

JOAN A. MULLIN & RAY WALLACE (EDITORS).

Inter-sections. Theory-practice in the writing center.
 Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1994.
 196 pp. \$19.95 . ISBN 0-8141-2331-7.

Discussing probable audiences for this collection of essays exploring writing centre theory and practise, Joan Mullin cites the composition community at large as a group who might wish to become familiar with what centre practitioners do, and who might come “to see the writing centres as resources for resolving problems facing the discipline and the academy” (p. viii).

Certainly, the keynote essay traces the thirty-year development of writing centre pedagogy by directly connecting changes in centre practise to those occurring in the classroom. In this essay, Eric Hobson points out that in the earliest writing “labs,” students worked with grammar rules and exercises, adopting practises like those prevailing in composition classrooms based on positivist notions of writing as a set of knowable and teachable formulas. As classrooms shifted to process-based writing and assignments became responsive to epistemic rhetoric, the centres also de-emphasized product-oriented corrections, and instead became sites where “writers could use the generative power of conversation to discover ways to improve their writing” (p. 3).

Rather than finding compatibilities between centre and classroom, other essays in the volume focus on the uniqueness of centre learning as it takes place between paired peers. In emphasizing difference, they are more in line with what has so far been the typical approach to writing about centre theory and lore. While these essays are contextualized within cross-disciplinary theory – ranging from the philosophical abstractions of Martin Buber and Hans-Georg Gadamer to the more practical considerations attending to the literature of learning disabilities and cross-cultural differences – inevitably the focus shifts from consideration of the informing theory to critical assessment and revision of its applications. The majority of essays seem to be based on the critical approach recommended by Alice M. Gillam in her essay on collaboration : “[I]t is time we utilize theory to understand and interrogate the rich complexity of writing centre practise and the protean forms of writing centre practise to interrogate and reinterpret theory” (p. 51).

Instead of connecting centre to classroom, the overall effect of these essays is to define with new clarity how these sites of learning differ. If we accept Hobson’s nomination of “individualized instruction and

collaborative theory” (p. 4) as the twin theories from which centre work proceeds, then this emphasis on one-to-one interaction means from the outset that we are outside the model of group instruction that informs most classrooms. Restating a position she often advocates, Muriel Harris argues not only that centre and classroom practices differ, but also that classroom instructors often have trouble understanding the value of work done by centre practitioners: “When we talk about our method of working one-to-one and focusing on the individual, we assume that classroom teachers understand how different our individualized approach is from theirs. . . . [Individualized instruction] is too often interpreted by those outside the writing centre merely as having the luxury of a class size of one to work with. As a corollary, they assume our responsibility to be one of informing students of the rules and guidelines they should already have known” (p. 96).

With similar interest in distinguishing classroom from centre, Pamela Farrell-Childers’ article, “A Unique Learning Environment,” refers to centres as “low-risk. . . alternative resources,” aimed at addressing the needs of the “whole” student (pp. 112-113). If, as she argues, centre practitioners are typically as interested in affective as cognitive outcomes, then this may explain why they do not share the anxiety of some of their classroom colleagues who, according to Joan Mullin in the introduction, are looking for measurable gains or some evidence of writing improvement to respond to criticism that writing classes have not been “producing competent writers for contexts other than composition classes” (p. viii).

Focus on the uniqueness of the centre environment continues in other essays dealing with collaborative learning. Of course, to discuss collaborative learning theory requires reference to post-modernist epistemology, and to the view of knowledge construction through group negotiation and consensus. Attempting to link this theory, which depends on the concept of the group, to a learning environment that features individualized instruction leads to a variety of contradictions and objections, perhaps the most obvious of which is that “privileging the group or community over the individual. . . is not sensitive to different personality types and therefore different learning and writing styles” (p. 27).

