Review:


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Editors Shanti Bruce and Ben Rafoth’s new volume Tutoring Second Language Writers (2016) appears during exciting shifts in U.S. university writing centers. Most apparently, we continue to see an increase in international and multilingual students to our schools and writing centers. In fact, according to the Institute for International Education, in 2014 U.S. enrollment of international students in colleges and universities increased 10% over the prior year, the highest rate of growth since 1978/79.

Ahead of and accompanying this population trend, writing center and related scholarship in applied linguistics has grown. A survey of dissertations in composition studies and our writing

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center journals as well as the edited collections in recent years show relevant, verifiable research and demonstrated effective strategies. At the local level, this scholarship and the complexity of working with advanced language acquisition is more often guiding our work.

I glimpsed this recently at the Georgia Institute of Technology’s communication center. As a second language (or L2, the term used throughout the text to persons whose first language is other than English) specialist, I was leading a peer tutor meeting. I wasn’t surprised when two students energized the room: Kiran Rampersad, an international student from Trinidad and Tobago, and Keertana Subramani, born in Tamil Nadu in India. But I noted that they emphasized culture more than language. “Tutoring someone in their second language is about helping them obtain new ideas, new cultural insights and new dimensions of thinking,” Keertana emphasized.

The editors’ new volume goes beyond basic ‘how to’s’ of tutoring L2 writers and instead digs deeply into the complex cultural, social and linguistic concerns that our centers face as we seek to not only effectively assist second language writers, but also create more multilingual centers. Similar to previous volumes by the editors (ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors 2004 and 2009), this book is written for tutors by a range of authors. Timely for this volume, the 14 individually-authored chapters represent a wider range of perspectives, in particular voices from writing centers outside the U.S. and tutors’ involvement in research.

In chapter one, editor Ben Rafoth begins with a charge to writing center tutors to join a community of reflection, in the freshly illustrated tradition of John Dewey. Tutoring is complex and potentially transformative work, Rafoth insists, in particular tutoring that supports the advanced literacy of multilingual students. In response, tutors “must expand their capacities for teaching and learning in systematic and discovery-oriented ways.” Rafoth illustrates the qualities of active reflection with examples from this text and closes the
chapter with the inspiring story of Atul Gawande's self-imposed coaching and reflection period when he was a mid-career successful doctor.

Each of the book’s four parts opens with a brief overview that introduces the themes of the section; each chapter is followed by references but also salient discussion questions designed for group dialogue. Part one, “Actions and Identities,” unifies three authors who connect multilingual tutoring to universities’ wider responsibility for promoting justice and tolerance. In chapter 2, Frankie Condon and Billie Olson recount their story of confronting intolerance and racism toward international students at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. They explain their process in which leaders and peer tutors conducted research that resulted in a book that aims to “create a house for diversity” in their writing center. Chapter 3’s author Michelle Cox analyzes how identities—of multilingual students and their tutors—are constructed in writing center work, including an in depth analysis of the labels we use and how we assess the ‘accents’ of written World Englishes. In chapter 4, editor Shanti Bruce examines interviews at a writing center in Puerto Rico which focused on the dynamics of resistance and commitment to bilingualism.

Part two, “Research Opportunities,” presents three chapters which inspire a mode of inquiry that arises when tutors pay attention to challenges of language or interaction and commit to disciplined investigations. Chapter 5 and 6 both continue the topic of chapter 4, English among first-language Spanish speakers, an appropriate theme for 2016. From 1996 to 2012, U.S. college enrollment among Hispanics ages 18 to 24 more than tripled (240% increase), outpacing increases among blacks (72%) and whites (12%), according to Jens M. Krogstad of the Pew Research Center.

In chapter 5, author Kevin Dvorak writes about the positive and negative pedagogical results of ‘code-mixing’ Spanish and English in tutoring sessions in their university writing center in Miami-Dade County. He involved tutors and students in in-depth interviews and reflections, which slowly resulted in their center
more boldly promoting multilingualism on campus. In the next chapter, Glenn Hutchinson and Paula Gillespie, also working with an increasing Hispanic population, reflect on multilingual tutoring through a tutor-led process of video recording and reflecting on their own tutoring sessions. The tutor-chosen and analyzed clips have been made available for other researchers online. In chapter 7, Rebecca Day Babcock writes a highly accessible, tutor-focused overview of research methods and inquiry topics that could further the work of multilingual tutoring.

The title of Part 3, "Words and Passages," is a metaphor for four shorter chapters by authors reflecting on individual research projects or experience in tutoring. Elizabeth (Adelay) Witherite explains the results of her thesis for which she interviewed tutors about social justice in tutoring. Chapter 9 details Jocelyn Amevuvor’s encounter tutoring a Ghanaian student, which prompted an examination of cultural issues affecting language development. Chapter 10 extends chapter 3’s topic of multilingual students’ identity. Pei Hsun Emma Liu illustrates how multilingual writers can retain their written ‘accents,’ signs of their culture’s rhetorical and linguistic patterns, while still successfully negotiating North American academic norms. Chapter 11 tells Jose L. Reyes Medina’s story of immigrating to the U.S. as a young adult with limited English, and the habits and structures that best encouraged his adult English learning.

Part 4, "Academic Expectations," is the most practical section, encompassing responses to specific challenges tutors face when seeking to help multilingual writers compose or edit texts. In chapter 12, Valerie M. Balester confronts the ways in which entrenched tutoring practices can limit the skills and language of international students, and explores strategies for writing centers to learn from culturally diverse ways of thinking. Jennifer Craig, in the next chapter, discusses discipline-specific L2 writing with well-explained strategies and three anecdotes of successful tutoring sessions. Finally, Pimyupa W. Praphan and Guiboke Seong enter the ongoing debate about the efficacy of correcting
errors in L2 writing, presenting both strategies and examples that demonstrate versatile solutions for tutors.

Among its strengths, this text includes emerging educators in writing center work and devotes pages to discussion questions and narrative introductions that invite dialogue. As such, this collection does not offer a comprehensive span of writing center research about applied linguistics, but it does not propose to. Instead, the editors provide relevant, sound research that investigates new aspects of these issues as well as strategies that are both fresh and well-tested.

In his introductory chapter, Roth writes, “For writing tutors everywhere, perhaps the takeaway from this book is to keep learning—about language, languages, writing, and writers.” Reading, discussing, and incorporating the insights in this text would be a profitable way to accept that invitation.