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Review of *The Everyday Writing Center: A Community of Practice*

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The Everyday Writing Center: A Community of Practice, by Anne Ellen Geller, Michele Eodice, Frankie Condon, Meg Carroll, and Elizabeth H. Boquet. Logan: Utah State UP, 2007.

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Imagine a writing center where unexpected troubles lead to impromptu learning, where time follows rhythms rather than clocks, where tutors knit scarves and write journals during paid hours, where a commitment to diversity includes anti-racist activism, and where leadership involves pushing past the familiar to embrace risks and a Trickster habit of mind. This imagining is not only what the authors of *The Everyday Writing Center: A Community of Practice* do, but it is also what they ask readers to do along with them. Collaborators Anne Ellen Geller, Michele Eodice, Frankie Condon, Meg Carroll, and Elizabeth H. Boquet articulate a new theory for writing center practice grounded in Etienne Wenger's conception of "a community of practice," or a learning culture that invites question-asking, acknowledges conflict, and values "meaningful discomfort" (22). By combining qualitative research with deep theoretical and interdisciplinary engagement, the authors show that imaginative dreaming can become part of the everyday—they show what is not only possible but also probable and productive about writing center practice.

The Everyday Writing Center is organized into seven chapters, each expanding the theoretical base and revealing practical implications of a new and challenging framework for writing centers. In the introduction, the authors characterize the current state of writing centers as too narrowly focused on tutor training, with handbooks as containing, rather than opening, our knowledge of one-on-one tutoring. They are concerned about a commoditization of knowledge and a dull, repetitive use of prescriptive tutoring strategies. Drawing on Max DePree's assertion that "the health of an organization is inversely proportional to the size of the manual" (qtd. 8), the authors explain, "We worry about the degree to which the neatly-packaged representation of our rich, multi-layered everyday writing center lives becomes a set of 'symbolic practices that substitute for action all too easily'"(8). What, then, might allow for more authentic, complex representation and understandings of writing center practice?

The remaining chapters identify conditions that support relational, creative practice. In chapter 2, "Trickster at Your Table," the authors argue for cultivating a Trickster mindset that welcomes uncertainty, disorder, and change. Learning to see through "Coyote eyes," they argue, will allow writing center directors to recognize contradictions, to avoid binaries, and to cross boundaries. To counter the claim that there is not enough time for this puzzling, improvisational practice, Geller et al. explore in chapter 3 how "our use of time and our conception of time can change and can be changed for the better" (32): for example, by rethinking our time spent checking emails, observing tutorials, or setting goals. The authors look specifically

at how time can serve as an excuse and prevent us from doing what matters. This chapter on time, in my mind, is a real strength of the book, as skeptical readers would likely claim that there is not enough time for what the authors propose. By tackling the question of time early in *The Everyday Writing Center*, the authors ask all of us to think carefully about our priorities.

Turning next to a focus on developing communities of practice, chapters 4 and 5 discuss tutors as learners and as writers, respectively. Using not only Wenger's model but also John Tagg's research on "learning paradigms," the authors argue for a "pro-learning culture" that involves all members of writing centers in shaping and understanding practice. They articulate the power of "framing and naming" for redefining our work (54); understand tutors' identities "in motion" through new learning and knowledge construction (53); and argue for a pedagogy of "*becoming* rather than as a display of *being* knowledgeable" (59). Because a community of practice involves the relationship of the self to others, of constructing and understanding identity over time and within social organizations, the authors are careful to consider issues of diversity throughout the text and of race particularly in chapter 6, "Everyday Racism: Anti-racism Work and Writing Center Practice." This chapter, perhaps more than any other, helps to ground the theoretical conversations in tangible, lived experience and provides concrete suggestions for discussing racism and making institutional change. Appendix material to chapter 6 includes valuable definitions and recommended readings. Finally, in chapter 7, the authors turn to leadership and "everyday administration," asserting that leadership must mean more than a job description or title within a structure. Instead, functional leaders are change-agents who question their mission, face challenges with passion and commitment, seek opportunities to collaborate with others, and focus on institutional transformation. In this sense, leadership becomes a process of "mattering" (125) and follows a high-risk/high-yield model.

For the field of composition and rhetoric, *The Everyday Writing Center* is groundbreaking for its shared authorship and community of practice framework. In an innovative, five-way collaboration, the authors speak with a collective voice that embodies writing center practice across local contexts. The collaboration itself allows the authors to achieve their aim of speaking across varied institutions, student and tutor populations, writing center missions and goals, and levels of resources and support. Through their writing and research process, Geller et al. engage in and model for readers the community of practice they advocate for writing centers. At the same time, they invite readers into this community, opening a space for difficult dialogues and encouraging all of us who are committed to writing centers to reassess our values and everyday practice.

The methodological approach further qualifies this text as a significant contribution to the field. The authors achieve praxis in *The Everyday Writing Center* through wide reading and engagement across disciplines as well as collaborative, qualitative inquiry into their work as writing center directors. As they draw on varied disciplines, including organizational management, cultural geography,

education, folklore, and sociology, they introduce their intended readers—other writing center directors—to scholarship on learning paradigms, epochal time, and critical race theory, among other areas. In addition to these interdisciplinary approaches to learning and leadership, the authors use action research on their own practice, which they weave throughout the text. Illustrative examples come from tutors' discussions and journals, activities during staff meetings, and artifacts, such as Tutorious Rex, a dinosaur that emerged from efforts to name a writing center superhero. Even as the authors share a number of tools for engaging tutors in staff education—from journal prompts and art assignments to experiments with time during tutorials and use of an inventory to discuss white privilege—they present these examples *not* as templates for building learning communities, but as case studies to be analyzed and questioned.

Because readers are welcomed into the authors' community of practice, it seems only natural to pose questions with an aim toward improving weaknesses of the text. As a tutor reading *The Everyday Writing Center*, I wanted to hear more about what *I* could do—not only as a learner and writer, as discussed in chapters 4 and 5, but also a leader and researcher. What might tutor voices add to the conversation on communities of practice? Although the authors describe their research as “I-Search, We-Search and teacher research projects” (65), they do not explore the potential or rigors of qualitative research, particularly for informing one-on-one conferences. I wonder about the implications of teacher research and of the broader communities of practice framework for tutoring itself. Finally, I would have liked more attention to the bibliography, as some works quoted in chapter epigraphs and appendix materials are cited neither in the footnotes nor in the bibliography at the end. Because I found myself heavily annotating the text with plans to return to key passages and to identify further readings, I would have liked a complete list of references.

As a reader, I found *The Everyday Writing Center* to be catalytic—a book that sparked my thinking not only about writing centers but also about learning, teaching, writing, and leading. This book has much to say to all of us in composition and rhetoric, as it is really about being in community, engaging with others, and working against oppression and toward social justice. Geller et al. describe the work of functional leadership and investment in communities of practice as messy, risky, and uncomfortable *but* entirely exciting, worthwhile, and enriching, just as learning itself is all of these things. They present a hopeful, participatory vision for writing centers without being naïve or idealistic. I remain excited about the community of practice that is sure to develop as a result of *The Everyday Writing Center*, a book with staying power and insight for us all.

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