

2023

## **Review: Unwell Writing Centers: Searching for Wellness in Neoliberal Educational Institutions and Beyond**

Aurora Matzke

*Chapman University*, [matzke@chapman.edu](mailto:matzke@chapman.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/english\\_articles](https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/english_articles)



Part of the [Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons](#), [Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), [Language and Literacy Education Commons](#), [Liberal Studies Commons](#), [Other Education Commons](#), and the [Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education Commons](#)

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Matzke, Aurora (2023) "Review: Unwell Writing Centers: Searching for Wellness in Neoliberal Educational Institutions and Beyond," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 41 : Iss. 3, Article 10. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.2033>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Chapman University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Articles and Research by an authorized administrator of Chapman University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [laughtin@chapman.edu](mailto:laughtin@chapman.edu).

---

## Review: Unwell Writing Centers: Searching for Wellness in Neoliberal Educational Institutions and Beyond

### Comments

This review was originally published in *Writing Center Journal*, volume 41, issue 3, in 2023. <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.2033>

### Copyright

Purdue e-Pubs

## R E V I E W

*Unwell Writing Centers: Searching for Wellness in Neoliberal Educational Institutions and Beyond* by Genie Nicole Giaimo

Aurora Matzke (Chapman University)

**Abstract** “Unwell Writing Centers: Searching for Wellness in Neoliberal Educational Institutions and Beyond” blends narrative, mixed methods research, and rhetorical analysis to make a case for the possibilities inherent in homegrown wellness practices that are “communal, political, and rooted in defiance of white supremacy.”

**Keywords** wellness, review

There could be little more apt for this age and time than the subtitle of *Unwell Writing Centers*. As a discipline, it seems that now more than ever, we are *Searching for Wellness in Neoliberal Educational Institutions and Beyond*. And as author Genie Nicole Giaimo demonstrates, we are not alone in this pursuit. With research spanning a multitude of disciplines that stretches deep into the annals of U.S. history, Giaimo calls our attention to how the corporatization of education continues its stretch into the very core of wellness practices. Spoiler alert: these corporate efforts perpetuate racist bootstraps narratives that place the onus of wellness on the individual and do little to change or acknowledge the system as a complex and acute oppressor. With a poignant foreword by well-known writing center scholar Elizabeth H. Boquet, *Unwell Writing Centers* provides readers with one practitioner’s longitudinal attempts to understand, name, and implement workplace practices in the writing center that actually contribute to wellness for all.

The brief introduction provides the author’s inaugural narrative, as well as a breakdown of the sections. The first section, “Searching for Wellness,” makes a case for understanding the writing center as a workplace—one that may be marked, like any other workplace, with stressors and practices that work against wellness. “Finding Wellness Interventions That Work,” the second section, discusses writing center wellness

interventions and emergency planning. The final section, “Looking to the Future of Wellness Work,” highlights how emotional labor and burnout factor into wellness research, particularly from the history of Black liberation social movements. The text concludes with a veritable cornucopia of appendices, all which afford readers practical applications for their own wellness research and interventions. All sections include opening narratives in which Giaimo shares personal experiences that explain her position in relation to the subject matter of the chapters. *Unwell Writing Centers*’ most poignant contributions, by and far, are the extensive resources offered by the author that detail her own research, as well as provide burgeoning researchers with a look at how to structure their own ideas.

The structure of opening narrative, literature review, research outline, results, and discussion begins in Chapter One’s “Writing Centers and the History of Workplace Wellness Programs.” Here, the author lays the groundwork for the entire book, as she explains how wellness programming found in many institutions is grounded in the positive psychology movement, which relies on individual intervention. Intriguingly, she connects this emphasis on the individual with much of the research on writing center sessions, creating a through line for those who may at first be proponents of these systems (including her introductory, researching self). She

Review

—  
Matzke

## Review

—  
Matzke

next describes how longitudinal research into the felt effectiveness of these programs from the writing center tutors' perspectives was mixed at best. Consequently, her results suggest that while writing center directors would benefit from first cataloging and understanding the breadth and depth of on-campus resources that are connected to wellness, this should only be the start of the journey, not the conclusion. As Giaimo notes, her own process swiftly moved her from relying on the institutional wellness programming to programming created by the author in conjunction with the population she was attempting to serve (the tutors themselves).

Chapter Two opens with the author's own experience with lockdown and shelter in place requirements. Giaimo uses these experiences to introduce the idea that writing centers can be places of both acute and everyday stress for all writing center staff—with the significant finding that writing center staff are more concerned with everyday stressors than they report being with "punctuated" and/or "high stress events" (p. 36). The text provides an overview of stress research in writing centers, noting that most research has focused on writing or production focused stress with a smaller offshoot into mindfulness practices. Giaimo attempts to course correct this focus by providing the history of research on workplace stress. Most relevant to both directors and writing center workers may be the author's arguments regarding research on precarity and its connections to workplace stress. Giaimo provocatively argues that more work must be done by writing center researchers to "examine how job stagnation, job insecurity, and lack of autonomy in decision-making" might contribute to tutors' understandings of the writing center as a workplace in which stressors occur (p. 43). In the meantime, practitioners might wish to take note of Table 2.3, as it provides several suggestions for actions to mitigate stressors in centers.

Chapter Three closes Part I: Searching for Wellness with a step-by-step guide for readers to establish their own writing center wellness research protocols. Giaimo provides an insider's look at their own studies, using the studies and questions asked to demonstrate how

researchers might address common issues with writing center studies writ large. For example, many writing centers deal with small tutor populations. This means that most studies will need to be designed with a careful eye toward longitudinal and repeatable elements, in order to strengthen the validity and reliability of study results. Giaimo even provides examples of coding and visualization results, taking readers through the full circle of the study process. The text might also be helpful for graduate students looking to study human populations for the first time, as Giaimo briefly touches on the rationale for IRB approval. Ultimately, Chapter Three provides an excellent conclusion for the first section of the text, as it demonstrates the thoroughness with which the author has addressed the very subject of the text as a whole and gives readers the chance to develop their own protocols in alignment with wellness research in writing centers thus far.

