

Hall, R. Mark. *Around the Texts of Writing Center Work*. Utah State UP, 2017. 184 pp. ISBN: 978-1-60732-581-9.

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In *Around the Texts of Writing Center Work*, R. Mark Hall taps into a growing interest in the field of writing center studies with the invisible labor that writing center workers perform. In his book, Hall focuses on reflective texts that are produced by tutors in everyday writing center work, such as observation notes, session notes, session transcripts, and blog posts. While there is a growing body of research on writing center administrators and their labor (Caswell et al.), there is little research on peer tutors and their acculturation to writing center work. To theorize more fully writing center work, however, Hall's study moves away from solely studying workers' perspectives and towards the texts that workers produce, arguing that "examination of everyday documents [...] illuminates the theories that underpin and motivate writing centers" (4). And theory, he notes, is woefully absent from many of the practices performed in writing center labor, given the field's aversion to theory as "remote" and "removed from the practical business of tutoring" (6). While in the introduction Hall notes that early readers of the manuscript were interested in his ideal tutor training models, which he offers in Chapter Six, *Around the Texts* is not intended as a tutoring guide (although it provides useful activities that would benefit a tutor training course as much as it would tutors already employed by a writing center) (10). Instead, Hall uses the texts of writing center work to better understand what's missing from the conceptual frameworks that inform writing center work. As he notes, "Writing Center administrators and peer tutors alike always have reasons for working the way they do. The challenge is to make those reasons conscious, explicit, to call them up for examination and revision" (14). Much of Hall's enterprise in this book is to make explicit and to name the values and beliefs underlying writing center praxis, which he accomplishes through

applying a wide variety of methods to a number of tutor-produced texts.

By his own accounting, Hall has worked in six writing centers and directed three in the past decade (15). His depth of experience prompted him to conduct extensive observational work in his most recent position at the University of Central Florida (UCF) before making any changes to the way work is conducted at the center (15). His need to understand the work of UCF's writing center speaks to a critical nuance of his research and the texts that he analyzes in *Around the Texts*, that is, a particular focus on the local in his research. Without studying the everyday business of the UCF writing center, he would be unable to understand its work. Similarly, without rooting his research in the local contexts of his writing center and institution, he would be unable to theorize its functional frameworks. In my own research, the local contexts of specific writing centers have loomed large as a contributing factor to my methodologies and my analyses (Giaino 60). Hall's book models its own "best research practices" by modeling an approach for other researchers conducting similar and tailored studies of texts in their own writing centers. Hall even notes that this is one of the main intentions of the book: "My applications of various frameworks for analysis, then, are intended as illustrations. I encourage readers to consider other theories too, which might better—or differently—serve your own purposes" (8). In other words, Hall encourages readers to apply the theoretical frameworks he proposes in his book to their own writing centers or pedagogical spaces. For researchers interested in conducting analyses of large-scale programs that produce a great deal of texts (administrative or otherwise), such as writing centers, or writing programs, Hall's methodology, which he sets out in the introduction, serves as a useful framework to adapt and apply locally. Undergraduate and graduate students, writing program administrators in two-year and four-year institutions, as well as K-12 writing center administrators will find the methodological aspects and theoretical frameworks of this book compelling and approachable. And these methods and frameworks can be enacted through pedagogical

lenses, as Hall advocates, through tutor training courses, as part of a research agenda, or through an assessment program enacted by administrators.

Methodologically, the book is a blend of qualitative analysis (observation, discourse analysis) and quantitative analysis (statistical summaries of coded observations, in Chapter Two, as an example) that takes as its texts a wide range of writing center documents that are produced through the everyday and reflective practice of tutors and administrators. Chapter Two analyzes tutor observations and how to collaboratively establish valued, rather than “best,” tutoring practices; Chapter Three analyzes tutor transcripts; Chapter Four analyzes session notes; Chapter Five analyzes tutor blog posts; and Chapter Six analyzes tutor education activities. Hall relies upon data from both his current institution’s writing center at UCF and the previous two writing centers he directed (California State University, Chico and University of North Carolina at Charlotte). While most of the chapters tend to focus on texts from one institution—Chapter Four analyzes session notes from Hall’s current writing center at UCF, while Chapter Five analyzes tutors’ reflective writing on a then-newly implemented blog for California State University Chico’s writing center—Chapter Two analyzes texts from all three institutions. Therefore, Chapter Two, in analyzing session observations and engrained tutoring values and practices, is perhaps the most exciting, methodologically-speaking, as it presents a mixed methods study (qualitative and quantitative) of longitudinal data from all three writing centers, all of which add statistical power to his analyses. It also appears to be the cornerstone of this book, as its texts and analytical approach are recalled in most subsequent chapters (three, four, and five, explicitly). This chapter also shares longitudinal statistical data about tutor development and raises a key point that is made over and over again in this book; that is, many “commonplace” writing center practices are not “inherently productive” (33). Rather, it is up to us to assess the efficacy of our own common practices and change those practices if they don’t work.

