

## Book Review

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*Rhetoric of Respect: Recognizing Change at a Community Writing Center* by Tiffany Rousculp. Urbana: NCTE, 2014. 185 pp. Print.

Writing centers can contribute to positive social change. Besides helping students revise assignments for a class or other writing projects, we can help writers from the larger community express themselves as citizens and address problems that matter to them. More writing centers are rethinking their mission and seeing how community engagement can connect and enhance the work they are currently doing. Therefore, I highly recommend that all writing center directors and tutors read Tiffany Rousculp's book, *Rhetoric of Respect*, because we can learn much from the important work being done at the Community Writing Center (CWC) she started while working at Salt Lake Community College. This book will prove useful for those just beginning to engage in community writing projects and for those with experience too. Most importantly, this book encourages more conversation about how writing center staff can think about change in its political, social, and ethical dimensions.

Rousculp explores some of the successes and challenges she faced as the CWC founding director from 2001-2010. Part of her college but located off campus, the CWC began with the mission to assist community members with writing "for practical needs, civic engagement, and personal expression" (6). Readers new to community writing centers will value the philosophical and pedagogical explanations that inspired such work. For example, Rousculp refers to educational approaches as a means of social change (Paulo Freire), service-learning scholarship (Ellen Cushman, Thomas Deans, Paula Mathieu, and

others), and peer tutoring (Muriel Harris, Harry Denny, Kenneth Bruffee, and others). Rousculp wanted the CWC to be a place where community members “from all different backgrounds could come to work on any kind of writing task” (47). And in Chapter 3, such community work creates opportunities for tutors as they help plan new workshops, create CWC initiatives, and play a stronger role in the center’s decision-making process. Rousculp’s book intersects with the community writing center work of institutions like 826 Valencia, a non-profit Dave Eggers co-founded in 2002. If you haven’t visited 826 Valencia, I urge you to do so or to read about their work online (826national.org). They have seven chapters in cities across America. These free K-12 community writing centers possess a playful feel to their spaces, including a pirate supply store in San Francisco and a superhero shop in Brooklyn. Behind each storefront of things that children might like, there’s a writing center, where they are encouraged to write and publish their work. Although the centers are different in design and audience, both Rousculp’s CWC and 826 Valencia want to help writers, especially those without access to adequate resources, to benefit from the power of individual tutoring and writing workshops.

For those who have volunteered at 826 Valencia, or perhaps those who have worked on behalf of universities like Carnegie Mellon University and the Community Literacy Center in Pittsburgh, *Rhetoric of Respect* helps us think critically about community writing centers. As Rousculp’s CWC collaborated with 5,000 people and 130 different groups in Salt Lake City, including a homeless shelter, nursing home, and cancer support group, Rousculp learned the importance of developing a “rhetoric of respect” for such community-based writing initiatives. She defines this rhetoric of respect as a “[relationship] that is grounded in perception of worth, in esteem for another—as well as for the self” (24-25). Rousculp adds that such an approach “entails recognition of multiple views, approaches, abilities, and importantly, limitations (especially our own)” (25). Writing center staff certainly can connect inclusive tutoring practices with this methodology.

Because of the emphasis on respect, Rousculp explains in Chapter 4 how the community work and its partners helped the CWC rethink its mission of “change” (91). For example, she discusses the dangers of “need-based discourse” that uses terms like “outreach” (93). If we think of community work as

“outreach,” we might create a hierarchical relationship between the university and the community. Also, Rousculp reflects upon her own preference as an activist teacher who wanted writing projects to have a political, social dynamic. In order to respect community members, she learns not to force participants to be political when they wanted something else in their writing. Rousculp shares an effective example of the tension between the personal and the political by describing a project where CWC volunteers helped people with disabilities from a nursing home write about their experiences. The organization promoting the event wanted participants to write about the bad conditions at the nursing home; however, participants’ stories were more “nuanced” (109) and didn’t neatly follow the organization’s original objectives. Rousculp, then, explains that writing projects need to respect the wishes of participating individuals and avoid pushing agendas that other, more privileged groups may want them to support.

Using ecocomposition theory, Rousculp explores the importance of a writing center’s space and environment, reflecting upon the CWC as an organism that can change based on the collaboration between people, the effect of institutions, and a sense of place. For instance, as the CWC became a more stable part of the institution and moved from the Art Space near a homeless shelter to a location adjacent to the Salt Lake City Public Library, Rousculp describes how the new site affected which community members participated and made the CWC more institutionalized. Rousculp, then, seeks a balance between strategy and tactics, ideas drawn from Paula Mathieu’s *Tactics of Hope*, to explain how the CWC clarified its mission. After achieving the more attractive location, the CWC decided that future writing projects needed to connect with at least two of the following criteria: projects should involve “underserved, underrepresented, or vulnerable populations;” focus on “activist writing;” or assist students from different grade/college levels with their writing (151).

In future scholarship, the activist writing as described in *Rhetoric of Respect* can connect with students on campus. At universities, community colleges, and high schools across the country, students are facing tough problems, ranging from the possibility of immigrant students and their families being deported to worries about expensive college loans to racism in the judicial system. Rousculp’s book can also encourage others

to find more intersections between service-learning and writing center theory. One main point of the book is the importance of respect between the community writing center and the community. As I was reading Rousculp's book, I started thinking about the role respect plays in writing center sessions on campus, the importance of listening, and the non-hierarchical relationships that many tutor training books emphasize. I am curious to know more about how university writing center work connects with community writing center work. In addition, how should tutors/volunteers be prepared for CWC work and how can we gain support from our institutions?

More writing centers are engaging in community-based writing initiatives as seen in the first Community Writing Conference held in Boulder, Colorado, in November 2015. Also, Lisa Zimmerelli and Victoria Brown's article in this issue of *WLN* shows how more tutor education courses are including service-learning components. Rousculp's excellent book can help with such projects as we build more relationships between our writing centers and the communities in which we live.



Mathieu, Paula. *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition*. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 2005. Print.

## WcORD of the Day

Once a day, the "Writing Center WcORD of the Day" Facebook page posts interesting finds from WcORD (the Writing Center Online Research Database). <[facebook.com/WcORDoftheday](https://facebook.com/WcORDoftheday)>.

**Share your finds!** Send an email to Patrick Hargon at <[hargonp2@unk.edu](mailto:hargonp2@unk.edu)> with URLs for online writing center resources you have or know about. Do you have podcasts? Video clips? Mission statements on your website? Policy statements? Yearly reports? Interesting websites that could be useful? Tutor training materials? What else?

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