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Review of *A Synthesis of Qualitative Studies of Writing Center Tutoring: 1983-2006* by Babcock, Manning, and Rogers

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Over thirty years ago, Stephen North published a statement that was a paradigmatic moment for the writing center world. No, it wasn't "Our job is to produce better writers, not better writing," which appeared in "The Idea of a Writing Center" and is likely the most cited axiom in writing center history. Instead, it was "in all the writing center literature to date, *there is not a single published study of what happens in writing center tutorials*" (28). This call to action appears in "Writing Center Research: Testing Our Assumptions," North's contribution to the 1984 collection *Writing Centers: Theory and Administration*.

Since that time, the number of published studies on writing centers has certainly grown, resulting in a body of work large enough for Sarah Liggett, Kerri Jordan, and Steven Price to issue a taxonomy of writing center research in 2011 and for Rebecca Babcock and Terese Thonus to publish a book-length account of "evidence-based practice" based on writing center research in 2012. More current efforts in this vein come from Dana Driscoll and Sherry Wynn Purdue; Jackie Grutsch McKinney; and Isabelle Thompson and Jo Mackiewicz, among others.

A Synthesis of Qualitative Studies of Writing Center Tutoring, 1983-2006—written by Babcock and her colleagues Kellye Manning and Travis Rogers with the assistance of Courtney Goff and Amanda McCain—takes a different approach than these other studies, one that is not intended to present new research but instead to "synthesize" a range of research conducted in the qualitative tradition. *A Synthesis* relies on grounded-theory methodology or an approach to construct a theory of what happens when writers and tutors come together in writing center settings that is driven by the content and trends in the research studies the authors include, rather than using an external

framework or set of categories. More specifically, the authors collaboratively read and coded 58 qualitative studies of writing center tutoring, including dissertations, book chapters, journal articles, and one conference paper. The authors only included studies that focused on college students, directly reported their data, and had clear methodology and research questions (8), allowing for comparisons and categorization across the entire range of studies. Certainly, evidence that the field has taken up North's 1984 charge is provided by the fact 58 such studies were published between 1983 and 2006.

So what do Babcock and colleagues make of this body of work? Overall, their synthesis carries few surprises. In seven relatively brief chapters, we are told that the key features of tutorial interaction are the personal characteristics of tutor and writer, the external influences for both participants, the communication strategies that both tutor and writer use, the roles each participant plays, the emotion and temperament of tutor and writer, and the ways that desired outcomes for both participants shape sessions. These features will strike anyone familiar with writing center work as, well, familiar. That they come from primary research on writing centers is comforting in a way, telling us that our assumptions are perhaps not misaligned with reality. Additionally, seeing these features in total paints a broader picture of the writing tutorial than our assumptions sometimes offer, particularly when our practice might be driven by simple continua, for example, whether to be directive or non-directive or if we should focus on the writers or the writing.

One might conclude, then, that *A Synthesis* might be used similarly to Babcock and Thonus's *Researching the Writing Center*,[1] with sections that point to the key studies to consult for a range of issues. For instance, readers interested in studies of "laughter" in the writing center will find one paragraph and reference to six studies on the topic. That section—under the larger category of "Communication"—is typical for much of what appears in this book. It is driven by the authors' categorization of common themes or topics in their data set and is presented as a series of very brief findings from each study. Here's an example from that section:

> Ritter (2002) noticed a tutor introducing herself and then laughing, and concluded this "may have been an attempt to establish solidarity or even tone down the institutional nature of the W[riting] C[enter] T[utorial]" (p. 228). Haas

(1986) noted participants in her study approached the conference in a playful way, enhancing their relationship. Boudreaux (1998) found that laughter could signal rapport, and it could also be used to diffuse awkwardness, such when asking for a favor or asking personal information. Tutors and tutees in McClure's (1990) study laughed when they were at ease or when they were especially pleased that they came up with a satisfactory solution to a problem. (48)

This pattern—identify the author and date (in APA citation format), offer usually one sentence to summarize that finding, move on to another author and finding—does make for a somewhat choppy reading experience. I found myself wanting to know more about those individual studies—their context, their methods, their nuance—so that I could make sense of these quick hits. But perhaps the intention here is just to give the reader a taste of these studies, to offer an invitation to find them and take them in as a whole. In that way, this book is well suited as a reference to the works it synthesizes, a kind of annotated bibliography of its sources, one that complements the Babcock and Thonus evidence-based analysis. Both of these fill an important need given that Murphy, Law, and Sherwood offered their annotated bibliography of writing center studies in 1996.

What I found most insightful is the book's final chapter. Once again, it is not necessarily filled with revelations as it attempts to build theory that governs writing center practice. The authors drawn on Lev Vygotsky, particularly his notion of "the zone of proximal development" or "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky 86) as a controlling idea, even to the point of offering "Vygotskiation" as an alternative to "collaboration" as a descriptor (117). Vygotsky's work has been a foundation of socio-cognitive approaches to understanding writing center work (and writing in general) for more than thirty years, going back at least to Kenneth Bruffee's 1984 article "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind'." However, what Babcock and colleagues offer in this chapter is guidance on where we go from here. Rather than only dichomotized approaches—teacher versus tutor, non-directive versus directive, writer versus writing—the authors offer "points of departure" (116) for readers to embrace the nuances of writing center work and resist simplistic notions of what might constitute "success"

or "satisfaction." Writing centers are complex teaching sites, ones in which relatively novice undergraduate tutors may be working with fellow undergraduate writers who often lack the language and experience to create a productive agenda or navigate the rough terrain of teacher expectations, institutional contexts, and disciplinary discourse. Babcock, Manning, and Rogers assert that it is through research that we best understand these complexities, and, ultimately, ensure the success of writing centers as instructional sites. I am persuaded by that claim."

1. This book was reviewed in *WLN*, 30.1-2 (2014): 10-13.

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