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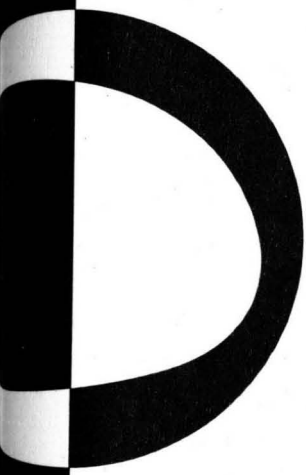


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Beth Godbee

**Review: *Rhetoric of Respect:
Recognizing Change at a
Community Writing Center*
Tiffany Rousculp**

Tiffany Rousculp's *Rhetoric of Respect: Recognizing Change at a Community Writing Center* (2014) is an important book for writing center studies. Not only does Rousculp draw our attention to widely-growing though seldom-recognized community writing centers, but she also helps us see the positioning involved in making these centers sites of social change. This positioning she calls a "rhetoric of respect," or "a different type of relationship, one that is grounded in perception of worth, in esteem for another—as well as for the self" (pp. 24–25). Using ecocomposition theory to recognize change, Rousculp contributes to a deeper understanding of micro-changes that emerge and are sustained over time through conditions of flexibility, self-awareness, uncertainty, failure, collaboration, and relationship. These conditions characterize many campus and community writing centers and can be cultivated to greater degrees when we recognize their purposeful impact for our everyday, local work. Through metaphors of ecocomposition—organism, environment, relationship, place, web—Rousculp identifies and shows the importance of attending to moments of transformation for

writers, staff, and community partners who participate in relationships built and sustained around writing.

Rhetoric of Respect tells the story of the Salt Lake Community College (SLCC) Community Writing Center (CWC), which Rousculp co-envisioned, opened, directed, assessed, and revised—all collaboratively with undergraduate student staff, faculty colleagues, community members, and local organizations—for a decade (2001 through 2010). During this time, the CWC engaged in partnerships with more than 5,000 community members and more than 130 community organizations, working one-with-one, in small and large groups, and in short- and long-term partnerships of various kinds. Though Rousculp says there is “nothing magical or terribly unusual” about this story, as the CWC “was born, and grew, within a public institution” likely to be similar to many of ours (p. 22), the CWC is truly an exceptional case for community writing centers that disrupts common understandings of rhetoric, expertise, agency, partnership, and change.

In seeking not to define but to recognize change, Rousculp uses ecocomposition—attributed especially to Sidney I. Dobrin & Christian R. Weisser (2002) and Marilyn Cooper (1986)—to explore the relationships and “connective spaces” that help to explain moments of transformations for the self, for one’s relationship with literacy, or even for “an emergence of a writing self” (p. xvii). Within an extensive web and environment (hence, the ecocomposition frame), we find moments of transformation unmediated by instructors but emergent in relationship with others. Rousculp likens these moments to Elizabeth Ellsworth’s (2005) “pedagogical pivot points.” For pivot points to emerge, Rousculp and her colleagues at the CWC needed to embrace and act on a rhetoric of respect “for the ‘wholeness’ of a person or collection of people” (p. xiv) in all their interactions: “between the directors and the staff, between staff and writers, between the center and partner organizations, and among writers” (p. 25).

Embracing a rhetoric of respect meant challenging the goal of empowerment, working against notions of people as deficient or in need of change, and instead seeing people “for who, what, and where” they are at a particular moment (p. 54). Embracing the rhetoric of respect also meant that Rousculp experienced personal change, which she traces through candid reflection of mistakes, failures, and revisions over her time directing the CWC. Rousculp asks those of us in rhetoric, composition, community literacy studies, and writing centers to rethink our good intentions; to acknowledge the regulatory role of literacy education; and to respect individuals’ abilities to make well-informed, self-determined decisions. In doing so, we can recognize and realize

change (as it emerged in the CWC and surely does in many writing sites) “not as a collective action or anticipated outcome but as the potential for individuals to use writing as they see fit, to exercise agency over textual production within regulatory systems in ways they deem most appropriate for themselves at a particular moment in their lives” (p. 91).

