

Review of *The Politics of Writing Centers*, edited by Jane Nelson and Kathy Evertz*
by Kate Anderson

In a corner of the university often overlooked by mainstream academic discourse lies the writing center, a potentially powerful but often problem-ridden vortex. Although many books have explored the notion and business of writing centers and what exactly they *do* and *should* embody, few combine factual criticism with progressive suggestion. *The Politics of Writing Centers*, a 2001 collection of essays from Jane Nelson and Kathy Evertz of the University of Wyoming, moves effectively from a discursive investigation of age-old issues to a forward-looking path by which writing centers may become “agents of their own change.” Nelson and Evertz claim that their study offers an unprecedented politics-based angle.

The major conflicts on the writing center battlefield include, first of all, the issue of personnel. Carrie Shively Leverenz’s essay, “Graduate Students in the Writing Center: Confronting the Cult of (Non)Expertise,” proposes that the institution of the writing center is fundamentally political because of its intense intersection with the student experience. The nature of the writing center’s function perpetually threatens the expertise of a relatively untrained graduate student and the undergraduate who needs competent assistance. After all, the university sphere is built of relationships: many of the book’s essays depict those inside the writing center as particularly crucial—and subsequently fragile. Shamoan and Burns’s essay “Labor Pains: A Political Analysis of Writing Center Tutoring” extends the critical trend of instability. The authors observe that writing centers encompass a peculiar mixture of humanitarian pride and occupational woe (mainly power battle and wages).

The essays within are not limited to a discussion of the inner working of writing centers—rather, some attempt to map out the territory beyond centers to examine how they cooperate with the university at large as well as in the scattered national community of centers. This dynamic is yet another arena for looming disaster. An essay by Haviland, Fye, and Colby stresses the power determined by the geographic location of a writing center in its campus, as this designates the entire operation as visible or invisible (is the center physically, not merely theoretically, attached to its department?). One essay by Hobson and Lowe lays out the description and significance of the National Writing Centers Association (NWCA), whose “amorphous” mission (based variously in advocacy, community establishment, and resource distribution) has inspired measures of success *and* failure among its constituents. Christina Murphy and Joe Law’s entry, “The Disappearing Writing Center Within The Disappearing Academy,” parallels the vanishing prowess of the writing center with that of the once-grand tradition of higher education, both of which are endangered by excessive outsourcing.

So how might we salvage what we already have in our writing centers while meeting the criteria of progress and combating opposition? The book closes with a group of essays on the principals that could lead to a greater foundation for practices of overall effectiveness. Jill Pennington’s review[†] suggests that Nelson and Evertz’s political spin on the scene is not so revolutionary. Indeed, having a taste of the field, I find the political discussions terribly incomplete. A useful manifesto for this cause should include more of the commonly experienced conflicts in writing centers, including ESL students, tension between disciplines, funding allocation to the writing program, technology, and transient staffing. However, some of the included guidelines for positive change are hard to argue with and important to promote. This collection is a valuable, pertinent resource for anyone in my position who works within the confines of the writing center but has a limited understanding of its more universal issues.

* Nelson, Jane and Kathy Evertz, eds. *The Politics of Writing Centers*. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 2001.

† Pennington, Jill. “Review: The Politics of Writing Centers.” *The Writing Center Journal*. 23.1 (2002): 67-71.