Both Alice Gillam (in “Collaborative Learning Theory and Peer Tutoring Practice”) and Christina Murphy (in “The Writing Centre and Social Constructionist Theory”) suggest that because there are limita-

tions to the application of collaborative theory in the centre, the practise itself should be limited and thoroughly interrogated. Murphy explains that writing centres have had an “historical commitment to individually constructed knowledge” (p. 41). She makes the case that moving from a romantic view of knowledge and voice as belonging to the individual to a post-modernist group-oriented view of knowledge is an unwise exchange of one agenda for another: “the least effective writing centre tutors will be those who operate from a Romantic perspective, while the most effective will be those most adept at inspiring in students a capacity for group work; the mastery of social skills – especially those most adapted to the workforce – will replace a concern for developing the individual’s voice and unique powers; and consensus will become the greatest measure of truth – even though. . . consensus is no guarantee of ethics and morality” (p. 32). Murphy proposes a position of inclusivity, respectful of philosophical differences, and warns against accepting social constructionism as a paradigm that “provides all the answers, or even answers sufficient to warrant the devaluing of other theories and philosophies of education” (p. 36).

Gillam contextualizes collaboration within a peer-pair configuration. Introducing an excerpt from a sample peer conference, she asks long-forgotten questions about whether and on what grounds partnership collaboration can be said to succeed. While her conclusion is somewhat predictable in making the point that such assessments are subject to individual interpretation, her description of the various ways to measure success or find fault is fascinating.

All this convinces me that while there are intersections between theories which underpin centre and classroom practise, actual practise in these two environments is not the same. If it does not turn out, as the editor hopes, that this collection helps to focus or resolve some of the dilemmas about writing and learning that have arisen in the academic community outside of the centres, this book will be useful to those who work or research in centre settings.

As a centre director responsible for instructing undergraduate tutors, I was pleased that the last half dozen essays in the volume offer suggestions for potential curriculum enrichment – from Lassner’s description of building her course around the rubrics of “Composition Theory and Collaborative Learning,” to Jacoby’s suggestion that Robert Coles’ *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the moral imagination* “should stand alongside Harris’s *Teaching One-to-One* (1986) and Meyer and Smith’s *The Practical Tutor* (1987)” as required reading for tutors (p. 144). Indeed,

this collection itself may find a place on such a reading list. Advanced-level tutors could respond to the volume as a whole, while undergraduate tutors might work with selected pieces. For example, tutors could become sensitive to the complexities of difference in tutoring relationships by reading Harris and Lassner and considering how the former's emphasis on the usefulness of applying contrastive rhetoric in some ways contradicts the latter's emphasis on the need for tutor's to accept difference in place of peerness. Alternately Harris could be paired with Gillam, since each offers views of collaboration helpful in dissuading tutors from expecting one ideal form.

In terms of omissions, two areas stand out. The relationship between computers and writing which preoccupies many centre practitioners is not represented here, likely because this field is rich enough to require its own volume. Perhaps a more puzzling omission is discussion of group-based tutorials. One essay describes this practise in relation to creative writing, yet no one mentions that a number of centres have developed this component for academic writing, responding to the need to deal with more students and to the theory of social construction. An essay assessing the implications of such a shift could have been informative, particularly because many of the theoretical problems discussed throughout this volume arise because centres continue defining individualized learning a cornerstone.

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JUNE LARKIN. *Sexual Harassment. Toronto: Second Story Press. 1994. 168 pp. \$14.95. ISBN 0-029005-65-1.*

In her book entitled *Sexual Harassment: High school girls speak out*, June Larkin states that "[t]he overall goal of this book is to help educators, parents, and students understand and deal with the sexual harassment that goes on in schools. . . . This book is written as a resource to make schools healthier places for girls" (p. 18). June Larkin has not only successfully met this goal but has written a book that provides important insight into a major barrier to equal education for girls.

Sexual Harassment: High school girls speak out is a well written and insightful book. Dr. Larkin begins by defining sexual harassment: Sexual harassment is contextualized as an expression of patriarchy, complicated and exacerbated by race and class, which "reinforces and reflects