In the five chapters of *Rhetoric of Respect*, Rousculp moves from introducing the SLCC’s Community Writing Center to describing its discursive ecology. She traces changes for both individuals and institutions and reflects on the role of place in working strategically or tactically and in acclimating to a set of conditions versus disrupting them. In Chapter 1, Rousculp sets the scene for the CWC: describing its mission, emergence, and evolution; naming the many people and organizations involved; and locating it within its physical spaces and wider disciplinary context. Ecologically speaking, the CWC is influenced not only by the urban area of Salt Lake City and the SLCC, but also by its locations—from 2001 to 2005 in the Artspace Bridge Projects, a space near the city’s homeless shelter, and since 2006 as part of an extension of Salt Lake City’s main public library, along with café, deli, garden, and retail store—as these sites changed who walked through the doors and how the CWC was positioned within the community. Rousculp reflects on how the CWC changed over time and how changes linked to the move in location and to relationships determined partnerships and goals for programming. An example of an early change, expressive of a rhetoric of respect, was renaming “individual writing assistance” as “writing coaching” to emphasize “the human connection inherent in sharing writing with someone else” (p. 8). Rousculp’s description of the CWC’s site and the implications of naming, for instance, are likely to resonate with writing center scholar-practitioners who think and write about the who, what, where, when, and why of their centers.

Building on the overview of the CWC in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 explicates a rhetoric of respect focused on recognizing the worth of people, prioritizing relationships (with individuals and organizations), and attending to the language we use in relating with and when describing others. Pointing to the CWC’s “ideological DNA” (p. 27), Rousculp shows how the CWC challenged and disrupted assumptions about writing, literacy, and education, including the privileging of some types of writing over others, the separation of higher education from community education, and the sense that academics know best what community members need (p. 55). Here Rousculp gets into the deep logics of “how we name and classify, how we collaborate, and how we problem-solve” (p. 25), uncovering the problematic language around empowerment and the regulatory role—even “idolatry”

(p. 31)—of literacy, drawing especially on J. Elspeth Stuckey's *The Violence of Literacy* (1991) and her recognition that "We promote greater literacy, or we promote greater humanity" (Stuckey, p. 124). In response to this tension, Rousculp points to the need for "deroutinization" (as cited in Cushman, 1996), pp. 12-13) in order to disrupt patronizing or salvific narratives coming from a place of "educational benevolence" (p. 54). Alternatively, educators—those of us working in and directing writing centers—need to recognize the complexities of people's lives and how a range of circumstances shape individuals' priorities about whether or how to write.

Chapters 3 and 4 then describe how a rhetoric of respect led to transformations by showing how the CWC, as an organism, changed in relation to other organisms (individuals and organizations) within their local/community and professional/higher education ecosystems. In mapping energy exchanges, Chapter 3 shows the deroutinization involved in approaching writing and literacy learning from stances of "uncertainty" (p. 58), "trust" (p. 60), "fierce collaboration" (p. 81), and "humility" (p. 85)—stances that grew out of productive failures and reflective revision. Among the mistakes discussed, we see (p. 1) how overestimating the appeal of writing led to a failed advertising approach during the 2002 Winter Olympics in which no one stopped by the CWC and (p. 2) how the CWC inadvertently assumed "the model of importing expertise and resources into a needy community" by requiring a five-page application (none were submitted) of community organizations that was thick with need-based discourse (e.g., "prevented from," "struggle," "limited," "lack") (p. 92). Rather than assigning blame to community members or organizations, Rousculp and the CWC were able to see their "misfires of good intentions" (p. 120) and to move from a "liberatory" center focused on "empowerment" into one respectful of individuals' agency, priorities, ideologies, and self-determination. These transformations, or pivot points, for the CWC were fundamental to its survival and sustainability (financial and otherwise), as is addressed in Chapter 4. In total, change happened in ways that were not anticipated and involved re-seeing individual writers, communities, the purposes of literacy, and the outcomes of literacy education, for "it was not up to the Community Writing Center to determine the worth of change" (p. 126).

Finally, Chapter 5 concludes in the midst of ecocomposition's theories of sustainability and disturbance by looking at place. Rousculp considers how the means and aims to deroutinize education changed as the CWC became institutionalized at the public library. Engaging at length with Paula Mathieu's (2005) discussion of strategic versus tactical

engagement, Rousculp asks what is lost (i.e., more improvisational, short-term, tactical action) through institutionalization (aligned with long-term strategies and the maintenance of power relations). In showing the challenges of the CWC's "place-ness," or its propertied space or institutional status (p. 132), Rousculp worries about the CWC being co-opted by educated, middle-class community members and their organizations. As the CWC found itself entering into more partnerships and offering more programs that ignored, if not maintained, systemic power relationships (e.g., a local production of NPR's *This I Believe* program or spooky stories for Halloween), Rousculp and colleagues reflected: "We weren't using our new status and stability regularly in determined efforts to disrupt or make change" (p. 150), and so they decided to change. In response, they established three questions/criteria to prioritize partnerships and to align their work with social change. These questions asked whether a given project/program (1) worked with underserved populations; (2) provided opportunities for activist writing; and/or (3) worked with students. Rousculp's critique and revision of the CWC illustrate the messiness of relationships, the value of guarding against complacency, and the need to redefine "success stories." Moreover, by reflecting on the relationships driving campus and community writing centers, Rousculp asks us to think more carefully and critically about why, how, and with whom we partner, for what ends, and through what means.

