

Book Review

Greenfield, Laura. *Radical Writing Center Praxis: A Paradigm for Ethical Engagement*. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2019.

ISBN: 978-1607328438

Pages: 198

Price: \$25.95

Graham Stowe

At the core of all writing center work is the tutoring, the day-to-day work of engaging with students, faculty, and their work. Laura Greenfield's *Radical Writing Center Praxis: A Paradigm for Ethical Political Engagement* addresses this question through a political lens. Taking part of her inspiration from Jackie Grutsch McKinney's *Peripheral Visions for Writing Centers*, Greenfield considers, reconsiders, and ultimately dismisses out of hand both the grand narratives we tell ourselves about what we do in writing centers as well as the actual things we do. In short, she calls for a paradigm shift, away from the grand narratives and the current practices within those narratives. She does not suggest we change our narratives to match our practice; indeed, she asks for nothing less than to redefine the field of writing center studies altogether (4-5).

Greenfield's argument rests on two important suppositions, that there are, in general, two categories of writing centers currently. First, the conservative writing center assumes that the hegemonic power structures within higher education are right and good. A conservative writing center encourages students to submit to the standards of a given writing assignment, for instance, and to do so using standard written English (38-42). Secondly, a liberal writing center looks better according to Greenfield, but is in fact caught up in the same political forces as the

conservative system. It fails to actually address the injustices within hegemonic power structures because its core value is a form of relativism. The liberal writing center narrative is committed to the notion that all ideas are equal, even if it tends to promote an ideology that some are more equal than others. The liberal center does not give tutors space to take their own ethical stands (44-49). Rather than either of these two paradigms, Greenfield suggests a radical one.

Greenfield's radical paradigm is one that relies on an "ethics of love, hope, resistance, justice, liberation, and peace" (59). Like a liberal or conservative writing center, a radical one engages with and responds to power. The radical center, however, negotiates with power structures, that they "should be considered dialectically" (64). A radical writing center sees power "as something to be exercised rather than possessed" (65). Such a center employs a model that recognizes the individuality of both a tutor and a student, and the work of the center is to create dialogue. Dialogue is, in fact, the "crux of pedagogy" in a radical writing center (71). She offers a "radical praxis," that truly engages with the systemic sexism, racism, homophobia, ableism, classism, among other injustices, that affect our centers (116-121).

Greenfield is the Director of the Transformative Speaking Program at Hampshire College, and is also the co-author of the award-winning *Writing Centers and the New Racism: A Call for Sustainable Dialogue and Change*. Her work has long focused on the kinds of issues addressed in *Radical Writing Center Praxis*. It is, in many ways, an extension of *Writing Centers and the New Racism*, taking up its titular call and expanding it. Her writing is consistently couched in this ethic of social justice, as is her work as an administrator (which she happens to address in the text, too).

Generally, the book's chapters address each of the dominant narratives, conservative and liberal, and then explain how and why the field should follow a radical model. The first chapter defines the liberal and conservative narratives and demonstrates their flaws. The second defines a radical politics as the alternative to the others. The third, fourth, and fifth each show specific failings in the liberal and conservative models. The chapters then move to an outline of the ways a radical approach would change writing centers. Chapter three, "Making a Better World: Rearticulating a *Raison d'Être* for Writing Centers," especially,

discusses an entirely new vision for writing centers through the lens of justice and peace (87). Greenfield relies on an example from one of her own tutors to explain one way this might work. The details of the example are less important here than the ultimate point: a writing center director must rely on the same radical dialogue they ask their tutors to trust in. Doing so forces a writing center administrator to see the ways in which power structures affect tutors and, in turn, student writers. Chapters four and five continue in a similar vein, while adding more examples to demonstrate the practice of a radical writing center.

The book's strengths are too numerous to list here, but one of them is Greenfield's discussion of what she calls "resonance." Resonance for a writing center comes from sharing space with others in a community, and offering to listen to others. Stories are shared between those "in" the writing center and those "outside" it, partly to show that this is a false binary in the first place. But more than that, it gives writing centers an opportunity to hear from their own communities and grow and change in the most beneficial ways. She calls these kinds of meetings "culture-building," wherein two groups of people come together with the aim of learning from one another.

Readers who are sympathetic to Greenfield's arguments may find that their approach to writing center work will be fundamentally altered for the better by *Radical Writing Center Praxis*. However, because she assumes her readers will agree with her, some may dismiss her thesis as quickly as she dismisses liberal and conservative models. She does not consider a middle path, either, between a radical center and a liberal one, which may be as far as some writing center directors are able to go, given certain institutional and personal constraints. A middle path could be forged, though Greenfield may call such a path a half-measure. That said, the book's title is *Radical Writing Center Praxis*, so its likely audience is coming from relatively far left. For Greenfield, a radical writing center aims to do more than help writers (rather than writing, as the community often says). The goal is to create a more just, equitable world.

Contributors

Judith Kemerait Livingston is department chair and associate professor of English at Columbus State University. Prior to becoming department chair, she served as CSU's director of first-year composition. Her publications appear in *College English*, *Reflections: A Journal of Community-Engaged Writing and Rhetoric*, and *Writing Program and Writing Center Collaborations: Transcending Boundaries*.

Jo Mackiewicz is a professor of Rhetoric and Professional Communication at Iowa State University. In 2017, she published *The Aboutness of Writing Center Talk: A Corpus-Driven and Discourse Analysis*. In 2018, she published *Writing Center Talk over Time: A Mixed-Method Study*, which won the IWCA Outstanding Book Award for 2018. With Isabelle Thompson, she has published a number of articles about writing center discourse, as well as the book *Talk about Writing: The Tutoring Strategies of Experienced Writing Center Tutors*.

Eliot Rendleman, Ph.D., is Professor of English and Associate Dean of the College of Letters and Sciences at Columbus State University. He was Director of the Writing Center and the Academic Center for Tutoring for 10 years at Columbus State University. Prior to that, he was the Coordinator of the Writing Center at Truckee Meadows Community College, a graduate writing tutor at the University of Nevada, Reno, and an undergraduate writing tutoring at the University of Michigan-Flint. In addition to his administrative duties, Eliot has taught courses in writing center theory and practice, professional writing, and composition. His publications can be found in the online journal *Composition Forum*, in *Writing Lab Newsletter*, in the WPA-CompPile Research Bibliographies, and in the collection *Writing Program and Writing Center Collaborations: Transcending Boundaries*.

Sundi Rose has a Bachelor's in Professional Writing and a Master's in English Education. Her scholarship focuses on popular culture as an entry point to composition and rhetorical study. She has been teaching classes themed in mass media, popular culture, and shared identity for almost ten years, and prioritizes transfer among her students. Sundi is also a freelance entertainment writer, contributing to several online publications such as Comic Book Resource, The Heavy, Entertainment Weekly, Pop Sugar, Hello Giggles, IndieWire, Daily Dot, and Culturess. She has taught classes such as "Breaking Bad and American Issues," "The Politics and Power of Game of Thrones," "Writing about Mass Media," and "Southern Settings."

Graham Stowe served as President of SWCA (2018-2020), Vice President (2016-2018), and South Carolina State Representative 2013-2015. He directed the Writing Center at the University of South Carolina from 2011 to 2018. He

is the founding director of the Writing Center at Canisius College in Buffalo, NY. He holds a PhD from the University of South Carolina. He has been working in writing centers since 2001.

Isabelle Thompson is emerita professor of Technical and Professional Communication and former director of the English Center at Auburn University. She has published articles about technical communication and, more recently with Jo Mackiewicz, articles and a book (*Talk about Writing*) researching writing center tutoring.