

Writing Centers as Democratic Spaces: A Review of *A Writing Center Practitioner's Inquiry into Collaboration: Pedagogy, Practice, and Research* by Georganne Nordstrom

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Writing center scholarship and assessment have long incorporated quantitative, empirical, and mixed methods approaches to research and data collection, even if Writing Center Studies (WCS) hasn't quite been able to shake the reputation that it is a field directed by lore and qualitative research. During the 2010s, partially in response to this perception, there was a noticeably intentional disciplinary pivot towards scholarship that promoted and employed research methods that were replicable, aggregable, and data-driven (RAD). This turn was embraced by researchers, journal editors, and conference organizers alike, partially because RAD scholarship was characterized as “a process that shapes our inquiry, facilitates our scholarly identity,” and that in turn, “strengthens our credibility, and positions us to speak with authority” within our own institutions and within the academy writ large (Driscoll and Powell). In *Writing Center Practitioner's Inquiry into Collaboration: Pedagogy, Practice, and Research*, Georganne Nordstrom responds to this disciplinary pivot, exposes a bit of the lore that surrounds it, and provides a model for empirical research in writing centers that is locally-based, centers identity and embodied experiences, and is rooted in social and restorative justice.

Implicit in arguments supporting RAD research is that colleagues in other disciplines, upper administration, and the public have been skeptical of writing center expertise. At the same time, institutions will hold up writing centers (along with programs for accessibility services, counseling services, cultural support, and student food banks) as examples of how those institutions provide support for students. This is typically done without acknowledging that it is the institutions themselves that create the conditions necessitating those kinds of support in the first place, conditions that writing centers can often reproduce. Separating the privileging of quantitatively measurable education outcomes (Giroux) from histories of white supremacy (Inoue) and undemocratic institutions (Brown)

cannot be easily done. Such efforts can come across as late capitalist solutions to problems caused by capitalism, as individualistic responses to collective concerns—and that’s even before getting to the question of whether sorting out *all of that* should be the responsibility of writing centers.

Rebecca Hallman Martini and Travis Webster drew attention to these complications in 2017, noting that “the field’s emphasis on empirical and replicable aggregable data-supported (RAD) research that attempts ‘objectivity’ may inhibit identity-based research that recognizes how race, sexuality, gender, ability, privilege, and emotion impact our work.” Along similar lines, Elisabeth H. Buck identified that the “explicit and ongoing focus on RAD research” in writing center scholarship remains a point of contention among practitioners (99). With those critiques in mind, the pivot towards RAD writing center research calls for critical evaluation in its own right: In what ways has the discipline been legitimized because of its embrace of RAD research? How has this pivot towards RAD scholarship materially benefited our discipline, ourselves, our students, and our tutors? For instance, are there now more tenure-track or non-contingent writing center positions than before? To what extent are researchers replicating studies and aggregating data? In what ways has RAD research supported goals of social and restorative justice? What do researchers need to do so that WCS’s embrace of RAD research does not reinforce neoliberal, white supremacist, anti-democratic ideologies?

In *A Writing Center Practitioner’s Inquiry into Collaboration*, Nordstrom directly addresses at least the latter two of those questions by presenting Practitioner Inquiry (PI) as a way to square the conditions of higher education with the socially just ambitions of writing centers. Extending an argument she has articulated elsewhere, Nordstrom’s conception of PI is that of a research method applicable for writing center contexts because of its ethical obligations to researchers, tutors, students, and communities (“Practitioner Inquiry”). As such, PI has much in common with frameworks like grounded theory, teaching-research, and Critical Discourse Analysis, each of which seeks to empower research participants as epistemological collaborators, as opposed to treating them as research subjects. Further, PI necessitates that research questions respond to local needs, rather than work backwards to prove a predetermined theory.

Although Nordstrom only mentions the concept of “democratic validity” once, the idea resonates across her central argument that writing centers are—or, at least, should be—sites of equitable, col-

laborative pedagogy and research. Built out of the field of education research, democratic validity measures the extent to which research (a) emerges out of a local context, (b) includes collaborators from the community, and (c) aims to recognize solutions that are appropriate for that context and those collaborators (Herr and Anderson). Democratic validity assumes an ethical obligation that classrooms and other learning spaces should be equitable and collaborative and extends that ideal to the research process. Defining collaboration this way calls to mind Andrea Lunsford, who advised that collaboration in writing centers must be practiced and researched with care for the collaborators and for control over the process.

