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Review: Centers for Learning: Writing Centers and Libraries in Collaboration

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by Deaver Traywick

It has been over a decade since Irene Clark argued in an article for *Computers and Composition* that writing and research are part of the same recursive and collaborative processes. Yet, she found then that the research process taught to students "still presumes linearity and solitude" (562). In fact, Clark demonstrated in that article that the linear model of acquiring sources, notating sources, assembling sources, and citing sources had essentially gone unchanged since the 1930s. Unfortunately, despite our best intentions, too many students still learn that research is what happens in the wake of a single, short classroom presentation by a reference librarian and that the process takes about as long to complete.

James Elmborg and Sheril Hook's *Centers for Learning: Writing Centers and Libraries in Collaboration* is a strong contribution to the work Irene Clark initiated. Despite the fact that university collaborations might be derided as "trendy" (48), the reality is that re-imagining the relationship between writing and research—and seeing that new relationship through to the curriculum—demands the cooperation of writing center and library professionals. In fact, *Centers for Learning* posits that only by working together can libraries and writing centers ensure the continued development of innovative and effective instruction. And in an age of increasingly corporate-modeled colleges and universities that demand ever more efficiencies of time, space, and personnel, Elmborg and Hook have gathered examples of collaborative efforts that not only serve students and advance the profession but also appeal to the deans and vice-presidents on whose support writing centers and libraries depend.

About the Author

Deaver Traywick received an M.F.A. in fiction from the University of South Carolina in 2002. He currently directs the writing center and teaches writing at Black Hills State University in Spearfish, South Dakota. His personal and professional interests include writing fiction, studying administrative rhetoric, and hiking as much as possible.

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As the reader might expect, *Centers for Learning* seeks significant collaboration that goes beyond simply housing writing centers and libraries in the same building or encouraging each unit to make referrals to the other. The collaboration the authors and contributors envision is one of truly integrated instruction in information literacy and writing: "one holistic process" (9) that recognizes the work writing centers and libraries do is not just complementary but is very often inextricably intertwined. However, this vision does not always and easily become a reality; as many of the case studies show, obstacles to meaningful collaboration exist, both at the boundaries of these two professional communities and at their intersections with institutional forces. *Centers for Learning* wisely draws attention to these obstacles, even if it does not propose ways to eliminate or circumvent all of them.

In his introductory chapter, Elmborg stakes out the theoretical common ground that writing centers and libraries occupy. He bases his approach in J. F. Lyotard's vision of the postmodern university in transition: a place where "content" is increasingly warehoused in receptacles such as databases and students must be taught "how to use the terminals" to access it (2). Elmborg adds to this base Lev Vygotsky's work on distributed cognition and Kenneth Bruffee's writings on collaborative thinking, eventually arguing that teaching content is and should be secondary to teaching processes of inquiry and modes of accessing content. These ideas will be familiar to writing center professionals, who have studied—and even advanced—them for a very long time. But they have only been applied more recently to libraries, where Carol Kuhlthau has developed a six-step Information Search Process (ISP). Given Kuhlthau's work and libraries that are increasingly abandoning warehouse models for instructional models, Elmborg finds it easy to imagine teaching writing and research not as two independent exercises bound together by a common goal but as a single complex and recursive process of accessing information and constructing meaning from it.

Sheril Hook builds on these theoretical underpinnings with a chapter on the intersections of writing center and library practice. Although she appreciates that writing centers and libraries finally share a common grounding in process theory, she is clearly disheartened that the two fields are still so isolated. Even in Kuhlthau's six-step ISP, she demonstrates, research precedes writing and is undertaken "essentially in preparation for writing and presenting ideas" (24). However, by acknowledging their common concerns of "*audience, authority*, and *language*" [her emphasis] (27) and their complementary approaches to teaching writing and research, Hook explains, writing centers and libraries can begin meaningful collaboration. These collaborations can include co-training peer writing and research

assistants, combining specific services and access portals, and developing common faculty development workshops that pollinate course assignments and syllabi with new assumptions about the interconnectedness of writing and research. Ultimately, Hooks foresees a "merged center," a single academic unit responsible for developing new instructional techniques and shepherding students through an integrated process of seeking and making meaning of the information available to them (36).