For writing centers, *Rhetoric of Respect* is the first book-length study of *community writing centers*, highlighting a range of community-based writing center work and making connections with wider disciplinary conversations about community literacy, service-learning, civic engagement, public rhetoric, and community writing programs. Community literacy has been expanding as a sub-field of composition and rhetoric, as evidenced, for example, through creation of the award-winning *Community Literacy Journal* in 2006, the emergence of a "Community, Civic, & Public" area cluster for annual conventions of CCCC (Conference on College Composition and Communication), and regular meetings of the CCCC "Community Literacy, Service-Learning, and Public Rhetorics" Special Interest Group. *Rhetoric of Respect* speaks to and fits within these conversations—building on, extending, and engaging deeply a range of scholarship on community literacy and community writing programs (e.g., Peck, Flower, & Higgins, 1995; Cushman, 1998; Grabill, 2001; Mathieu, 2005; Goldblatt, 2007; Flower, 2008; Long, 2008; Deans, Roswell, & Wurr, 2010; Parks, 2010; Mathieu, Parks, & Rousculp, 2012). *Rhetoric of Respect* also bridges these conversations with writing center studies, showing

the connections with writing center concepts, such as the value for one-with-one conferencing, the conception of tutors' roles as collaborators and coaches rather than as teachers, and the encouragement of risk-taking and practice rather than evaluation (p. 46). As such, it lays the framework for thinking about community writing centers across and within multiple sub-disciplines and as central to writing studies.

The timing of *Rhetoric of Respect* is important too, as we are arguably in the midst a community writing center movement. Many K-university writing centers make and sustain partnerships in the community, and, increasingly, we see college and university writing centers opening branches in public libraries, K-12 public schools, and other community-based sites. Among those institutions sponsoring community writing centers (which Rousculp discusses in Chapter 1) are the University of Wisconsin-Madison, University of Iowa, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, Ohio State University, Purdue University, and smaller schools like Casper College in Wyoming. Additionally, many campus writing centers partner with public literacy programs modeled after San Francisco's 826 Valencia, the New York Writers Coalition, and Chicago's Neighborhood Writing Alliance, among others. All of this is to say that the time is ripe for raising the visibility of community writing center work. By raising visibility *within* writing center studies, we acknowledge the multiple sites, conditions, and structures of writing centers; we also open ourselves to learning from the depth of research on community literacy and public rhetoric. By raising visibility *across* composition and rhetoric, we ask the broader discipline to take note of the community work that writing centers are engaged in, researching, and advancing.

Rhetoric of Respect has much to offer those of us within and outside of writing centers, for, as Ellen Cushman said of an earlier draft, Rousculp's study "helps us explore the longstanding question of where change takes place" (as cited in Rousculp, p. xv). This question helps us identify and explain the micro-changes or transformations we witness when working one-with-one and in small groups with writers. It helps us explore the ways in which we—the people who work in writing centers—are changed through this work. And it helps us recognize the conditions that enable or deter, that actualize or block more equitable and just approaches to literacy and writing education. Certainly Rousculp asks those of us in writing centers to look carefully and critically at the models, hidden assumptions, and possibilities that underpin our everyday work. This important book asks us to question how we might cultivate and truly develop a rhetoric of respect.

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About the Author

Assistant Professor of English at Marquette University, **Beth Godbee** studies how collaborative writing talk (and the relationship-building, writing, revision, and rethinking involved in that talk) brings about social change, or more equitable relations, for individuals and members of their social networks. Beth has published in *Research in the Teaching of English*, *Community Literacy Journal*, *Across the Disciplines*, and *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*, among other sources. She has also co-authored chapters in *Writing Centers and the New Racism* (2011, Utah State UP) and *Stories of Mentoring* (2008, Parlor Press). She is currently working on projects focused on relational communication, community literacy, micro-inequities, and epistemic injustice and rights.