Nordstrom's home site of research is at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (UHM). Localness and context are at the core of her ethos as a researcher and person, as evidenced by her careful consideration of her own status and privilege as a professional academic, as an administrator, as a white person working on stolen land. In her writing, she repeatedly reminds the reader of the United States's history of using the educational system to disenfranchise Indigenous and other marginalized people, including groups like the "Kānaka Maoli (Hawaiian), and descendants of the mostly Asian laborers brought to the islands to work on the plantations" that many of the students she works with at UHM identify as (55). In response to these conditions, Nordstrom positions empirical research as a counter to "hegemonic and oppressive constructs both in and out of the academy" (27). This is a bold move, reifying writing centers as places that are at once counterhegemonic and socially just because they are suited for collaborative epistemological practices that have been and are intentionally oppressed by institutional power. That institutional power—characterized as Western, white supremacist, capitalist, individual—suppresses Indigenous collaborative epistemological and ontological practices and the people who embody them precisely because those practices and people are definitionally anti-white supremacist and anticapitalist. This is especially important in contemporary contexts of higher education where neoliberal and white supremacist language preemptively claim so much territory.

Following Nordstrom's argument, for collaboration to work as a viable approach to research, it must be grounded in approaches stemming from cultures that value collaboration. This complicates the situations of writing centers, which exist within institutions of higher education that contemporarily are designed to reinforce and privilege individual accountability. This creates conditions wherein writing center researchers must work both inside the academy

(produce replicable research) as well as outside of it (utilize anti-hegemonic methods borrowed from anti-hegemonic groups). In order to accomplish the latter, Nordstrom argues that it is incumbent on researchers to reconcile the contradictions and power imbalances brought about when writing center administrators and tutors collaborate. That core objective is an immediately recognizable strength of Nordstrom's writing, and it is reinforced across a coherent methodological foundation and a clearly defined set of terms in her book, which unfolds accordingly.

The introduction, "Practitioner Inquiry and Empirical Research in the Writing Center," establishes writing centers as pedagogical sites of scholarly inquiry, a starting point widely accepted within the field, but also one that is persistently, annoyingly, disconsidered by university administrators and interdisciplinary colleagues (this latter sentiment also seems widely felt within the field). Placing her work along a recognizable trajectory of arguments for writing center disciplinary autonomy through empirical research (see also: Gillespie et al., Babcock and Thonus, Grutsch McKinney), Nordstrom adds important caveats: PI is not any research done by teachers (or, in this case, writing center administrators), the shared construction of knowledge must be the goal, and place-based does not mean that work isn't transferable. Most importantly, writing center practitioners should utilize empirical research methods because the contexts of writing centers are uniquely positioned to provide for them and because such approaches lead to research practices that align with "the values and goals of writing center practitioners and demonstrate veracity and validity" (19). In other words, focus on the appropriateness and benefits of empirical research within the specific contexts of writing centers and less on hoped-for institutional or cross-disciplinary acceptance.

In Chapter 1, "What Indigenous Practices Can Teach Us about Collaboration," Nordstrom positions collaboration as the core operating mechanism of writing center work and research. This is a riskier rhetorical maneuver than it might initially seem because, as Nordstrom alludes, the neoliberal structures of contemporary higher education emphasize culpability and ownership at the individual level, and thus offer limited pathways for action or accomplishment that are truly collaborative or symbiotic. Drawing mainly on Kānaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian) scholarship, poetry, and proverbs of community and communal work, Nordstrom incorporates nuanced understandings of collaboration, sustainability, and communal well-being. For instance, the core concept of "kuleana" invokes "a heightened awareness of our collaborative acts and their implications" that "goes beyond an individual's actions" and

attunes participants to “a dynamic interplay that attends to the concerns and interests of the community” (44). Applied to the context of writing center research, collaboration is then expanded to account for not just different practitioners or researchers cooperating on a project; it provides a central purpose of working together as meeting the needs of the wider group within the context in which you’re working. Throughout this section, Nordstrom’s approach is careful and measured; she always comes across as aware that she is leveraging concepts from communities she respects but does not embody. Likewise, Nordstrom avoids positioning Indigeneity as a monolithic opposition to hegemony, but instead as diverse and contextual cultural and rhetorical traditions that can inform research if done within specific, appropriate conditions.

Nordstrom provides a deep description of her methodological approach as a research model in Chapter 2, “Practitioner Inquiry: A Model for Research and Practice in the Writing Center.” With the goal of leading to empirical research that can be replicated in other writing center contexts, Nordstrom’s model relies on triangulation, systematicity, and transferability. First, cross-referencing concepts of reflexivity (Liggett et al.) with political stance (Cochran-Smith and Lytle), Nordstrom identifies commonalities and limitations in existing models of PI in WCS. From there, Nordstrom proposes that researchers develop a reflexive “habit of mind,” an overarching principle that reminds the researcher to continually interrogate their own practices and biases in relation to their collaborators (colleagues, tutors, students, etc.), the broader social and political contexts within which their research takes place, and in consideration of previous scholarship. This habitual practice helps ensure that the researcher’s “assumptions are then reevaluated and often reformulated” throughout the research process (63).