The nine case studies of the volume describe various efforts at and levels of collaboration. Writing center professionals seeking to initiate collaboration will benefit from Lea Currie and Michele Eodice's experience of leading a campus-wide discussion on writing center-library collaboration that included administrators, faculty, and academic professionals. Their decision to involve so many players, the authors explain, grew out of a belief that sustainable collaborations must "entwine" themselves in the institution, not just in individuals (52). Sarah Leadley and Becky Reed Rosenberg describe their experience as part of an Introduction to Interdisciplinary Studies course, an integrated course in writing, research, and quantitative reasoning in which faculty are expected (and funded) to work closely with writing center and library professionals. Donna Rabuck and her colleagues describe their Graduate Writing Institute, an effort to provide sustained assistance and mentoring to minority and economically disadvantaged graduate students. Their article closely traces the process whereby research and writing mentors helped one student find a scholarly voice in English, her third language. Carolyn White and Margaret Pobywajlo outline the pilot of a program in which tutors cross-trained by the writing center and by the library served as writing and research mentors assigned to specific classrooms. As one of their instructors commented, this program created a "team of people who can more frequently engage with students" during the process of writing and researching (194). Other contributors, such as Judy Arzt, Colleen Boof, and Barbara Toth, report on less expansive collaborative projects that still make meaningful strides, including the several programs that jointly train peer tutors in writing and information literacy pedagogy or sponsor faculty workshops combining these modes of inquiry.

Some of the most valuable information in *Centers for Learning* is contained in the many documents appended to the studies. For example, Currie and Eodice include a record of the important questions they asked their roundtable participants about building and sustaining collaboration. This document could prove an important resource for those seeking to replicate their discussion. White and Pobywajlo evaluated their pilot project extensively, and the many evaluation forms included with their article will assist collaborators who would like to further assess their own

efforts. In the most unusual study of the work, Cinthia Gannett and her colleagues describe their efforts at the University of New Hampshire to archive almost *everything* in the long history of their composition program. Their contribution contains two appended lists of archived materials that should benefit others who might undertake such an ambitious project. In total, the additional materials included in *Centers for Learning* represent the contributors' commitment to working with others, since they provide each reader an opportunity to continue and build on the authors' work.

Despite the breadth of the cases represented in this volume, both overlap and gaps remain. For example, many of the cases retread the same process theory ground that Elmborg and Hook detailed in their introductory chapters. The work as a whole could have been strengthened and tightened if the contributors had been given access to these introductory chapters before submission. Likewise, some of the cases describe less innovative collaboration than others, and a few skirt dangerously close to the space-sharing, mutual referral model that Elmborg and Hook want to transcend. While these cases represent the early stages of cooperation that will probably give way to more significant collaboration, the editors make clear in their introductory chapters that simply shuttling students from writing center session to reference desk and back again will not change the way students and faculty think about integration of writing and research.

Some of the best critical questions about these projects come from Casey Reid, the only contributor who worked as both an undergraduate writing tutor and a student research assistant. One the most important obstacles Reid recognizes is the different status and freedoms allotted peer assistants in the writing center and the library; the library staff, she found, only reluctantly turned over reference duties to their research assistants. (Ironically, White and Pobywajlo found an opposite, but no less frustrating phenomenon: library staff in their project expected that peer research tutors would "alleviate some of the traffic" at the reference desk and assist with "basic research skills," freeing professional staff for "higher-level tasks" [187, 190].) Reid appropriately wonders, after her experience, whether the well-established peer- and student-centered pedagogy of writing centers can transfer to the more hierarchical library staffed by career professionals. Her article concludes with several prescient questions that anyone considering a joint writing-research service should explore before starting: Who will pay for the service? Who will supervise it and make administrative decisions? Can either the writing center or library exist independently after joining forces in this way?

In their concluding essay of the volume, Nathalie Singh-Corcoran and Thomas Miller point out that libraries, like writing centers, are constantly seeking to ground their professional status more firmly in the university. As they do so, working together with writing centers provides an opportunity for both parties to further define their individual and collective roles in the wider university. And as all universities search for greater cost-savings and efficiencies, initiating collaboration may be the best way to ensure that writing centers define these roles on their own terms, rather than on those of someone unfamiliar with their work. In light of this reality, the case studies in *Centers for Learning* illuminate some of writing centers' most promising opportunities.

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