Because some of the documents and methods Hall creates are locally conceived between administration and staff, such as the “20 valued practices for tutoring writing,” which influenced his writing center’s tutor and administrator-led observations, he urges readers not to “simply take the list presented here” and redistribute it or apply it to session observation; they are more model than template (39). Rather, he calls for writing center administrators to engage in the activity of collaboratively developing a list of valued tutoring practices and then using that list to guide staff observations, thereby accounting for the local context of the community of practice, while also generating a list of what tutors value in their practice. There is elegance to a model that develops a communal document and then tests that document’s suppositions against the community’s practice through systematic inquiry in situ. As Hall identifies, and, I am sure, many of us have experienced, humans aren’t always the most reliable judges of their own values (what we say and what we do often differ quite profoundly); therefore, assessing behavior is a necessary key to understanding the often large gap between theory and praxis. For example, expert tutors might share with novice tutors a “disconnect between stated values and actual tutoring practice,” given “theories of action” they take for granted (35).

Chapter Four, “Commonplace Rhetorical Moves of Session Notes,” identifies session notes as another text—much like tutor observations—that has a conflicted and under-examined place within writing center ephemera. Session notes, much like observations, also produce uncertainty in tutor and administrator alike (What goes into them? Whom do we share them with? What is their rhetorical purpose?) They are texts that “invite further systematic research” (81). Tutor observations have a history of research that challenges their usefulness and labels them coercive (Griggs; Devet); and, as Hall notes, a number of scholars have called for their replacement with lower-stakes and non-hierarchical assessment models (22). Session note research has been similarly focused predominately on the success of the document and its effect on readers, rather than the rhetorical moves these documents

make within the writing center. Hall aims to rectify this by sharing the results of two rounds of systematic coding of session notes, the first a randomly collected sample of 50 notes and then 700 (10%) session notes aggregated over two semesters. The first data set was analyzed to develop a working coding schema (90). Both data sets were coded in concert with an experienced and a novice tutor, though the initial set of 50 was first coded by Hall (90). Key findings include a coding scheme, with explanation and examples, of common rhetorical moves tutors make in their session notes. Another finding included identifying common roles that tutors inhabit and present through their session notes. While the chapter discusses these findings, Hall is careful to remind us that the institutional context under which the writing center operates can profoundly affect the form and content of session notes. For example, at UCF the notes are structured as a letter with a primary focus on the specific client as audience, while at previous writing centers where Hall worked session notes were mainly descriptive and shared primarily among writing center employees (not external stakeholders such as clients or faculty) (94). As Hall notes, “norms around session notes both reflect and reproduce the institutional cultures and values of which they are a part” (94). And, as with the other chapters in the book, this one ends with an activity for tutor training; in this instance, one that enacts the practice of coding and analyzing session notes.

Chapter Six is perhaps the most applicable to those readers interested in adopting what Hall terms a “semester-long tutor-led inquiry project” (125). Identified specifically for tutors who have already taken a general tutor training course (though it might also be useful to newcomers to writing center studies such as graduate students in various disciplines), this semester-long activity asks “[c]onsultants [to] generate questions, collect and interpret relevant resources, then lead discussions about their subjects of inquiry during weekly ongoing tutor-education seminar meetings” (126). The project aims to combat the assumption that newly trained tutors have little left to learn in terms of writing center theory and praxis (125). It also aims to prevent professional development from

lapsing into practical matters instead of “knowledge making” that utilizes the writing center as a scholarly site (126). Hall then provides examples of tutor-led inquiry projects and assignment language and guides.

Around the Texts of Writing Center Work successfully studies the textual products of writing centers wherein the texts themselves are not necessarily as important as the assessment models that are demonstrated through engaging with them, such as Chapter Two’s collaboratively developed “20 valued practices for tutoring writing,” which doubles as an assessment metric for peer tutor observations. Hall’s book sounds the call for renewed engagement with what many might consider the “ephemera” of writing center work to “grow and develop in tutors the habits of mind that mark an inquiry-based approach to writing center work” (148). And while studying the products that inform writing center work can be a deeply rewarding activity that allows tutors to think more reflectively and consciously about their practice, thus furthering tutor education models, analyses of writing center texts can also help scholars and practitioners in the field to develop a more clearly defined and articulated organizational rhetoric around writing center work in which the work is as much scholarly as it is pedagogical (for tutors and administrators alike). By including student researchers and calling on tutors to do this kind of reflective work on writing center texts, Hall creates the opportunity for us to examine, as a field, the kinds of labor that we produce and how that labor fits into the larger priorities and preoccupations of our institutions. This is an opportunity to advocate for our centers, our tutors, our administrators and to make visible—to name—the often-invisible labor that we produce, such as peer tutor scholarship and reflective practices. Writing center texts complicate what might appear to be, to outside observers, easy and familiar interactions between peers and near-peers in low stakes settings. We know this is not always or even mostly true. Tutor turnover, institutional austerity, increasing adjunctification of academic labor, and a host of other factors continuously press upon the aura of calm that many writing centers

project. Examining the texts that tutors produce in the writing center allows us to measure how tutor professional development and research training influence the work of writing centers. Tracking impact can help us to counter easily-arrived-at conclusions about the work (and success) of writing centers, and to define and control the narrative, as it were, of our labor.

Works Cited

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