Unsurprisingly, Part II: Finding Wellness Interventions That Work opens the second section of the text with a narrative focused on what, for most writing center practitioners, is likely to be familiar—mentorship groups and their roles in cultivating wellness in centers. Here, Giaimo makes the most compelling case for recognizing how corporate wellness practices (such as mentorship group activities geared toward mindfulness) can be used to good effect, at the same time that a failure to recognize the non-Western histories of wellness practices, as well as how the individual may differ in their ideas, stressors, or goals from the institution may work to reinforce neoliberalist configurations that further champion capitalistic understandings of the supremacy of utility and investment. The push and pull are easily seen in the labor practices Giaimo shares toward the end of the chapter, providing some excellent first steps for those interested in fostering equity to decrease stressors. Ultimately, the author argues that (1) critique (of both positives and negatives) must be a foundational aspect of any mindfulness training, and (2) such training must remain optional and not compulsory, in order to offset the potential for toxic positivity to undercut reflective and inclusive action and practice.

## Review

—  
Matzke

There are two points in *Unwell Writing Centers* that are not only incredibly useful, but also incredibly timely. Chapter Five is one of the two. Emergency planning, and the writing center's role in it, has been largely ignored in the literature. This is despite the fact that many of us run centers distributed across campuses, both online and in-person, at hours that often stretch beyond the nine-to-five structure of many student service offices, and many times we find ourselves inside, outside, or alongside major student traffic hubs, not to mention that our student employees are not often given the same resources and training as professional employees, and faculty and staff are not often trained in the same ways in regard to emergency response and assistance services. Consequently, the practical and efficient breakdown of emergency planning and risk assessment offered in Chapter Five is a welcome and much needed addition to the larger literature. Giaimo rightly notes that centers will need a fair amount of self-assessment to understand what assessments will work best for them. At the same time, there are common practices and procedures that stretch across institutions that Giaimo offers as a starting point. In particular, the author notes that responses should be planned for before, during, and after an emergency; that emergency response is rarely antiracist or inclusive at the institutional level; leaders must clarify expectations for all employees (students, faculty, professionals, and others); and that well-being and recovery are integral parts of emergency response that are often glossed over or remain unaddressed. Also of interest in the chapter is the author's focus on how emergency planning has developed within the United States, as Giaimo makes a case for why emergency response might remain so scattered and/or fragmented despite recent events.

Chapter Six then opens the third and final section of the text with a focus on emotional labor. Usefully, the chapter begins by establishing a definition of emotional labor. The literature review of this chapter is particularly poignant, as Giaimo notes that emotional labor is often misclassified or undefined to a degree that then renders the concept fairly opaque. The author relies on Arlie Hochschild's

three criteria for identifying emotional labor before demonstrating emotional labor practices that may occur within writing centers. These ideas are anchored by eleven bulleted questions that allow readers to reflect on their own labor understandings and requirements. The chapter closes by briefly addressing how class-based assumptions of labor feed into emotional labor, as well as how emotional labor—if it remains unaddressed and underexamined—may lead to burnout (especially for the most vulnerable).

"Locating Wellness in Black Liberation Social Movements: Toward an Anti-Racist Wellness Model in Writing Centers" is by far the most compelling chapter within the larger text. Giaimo utilizes the final chapter before the conclusion to trace the ways in which basic care, radical care, and self-care have always functioned as cornerstones in Black Liberation social movements. Giaimo cautions readers against adoption of wellness initiatives that do not acknowledge these roots, as whitewashed initiatives function to protect and potentially reify white supremacist ideals. In addition, the author rightly notes the dearth of antiracist wellness research demonstrates that the discipline has unfortunately already been engaged in these problematic practices and that all writing center administrators then must do corrective and connective work to break the cycle of generational PTSD and trauma that follows micro-racist and exclusionary practices. Giaimo provides readers with the names of several experts in the field that continue to uncover the white, middle-class practices, ways of being, and knowledges of writing centers that contribute to policing behaviors and exclusionary practices. The author also gives readers a list of practices and reflections with which to start and/or continue their antiracist writing center wellness journeys that move away from shallow, racist, and exclusionary care models. While Chapter Seven functions as the last body chapter within the text, it would perhaps function even better as an introductory piece with which readers might start their reading. In addition, if readers are to take advantage of the extensive collection of resources found not only throughout the text but in the appendices at the end, Chapter

Seven should be a required reading before engaging these materials. And, of course, as the author cautions, readers should not adopt materials wholeheartedly from the collection but should rather interrogate their localized practices—using the materials to begin this deep and meaningful work at a localized, community level—lest they repeat problematic, corporatized cycles.

As a whole, *Unwell Writing Centers* provides a robust, antiracist wellness frame through which writing centers may examine their wellness practices. As Giaimo notes in the conclusion, “The radical reframing of care work as

communal, political, and rooted in defiance of white supremacy . . . helps us to reorient wellness work away from productivity-oriented workplace models and toward an inclusive and radical reimagining of writing center workplaces” (p. 132). The importance of this mission and work, especially given our current climate, cannot be underemphasized. Giaimo’s text is compelling, timely, well researched, practical, and engaging. Suitable for populations from undergraduate students to the storied center administrator, it clearly charts multiple directions for productive and inclusive educational research.

Review

—

Matzke