



*Book Review*

**Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times**

*Nancy Maloney Grimm*

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**Reviewer:**

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In *Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times* (1999), Nancy Maloney Grimm employs the frameworks of modernism and postmodernism to critique literacy practices in educational institutions, particularly in the writing centers. From a modernist perspective, Grimm underscores the idea of the writer as an individual who is autonomous, rational, solitary, and possessing a unitary self. She also highlights the modernist view of a text as organic, unified, coherent, clear, logical, and harmonious. For Grimm, this perspective is problematic because it isolates the writer from their gendered, classed, racial, sexual, ethnic, cultural, and political identities and contexts. In contrast, Grimm adopts a postmodernist approach, arguing that writing is inherently collaborative, communal, political, and relational and that no writer exists in isolation from these dynamics. Similarly, she contends that texts are never fully coherent; they contain contradictions and diverse voices, perspectives, and identities that reflect the complexity of the writer's positionality.

Drawing on her experiences at Michigan Tech University's writing center, as well as theories and metaphors such as 'gardening,' 'mapmaking,' 'fixing things,' and 'quilt making,' Grimm uses the stories, arguments, and lived experiences of various students and co-workers—



including Joe, Patty, Mary, Hajj, Rebecca, Nancy, Fannie, and Morgan—to explore how the language, behavior, attitudes, worldviews, and thought processes of the dominant white middle class become entrenched in academic institutions. She demonstrates how these norms subtly shape and acculturate students, embedding gendered, classed, raced, and abled ideologies into the white middle-class mainstream culture.

Grimm organizes her book into five chapters. Chapter One, titled “Conceptual Possibilities of Postmodern Thinking,” explores “what writing centers might gain from the conceptual possibilities of postmodernity as well as to show how persistent modernist beliefs hold us back” (p. 3). She argues that academic institutions often promote monocultural views, expecting students to write in ways that align with faculty or writing coaches. This expectation, Grimm notes, configures “teachers and tutors as heroes in the narrative of outreach—literacy missionaries rather than literacy maids” (p. 13, emphasis added). Furthermore, she critiques the notion that writing centers should simply be places where errors are corrected and differences are erased. Instead, she advocates for writing centers to become spaces where students learn to navigate and understand the conflicts and complexities of diverse perspectives (pp. 13-14). To support this idea, Grimm draws on the stories of Joe, Patty, and Mary, as well as the theories of David Bartholomae (composition), Mike Rose (literacy), and Mikhail Bakhtin (heteroglossia and multiplicity of voices). She asserts that academic literacy should not perpetuate the divisions of race, class, ethnicity, culture, identity, and subjectivity. Rather than encouraging the “Other” to become like “us,” writing centers—and writing instructors in general—should position “ourselves” as the “Other” by recognizing “the *limits* of our worldviews and cultural assumptions” (p. 14, emphasis added).



In Chapter Two, titled “Literacy Learning in Postmodern Times: Coming to Terms with Loss of Innocence”, Grimm argues that “writing centers can do a better job of supporting students if we stop locating literacy problems in individuals and instead locate them in cultural constructions” (p. 29). To establish this idea, she draws on Brian Street’s two popular models of literacy, i.e. the autonomous model and ideological model that helps her to build her position that ‘literacy is ideological rather than a neutral skill.’ The former takes “the dominant standard of literacy as a culturally neutral, individually acquired, and context-free” (p. 30) whereas the latter takes it to be “embedded in social practices that carry cultural values . . . that recruit us into a particular ideology, calling us to assent to a system that privileges some people more than others” (p. 31). Grimm critiques literacy practices that have contributed to the naturalization of dominant mainstream ideologies and calls on tutors to help students recognize how the academy’s taken-for-granted assumptions limit their identity and subjectivity. By doing so, she believes students can resist the predetermined expectations of mainstream culture. As in the previous chapter, Grimm supports her argument with the lived experiences of Rebecca and Mary, interpreting their stories through the theories of Paulo Freire (literacy education), Resnick and Resnick (literacy), Raymond Williams (culture), and Miles Mayers (new literacy). From her postmodernist perspective, she argues that writing centers should not aim to resolve students’ cultural tensions, but rather to highlight them, ensuring that students with multiple literacies receive justice.

