in the analysis, and I hope to be writing it up here soon. That's the project that I'm working on [5].

Well, it's a field, I mean, it's changing; you're seeing now writing center dissertations where there were no such things many years

ago.

Recently, Jennifer Ritter defended her dissertation, and she was looking at native speakers helping *non-native speakers* with their papers, and the negotiated interaction that they engaged in in those tutoring sessions—how they helped, or how they dealt with, for example, unclear meaning. Did they like to draw it out, construct it, or did the tutor go over it, did the tutor figure that it meant something, you know, and go on. So there are many ways for handling unclear meaning in a tutoring session with non-native speakers. And it arises so often, so she tape recorded those sessions, and she collected just a wealth of data, and some of it is really fascinating.

I had the pleasure of reading her dissertation since I was on her committee, and she did that study here in our writing center with our tutors. And that research also led to her job at the **University of Alaska at Anchorage**, because one of the things that they wanted her to do is start a writing center. That's not something she has to take up right away, but that's kind of on the horizon there for her.

Interviewer: How many *writing center dissertations* have there been at IUP [6]?

Rafoth: I wanna say half a dozen, but I think there are more, if I went back and looked at every dissertation, I think, but I've only been here since '87 and haven't been involved in all of them. Beth Boquet's dissertation, for example, was a writing center dissertation with Mark Hurlbert who directed that one. I was a reader on her committee. So, there's Boquet, and there are other people who've done writing center dissertations but not in this writing center, in a writing center of their own institution.

Interviewer: I noticed that many writing center directors and scholars did not actually do writing center dissertations.

Rafoth: I think probably a very small number of people who are directing writing centers now actually did writing center dissertations.

Interviewer: So, it's not necessary. Is it recommended?

Rafoth: Well, it's a field, I mean, it's changing; you're seeing now writing center dissertations where there were no such things many years ago. But there were writing center directors and you're starting to see now job ads specifically looking for writing center people and of course, as soon as you can see that, then you know that a writing center dissertation is probably a prime qualification then [7]. The *job market* is there and the job ads now do in fact specify somebody to direct a writing center. And, I think that if you really want to be *at the top of the list* for institutions and departments that are going out and looking for a writing center director, you'll want to have a dissertation in that area. Yeah, I really think so. I think that like anything, there's no single thing, there's no golden key that's going to slot you right into a job, that's going to insure or guarantee that you get a job; the best thing you can do is look for the kind of job that you want, to *network*, and to *have contacts* with people who have jobs, know about jobs. That's always still partly about who you know. And it's important not to make yourself too narrow. And, show breadth in a number of different ways, even if your dissertation is on a very narrow or specific topic, you can have breadth in terms of your coursework, your life experiences, your job experiences, your MA degree.

Interviewer: There seem to be many opportunities for new and exciting research projects and job openings in the writing center field, and your ideas were very helpful. Thank you very much.

Rafoth: You're welcome.

Notes

[1] Smarthinking is an online tutoring service. Individuals or organizations can contract to pay for its services. In addition to writing, Smarthinking offers tutoring in various subjects such as Math, Chemistry, Physics, Biology, Anatomy and Physiology, Accounting, Economics, Introductory Finance, Spanish and Statistics. For more information [click here](#).

[2] Some studies have already been done on Smarthinking. See for example the studies done by Teresa De Fazio and Michael Crock of the [Open University of Australia](#) and by Jane Calfee of [Kapiolani Community College](#). Both of these studies involve essay improvement, student success and satisfaction rather than a description and analysis of the actual feedback received, as Ben suggests. Beth Hewett, a former employee of Smarthinking, conducted such a study: "Synchronous Online Conference-Based Instruction: A Study of Whiteboard Interactions and Student Writing." Earlier, Holly K. Moe caused a controversy with her 2000 study of Smarthinking. Her full report can be seen in *ERIC*, and a shortened version was published in the [Writing Lab Newsletter](#). A few issues later, Beth Hewett and Christina Ehmann of Smarthinking issued a response, to which Moe also had the chance to respond. One of Moe's criticisms of Smarthinking was the lack of interaction between students and e-structors. Smarthinking has since added a synchronous whiteboard component, which Hewett discusses in her article.

[3] Robert W. Barnett and Jacob S. Blumner's book *Writing Centers and Writing Across the Curriculum Programs* is one resource. Early work on faculty attitudes toward the writing center can be found in articles by Malcolm Hayward and Patrick Sullivan. As Rafoth suggests, more work needs to be done in this area.

[4] There have not been many studies of this type, since most articles and books on tutor training are based on theory and personal experience, rather than actual research studies. One recent and notable exception is Karen Santos Rogers' dissertation "Investigating Tutor Training and Evaluation Practices in Colleges and Universities in the Mid-Atlantic Region."

[5] Some of the results of this study can be seen in Rafoth's chapter in *ESL Writers*. Other recent studies of tutoring online are "Between Technological Endorsement and Resistance: The State of Online Writing Centers" by Stephen Neaderhiser and Joanna Wolfe, and "A Comparison of Online Feedback Requests by Non-Native English-Speaking and Native English Speaking Writers" by Carol Severino, Jeffrey Swenson, and Jia Zhu, both appearing in the first issue of the [Writing Center Journal](#) (29.1) to be edited by Melissa Ianetta and Lauren Fitzgerald.

[6] According to Neal Lerner's research there have been 14 to date, but there were only nine at the time of this interview, and two of these were done before Rafoth worked at IUP.

[7] Partially inspired by this conversation, Interviewer, Carter-Tod, Levin,

Stahlnecker and Thonus discussed the relationship of the writing center dissertation to the job market, job preparation, and job prospects at the **2008 IWCA conference**.

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