

Book Review

Greenfield, L. (2019). *Radical Writing Center Praxis: A Paradigm for Ethical Engagement*. University Press of Colorado. (198 pp., paperback \$25.96; ebook or PDF \$21.95)

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Although *Radical Writing Center Praxis: A Paradigm for Ethical Engagement* was published in 2019, its message speaks to a 2020 audience who witnessed protests across the U.S. for Black lives and vowed to start or continue the work of anti-racism. Greenfield argues that because writing and communication centers are already part of oppressive systems and institutions, we must work to change our systems and institutions. Although most researchers and practitioners do not think their work contributes to oppression, Greenfield asserts that our work often unknowingly participates. *RWCP* is a “call to action” to those in writing and communication centers who believe they are challenging oppression, a manifesto for those who want to start engaging in this work, and an invitation to anyone interested in listening (p. 14). *RWCP* labels and critiques the liberal and conservative political paradigms that make complicity with oppression possible and proposes a praxis based on radicalism as the alternative. Radicalism forwards “love, justice, peace, compassion, community, and other similar values” (p. 9).

RWCP is a needed challenge to commonplace hegemonic practices, narratives, attitudes, and frameworks that circulate in writing and communication centers. Although Greenfield is not the first to name these issues (Faison and Treviño, 2017; García, 2017; Greenfield & Rowan, 2011; Grimm, 1996), *RWCP* reveals liberal

or conservative ideological underpinnings for dominant paradigms that enable familiar axioms and practices in tutoring centers. To discontinue participating in oppression, centers need a new paradigm; Greenfield proposes radicalism. *RWCP*'s strength is Greenfield's careful connection of recognizable practices, such as playing devil's advocate in a tutoring session, to the limitations of liberal or conservative paradigms. She draws examples primarily from writing center history, common narratives, and her personal experiences. Her examples help readers see their complicity in oppressive institutions.

Chapter one unravels liberalism and conservatism as political paradigms and relates them to common center practices. Greenfield does not use “political” as in Democrats and Republicans; “politics” refers to underlying ideologies about power that govern everyone's conscious and unconscious thinking, discourse, and behaviors. She argues that historically writing centers have embraced either a conservative or a liberal paradigm. Conservative paradigms, which understand power as positive and truth as universal, are complicit in oppressive systems. Conservative center practices may include “the necessity of particular ‘academic’ genres of writing, ... our privileging of standardized English, our use of standardized rubrics, [and] our values about what makes for persuasive evidence” (p.

35). Although conservative practices are certainly present, Greenfield claims that a liberal paradigm, which approaches power as negative and truth as relative, has emerged as dominant for writing centers because it opposes the hierarchical and positivist conservatism. Liberalism inadequately addresses oppression and does not actively work toward anti-oppression agendas, such as anti-racism. Liberal practices include those that “minimize the tutor’s role in relationship to the writer’s ideas and the writing” (p. 44). Likewise, Greenfield unsettles a “raison d’être” (p. 85) for many centers—that they profess to improve the writer or speaker (e.g. her process, her understanding of genre, her feelings of confidence) and not just improve her speech or text. In practice this mantra often fails to include, for example, a tutor initiating a dialogue, beyond playing devil’s advocate, about a student’s oppressive views in a text or speech.

Chapter two outlines radicalism, Greenfield’s alternative paradigm. Its principles are “truth is a human construction; power is not possessed but exercised... and authority resides not in people or entities but in ethically engaged praxis” (p. 59). Drawing from scholars such as Freire, Giroux, Butler, and Bizzell, Greenfield maintains that radicalism avoids complicity with oppression and violence within and beyond the institution. Ultimately, Greenfield argues for radical praxis, not a radical theory, for writing and communication centers. Because praxis “holds theory and practice in a purposeful tension” (p. 11), she does not provide one model but emphasizes a process that includes dialogue, listening, and collaboration.

Chapter three urges centers to rethink their “raison d’être” (p. 85), not as meeting institutional outcomes

(conservative) or making better writers or speakers (liberal), but as an agent that can “negotiate institutional and societal change,” even within oppressive institutions (p. 90). In a case study, Greenfield brings in the voice of a former tutor to illustrate the pitfalls of a common practice of aligning a center’s mission with the institution’s mission. As a writing and speaking center director at an institution with a mission to develop students as leaders, Greenfield worked to promote her center as an integral part of the institution. However, she reflects upon her process of discovering that her tutors and students rejected the institution’s framing of “leadership” as a positive and universal goal for students. Greenfield’s radical response was to initiate dialogue with her staff to create a new mission. The case study is radical not because of its outcome, or even a focus on mission statements, but the process of dialogue, listening to students, and risk-taking in the name of anti-oppression. Chapter four broadens out from the case study to redefine four existing and limiting lenses for writing and communication centers, which are space, methods, community, and disciplinarity.

Chapter five explains how theory and practice influence one another in administration and pedagogy. Although this chapter includes examples of radical practices, the nature of praxis and of radicalism defy prescribing one model: “We cannot simply articulate a theory and then translate that theory into practice; rather, our practices inform our theories, which inform our practices, which inform our theories in an ongoing dynamic process” (p. 141). Greenfield calls for a culture of radical engagement, building on educational activists Lucien Demaris and Cedar Landsman. Qualities of radical practices include distributed power, reciprocity, and

deep listening. Greenfield's examples touch on administration and pedagogy. She encourages a shift from tutor "training" to ongoing tutor education; tutor education should also be a shared responsibility across a center's tutors, administrators, and even other campus partners. When designing tutor education, administrators should constantly reflect upon materials. Administrators should encourage tutors to engage in real questions and participate in professional conferences and publications.

Administrators should listen and take seriously the perspectives and stories of tutors and should purposefully reach out to departments and individuals across campus who hold less institutional power. Centers can also offer space for events that give voice to underrepresented stories. Greenfield encourages tutors to grant students, rather than professors or the institutions, the agency to compose what and how they want. Tutors must trust students and avoid imposing their own priorities. Tutorials must be truly collaborative, flexible, and dialogic, and not just appear that way. Both students and tutors must radically listen and be open to change. Finally, centers should reflect upon representation and embodiment in their contexts.

Greenfield's case for radicalism deeply challenges readers. Although Greenfield recognizes that the book is "unapologetically ambitious in its scope" (p. 9), her arguments for radicalism may leave some readers feeling less hopeful that change is possible. Because Greenfield upends and rejects most of the logic and procedural knowledge that tutors and administrators rely on, replacing it with the more nebulous praxis of radicalism, administrators who are already stretched thin may feel that embracing radicalism is impossible under their constraints. However, Greenfield maintains that embracing

radicalism is going to take time, a realization demonstrated through Greenfield's own honest reflective practice throughout the book (e.g. chapter three). *RWCP* is most appropriate for directors and researchers who are familiar with writing center scholarship because it is firmly situated in the history of writing centers; however, communication center scholars who listen closely could also identify with Greenfield's invitations.

References

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