Grimm’s Third Chapter titled “Redesigning Academic Identity Kits” reveals specific ways of working with students in the writing center to enable them to intervene in regulatory social norms. In this chapter, she aims “to move writing center practice in the direction of a literacy of the contact zone by focusing on the conceptual stumbling blocks to that move,



particularly the social pressures that keep the academic identity kit intact” (p. 56). However, Grimm does not believe that writing centers can fully safeguard the agency and identity of writers, nor can literacy learning alone rescue them from institutional constraints. She demonstrates how students are given limited opportunities to negotiate their individual differences, including their racial, classed, gendered, and other identities. By analyzing Anne DiPardo’s essay on a tutorial interaction, Grimm illustrates how deeply individuals internalize societal norms and regulations. Through interpellation—where concepts like “good grades,” “reward,” “punishment,” and “good job” shape students’ behavior—students are encouraged to abandon their unique languages, discourses, styles, and identities. To support this idea, she quotes Lynn Bloom, who argues that “freshman composition functions like the ‘chlorine footbath’ at the neighborhood swimming pool,” where “students’ vices must be eradicated,” and they are indoctrinated to avoid further transgressions (p. 59). Grimm critiques this “disinfecting” process as a disservice to novice writers, as it pushes them to assimilate into the mainstream norms of Standard English and Western writing practices. While Grimm sees little hope in writing centers to fully protect students from these tendencies, she still draws on postmodern theories of subjectivity and agency, particularly from Foucault and Butler, to offer students ways to resist and intervene in these institutional pressures.

Chapter Four titled “Getting Unstuck: Rearticulating the Nodal Points” draws on Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of articulation to define the writing center as a space “situated within the contrasting democratic desire to understand and negotiate difference rather than the institutional need to manage or eliminate it” (p. 82). She illustrates this concept by unpacking two different roles writing centers can have: mediating and articulating. In the mediating role (which is traditional/modern), the writing center serves a remedial function by helping students



fix their grammar, find appropriate diction, understand the writing conventions, follow fixed documentation style, maintain coherence and closure, and so on. She further argues that “a mediating approach accepts a fixed notion of literacy, a singular standard, and this closes down possibilities for an increased understanding of differences” (p. 95). In contrast, Grimm advocates articulating a role (which is recent/postmodern) through which the writing center can encourage students to rethink literacy practices and assess whether they are allowed to speak about their different cultures, writing styles, languages, interests, and traditions. For this shift (from mediating to the articulating role) to take place, Grimm requires the active and willful role of the writing center directors who can fulfill it only when they are “prepared to develop not only their tutors’ cultural knowledge but also their critical language and perspective” (p. 98).

The Final Chapter titled “Toward a Fair Writing Center Practice” makes an argument that “writing centers can work more effectively to close . . . the gap [between tacitly uniformed expectation of the institution and differences of the students by] accept[ing] the notion that institutional practices are not fair” (pp. 102-103). She further asserts that instead of making the students responsible for their work, the writing center authorities should bear the charge of obstructing the students from being members of the community with their differences and also for not being ready to change when change is compellingly required. She acknowledges the fact that the institution isn’t always an equitable space. She illustrates the point that universities are not fair and equitable places with her own experience of working with a student (Keith) who went through several unfair institutional practices from the high school to the university. Even though there exist no easy solutions for this unfairness, she hopes that tutors’ self-questioning of the dominant cultural habits, their interactions with critical theories, their



motivation to desire to hear (the students), thinking through conflicts and contradictions (rather than resolving them), heightened ethical awareness are some ways of making “institutional practices of literacy . . . [of the writing centers] more democratic” (p. 119). For Grimm, the ultimate goal of writing centers should be to promote a just literacy education that preserves, rather than diminishes, the diversity of students' identities and subjectivities.

Since the book emerges from Grimm's “authentic” and “insider's voice” as a writing center and writing program administrator, it is an invaluable resource for anyone involved in teaching writing—from high school to university—and for those engaged in literacy learning and research in both formal (educational institutions) and informal (family and societal) settings. In the Introduction, Grimm identifies her intended audience: “I hope this book will be read not only by writing center directors but also by the undergraduate and graduate students who work in writing centers, and by the theorists and practitioners who imagine a social future in which literacy practices enable us to communicate across differences” (p. x). Although she encourages every undergraduate and graduate student working in writing centers to read the text, it may be challenging for them to fully grasp the complex conceptual abstractions, which are drawn from a wide range of philosophies and critical theories, unless they have prior exposure. The book is particularly well-suited for writing center directors, writing teachers, literacy professionals, and researchers in literacy learning.