Next, building off of these commonalities, Nordstrom introduces a version of PI suited for WCS, one that emphasizes transferability, as “a frame for validating and making use of our research in a way that more readily lends itself to empirical research in our field” because it “accounts for the differences that people—students, administrators, faculty, writers, practitioners—bring to a practice site” (69). Grasping the intricacies of Nordstrom’s model relies on accepting her subtleties of meaning and intention of recognizable terms, but she skillfully promotes transferability twice over. First, in direct and practical terms, because her description is detailed and can be reasonably replicated by other researchers. Second, on a meta level, because her thorough description serves as a prototype for researchers who may be anxious about introducing their own new or modified approaches. For those researchers, follow the pattern

Nordstrom lays out here: set the terms of your debate; justify your terms in relation to previously established understandings while recognizing how and why you diverge; expect your readers to accept your terms, but afford them the opportunity to respond or critique after they've listened to your evidence.

Enacting her methodology and ethos, Chapter 3, "A Practitioner's Inquiry into Tutor Professionalization vis-à-vis Collaboration," is the first of two research studies detailed by Nordstrom. Here, PI is used to interrogate two familiar presuppositions about writing center administrator and consultant partnerships: first that they are collaborative interactions and second that consultants gain professional skills through their work. Immediately, Nordstrom's theoretical framing is essential. Because she is researching the impacts of collaboration and consultant-writer relationships, her research model requires a theoretical underpinning that accounts for and is attuned to the potential benefits and limitations of collaboration. Fostering her study's reproducibility, Nordstrom organizes this chapter to promote transparency and transferability, clearly describing her methodology, purpose and objectives, data collection, and triangulated data analysis. Ultimately Nordstrom finds a correlative relationship between collaboration and consultant learning, her reflective approach pointing to nuanced findings that further the argument of writing centers as collaborative, pedagogical, and professional spaces.

Chapter 4, "Translingual Practice vs. Academic Discourse," describes a second application of PI, this time a comparative study conducted at UHM and the National University of Ireland at Galway. By implementing the study at two different sites, Nordstrom once again demonstrates the transferability and replicability of her project and research model. Intentionally, these research sites draw attention to the intentional limitations of English language education policies, as the people of both Hawai'i and Ireland have experienced a "long history of language suppression due to British colonization, and efforts at language revitalization" (100). The United States has continued the linguistic colonization practices of its own former colonizers, resulting in contemporary conditions where institutions of higher education, including writing centers, can reinforce hierarchical, racist standards of written and spoken English. In response are grassroots efforts at local writing centers to sustain and recapture Indigenous and heritage languaging, meaning-making practices, and traditions.

In this paired study, consultants are active participants, helping to develop research questions and providing data via interviews with

the practitioner. One complicated issue is consultants' attempts to turn consultations into collaborative interactions with students through translanguaging. Although democratizing practice, one problem with translanguaging, as their study sees it, is not that it pulls away from some preferred language standard, but that institutions are ill-equipped to support and acknowledge the value of students who practice it. Therefore, given writing centers' liminal space on their campuses, it is the responsibility of those practitioners with "more relative cultural capital" to enact change that supports translanguaging language users (115). For new writing center administrators and graduate students getting their first solid footholds in practitioner research, chapters 3 and 4 will be anchors. Nordstrom even has a suggestion for how: replicating her study by triangulating it with additional cohorts at comparable writing centers.

The book closes with a brief epilogue where Nordstrom reasserts writing centers' obligations to social justice, of identity and recognition, and for student writers and consultants. These historical responsibilities are linked to contemporarily exigent ones: reckonings with institutional racism, safely teaching during a global pandemic, and supporting Dreamers. Researching these issues through empirical methods, in Nordstrom's view, provides multifaceted returns "not only for the important knowledge it yields but also for the way it forces those who have traditionally marginalized support services to take notice" (122). In other words, methodologies like PI can be used to critique the very conditions of institutions of higher education that directly and negatively impact students and writing centers.

Throughout *A Writing Center Practitioner's Inquiry into Collaboration*, there is a clear and concise synchronization of method and purpose. And yet, this strength draws attention to the fact that, outside of Nordstrom's overview of student demographics at her school, it's not always clear who the collaborators are in this book's projects. Nordstrom made a convincing argument for collaboration in her article co-authored with tutors from the UHM Writing Center, "Affirming our Liminality & Writing on the Walls: How we Welcome in our Writing Center" (Nordstrom et al.). That piece, along with its partner presentation at the 2017 International Writing Centers Collaborative ("Roundtable"), were absolute highwater marks for demonstrating collaboration between writing center practitioners and consultants and for establishing writing center identity and purpose as inextricably linked to the local community. Taken together, Nordstrom's ongoing project provides a robust argument for writing centers as research spaces that are democratic and so-

cially just, even if the institutions we are working in are not.

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