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Book Review

Mackiewicz, Jo and Rebecca Day Babcock. *Theories and Methods of Writing Center Studies: A Practical Guide*. Routledge, 2020.

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Over the past decade, the field of writing center studies arrived at a critical juncture. Qualitative research may have served writing center scholarship well in its formative decades, but the time has come for the field to engage in rigorous quantitative research. In *Theories and Methods of Writing Center Studies: A Practical Guide*, Jo Mackiewicz and Rebecca Day Babcock make the argument that “[w]riting center research has grown up ... Researchers have—slowly but consistently—answered the field’s repeated calls for rigorous research—particularly empirical research” (1). Instead of relying on lore and anecdotal evidence, the editors contend that writing center studies should instead have a stronger focus on RAD (replicable, aggregable, data-supported) research methods. Though this sort of research has become more common over recent years, the editors contend that “a guide to the field’s theories and methods has been lacking” (1). The 20 essays comprising this volume fill that gap by exploring the theories and methodologies that have come to the fore in recent years. Two major themes emerge in this collection. The first is the need for writing center studies to borrow from other fields that have long engaged in similar types of quantitative research, such as composition, education, psychology, sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, and others. The second common thread that emerges is one that most writing center researchers have long lamented, that conducting replicable, longitudinal studies is a daunting task due to

the varying nature of writing centers, the populations they serve, and the complexity of tutoring writing. Nevertheless, most of the essays address these concerns and give helpful guidance for conducting data-driven research.

The study begins with a delightful foreword by Muriel Harris and an introduction by the editors. It is then divided into two roughly equal parts, “Theories” and “Methods.” The “Theories” section begins with “Vygotskian Learning Theory,” and many of the subsequent chapters return back to the Vygotskian principles outlined in this opening chapter. Most of the other chapters in this section focus on different theoretical approaches based on identity, including critical race theory, queer theory, feminist theory, and disability theory. Chapters on genre theory, transfer theory, second language acquisition, and activity theory round out the section. The “Methods” section begins with Babcock’s chapter on grounded theory. Babcock explains that grounded theory “is not itself a theory. Rather, theory is what results from its process” (109). This concept lays the groundwork for Babcock’s view of how quantitative writing center research should be undertaken: that theory should be constructed from observable data. All of the following chapters in this section demonstrate this process in the different methods they focus on, ranging from ethnology to meta-analysis to survey methods. The book ends with a concluding chapter by the editors that looks to the future of writing center studies.

As mentioned above, the chapter on Vygotskian learning theory by John Nordlof sets the tone for the rest of the section, but it also serves as an extension of the introduction for the entire volume in that it emphasizes the social nature of tutoring writing. Nordlof notes the limitations of “lore” and “dogma” prevalent in qualitative writing center research, but he also argues that the field’s focus on making better writers instead of better writing constitutes “an implicit understanding” that what writing centers “are engaged in is fundamentally about the student development process” and is therefore rooted in social relationships (11). This is where Vygotsky’s ideas about learning come in, as Vygotsky theorized that the human learning process happens best during social interaction. In a later chapter, “Activity Theory,” R. Mark Hall picks up on the same Vygotskian strain as Nordlof and states, “The notion that language is learned by participating with others strikes at the heart of what writing center work is all about” (83). Because learning takes place in social situations and because tutoring writing always involves an interaction

between at least two individuals of differing backgrounds and varying levels of social power and privilege, large societal forces should always be considered in writing center research. The chapter “Writing Center Research and Disability Theory,” by Noah Bukowski and Brenda Jo Brueggemann, reinforces this concept by asserting that disability is a social construction and that “[t]heorizing disability rarely involves looking at how a person’s differences affect him or her in isolation; rather, disability theory is most engaged in analyzing and unpacking how (and why) one’s constructed differences are coded and pathologized by larger systems of power (68). When looking at writing center studies through the lens of disability studies, or feminism, or critical race theory, data-driven research is needed in order to reveal the extent to which systems of power influence language, education, and social interaction. When tutors dominate sessions as Hall discovered in his coded transcripts, for instance, researchers can develop their own theories of tutoring instruction based on hard evidence.

The “Methods” section contains an eclectic selection of differing methods, but two of the essays that stand out the most due to their emphasis on studying the existing corpus of writing center studies are Steve Price’s “Extending Our Research: Meta-Analysis in the Writing Center” and Randall W. Monty’s “Corpus Approaches to Writing Center Research.” Price explains that meta-analysis consists of researchers gathering studies on a specific question and then analyzing the data through a statistical process, thus “leveraging individual studies to make new meaning from the body of data (151). This type of research allows strands of ideas and points of inquiry to emerge. It also, Price argues, “show[s] other disciplines that we *have* a body of scholarship, [and] that it contains research of such quality that it’s worth our efforts to explore” (158). In the same vein, Monty demonstrates how software designed to recognize keywords from large databases of scholarship may be used to recognize patterns of thought and issues of concern through the body of writing center scholarship. This method, Monty argues, allows writing center researchers to “develop better understandings of the work we do, and thus be better prepared to help student writers” (190). Monty also sees in this approach opportunities for documenting systemic oppression (195). The quantitative data researchers can glean from the corpus of writing center scholarship provides unique insights into the nature of the field as well as a rare opportunity to produce replicable data. The other chapters in this section detail other methods of quantitative research, and

they all address the difficulties writing center professionals may encounter in producing RAD research. Lori Salem's excellent chapter, "Survey Methods for Research and Assessment in Writing Centers," demonstrates how poorly-constructed surveys often stand in for hard data. These surveys are flawed, distributed to non-representative populations, and tend to produce overly positive results that are then given to administrators to show how well the writing center is doing (200). Salem's discussion of faulty survey data underscores the necessity for more rigorous quantitative data in writing center research.

Mackiewicz and Babcock succeed in providing a comprehensive guide to conducting data-based writing center research. It is an ideal volume for graduate students and early professionals because it provides so many possibilities for inquiry. Any writing center professional will find within these pages ways to investigate research questions they may have contemplated but were not sure how to approach. While some of the chapters may be too dismissive of the value of qualitative research and others make tenuous claims about the superior ability of quantitative data to achieve certain goals (for example, that quantitative research is better at producing anti-racist practices than qualitative methods), the volume nevertheless concludes with an insightful chapter by Cara Marta Messina and Neal Learner, "Mixed-Methods Research in Writing Centers" that argues for the importance of qualitative and quantitative research working together to provide a holistic picture of writing centers. More vigorous quantitative research is undoubtedly the future of writing center studies, and this volume will assist researchers to move in that direction.

About the Author



James Hamby is the Associate Director of the Margaret H. Ordoubadian Writing Center at Middle Tennessee State University, where he also teaches courses in literature and composition. He is currently serving as the Tennessee representative to the board of SWCA, and he has co-chaired both Directors' Day and Tutor Collaboration Day for SWCA-TN.