

# Writing Centers and Teacher Training

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As writing centers come of age, we are seeing that they are not simply a kind of emergency room for treatment of students in dire need. We never stop learning to write and centers offer assistance to people at every level, from remedial to graduate students, from faculty to people in the business community. In fact, as Thom Hawkins points out in his introduction to Gary Olson's book on writing centers, "the teaching practices of writing centers are influencing the way writing is taught in the classroom" (xii).

Writing centers train their tutors to understand two important aspects of teaching composition: the need, first, for viewing writing as a process and second, for individualized and respectful attention to students' papers and ideas; in addition, the center alerts its tutors to the reasons for students' difficulties with writing. The center is thus as effective a practical training ground as we might devise for ensuring that prospective teachers gain this understanding. We might, indeed, almost justify the writing center's existence on these grounds alone; Robin Magnuson suggests that the "training we provide our tutors and the multifaceted experience to which tutors are exposed should be an integral part of the requirements for undergraduate English Ed majors and for graduate teaching assistants in composition" (12).

Today's new writing teacher is, it is true, for the most part well-schooled in various recent theories of how people learn to write. Indeed one of the most striking aspects of contemporary composition teaching is the shift in our attitude to the belief that writing can and should be taught well. Only a generation (or less) ago, no one thought much about how to teach writing or was concerned with methods for training people to teach writing.

Many fine graduate programs in composition and rhetoric now provide theoretical knowledge. But practical experience, equally essential for good teaching, is not so readily acquired before entering the classroom; as Donovan et al. assert, new teachers usually receive only a syllabus and a text: "whatever apprenticeship tutors may serve in composition is often to paper, not people" (139). And Magnuson makes the interesting argument that much of students' difficulty in writing is the result of poor instruction from teachers who have been themselves badly prepared. We can prevent such inadequate preparation. The college or university writing center can be an important resource for providing tutors with this

vital experience with students before they face their first classes alone. Thomas Nash calls the writing laboratory a training center: "Invariably, young graduate assistants who work diligently and conscientiously in the laboratory report with amazement the unexpected benefits for them as classroom teachers" (5).

In a typical writing center, theoretical classroom study is supplemented by a variety of supervised teaching activities. Before they begin their work with the students in the center, new tutors attend training sessions of varying kinds: discussions of theoretical material, role-playing, examination of student papers and exploration of how best to discuss them with the student, or exercises designed to sharpen tutors' ability to explain grammatical concepts, for example. This preliminary training is followed up throughout the year by observation of the tutors as they conduct their daily conferences, workshops, and the like. Some tutors keep journals of their conference experiences; regular staff meetings allow for exchange of ideas about ways of dealing with difficult students or writing problems.

Work as a tutor in a writing center thus offers prospective teachers an unparalleled opportunity for experience, in a number of ways, before they face their own classes for the first time. It allows them to sit down in conference with individual students and talk to them about their papers as they are in the process of writing them; it affords familiarity with a wide range of students and their problems; it often provides some practice in an actual classroom; it offers the chance to work with and learn from the tutors' own peers and the freshman English staff; and, finally, it gives them an acquaintance with various kinds of writing courses and teaching methods. Most important of all, this is experience that can be gained in no other way: reading textbooks and observing experienced teachers in the classroom are useful to the novice, but actually working with the students themselves is invaluable.

The value of individual conferences in teaching writing is widely accepted and attested to by a substantial literature. Donald Murray, Roger Garrison, and others have taught us the importance of talking to the student about a paper that is actually in progress, asking questions about its purpose, its direction, the audience to whom it is addressed, and all the rest. Muriel Harris' *Teaching One-to-One* also strongly advocates conferences, and its first chapter offers a useful overview of their advantages and disadvantages. This intimate conversation with the student about his writing is as valuable to the tutor as to the student. A tutor comes to realize that the two voices in the dialogue of the conference ought by no means to be heard equally. The tutor's role is not to tell the student what to do with his paper but to help him to discover what it is that he himself wishes to do. The ability to *listen* to the student, to attend

with respect to what he has to say, is one of a writing teacher's most valuable assets. Inexperienced tutors, burning to impart knowledge, at first often find it difficult to listen enough; but they soon become aware that effective help can be given only by a person willing to find the right questions to ask and to attend seriously to the answers. Treating the students and their work with consideration, always remembering that the papers being worked on and the ideas they contain belong to the students, the tutor becomes the questioner, the prober for development and clarification of ideas. She herself probably operates by means of one or more heuristics that she in turn helps the student to internalize in order that he may in time become his own questioner.

Working in conferences with students also requires tutors to develop an acute critical sense of how a piece of writing succeeds and fails, giving them the ability to evaluate a paper quickly and accurately and to explain the paper's strengths and weaknesses to the student. And tutors who spend several hours a day tête-à-tête with a series of students gain invaluable knowledge not only about how students learn but also about what kinds of factors inhibit learning. The tutors' sharpened awareness of what the writing process entails and of how language operates to make meaning enables them to elaborate strategies for individualizing help for their students. The writing center is "real life": the tutor will probably encounter during his or her time at the center almost any problem that can arise later in the classroom.

The writing center conference is almost unique in its opportunity for the tutor to see the work of the student in process. Valuable as classroom teachers' conferences with their students are, there remains in most cases an unavoidable distance between teacher and student. In the writing center, this distance is minimized not only by the fact that the tutors are themselves students but also by the fact that they do not have to assign grades at any point to the papers they read. Students are more willing to acknowledge uncertainties, to ask for help at an earlier stage, to allow tutors to see their roughest drafts. To be aware of these kinds of insecurities and problems in student writing before taking on classroom work is an enormous advantage to the new teacher. To know why students have difficulty in writing is a necessary preliminary to helping them to write better.

A writing center's *modus operandi* all but guarantees, further, that prospective teachers will meet all sorts of different students. It is true, of course, that tutors seldom or never see the mature, confident writer that the freshman English teacher sometimes, happily, encounters; but these students can be faced with equanimity when they appear. Tutors do meet, and must develop methods to assist, the apprehensive, the lazy, the stubborn, the slow, the bright, the irresponsible, the aggressive, the

dependent, most of the kinds of students who will later challenge them in the classroom.

In addition to giving tutors experience in helping all these students to get ideas for their papers and to develop them, the writing center also provides valuable experience in dealing with the challenging, delicate task of making suggestions for revision. Not uncommonly a neophyte tutor begins to make suggestions for improvements in the very first sentences of the student's paper, eagerly and in detail. Alas, he soon learns that doing so often means that the time allotted for the conference has passed and problems of development and organization, far more difficult to repair than the mechanical errors he has been addressing, remain undiscussed.

Reading through an entire paper before beginning to comment on it is perhaps the best way to avoid overwhelming the student with criticisms and corrections. Tutors learn that reading the whole paper before criticizing it makes it easier to see its strengths and to see it as a draft to be improved rather than a finished product to be proofread. And this is a lesson that will be remembered later when the new teacher is commenting on student papers in writing; the teacher actually gains time by reading the whole paper before making comments. He learns to ignore trivial errors in order to draw the student's attention to the more serious weaknesses of her paper, and he usually finds something positive to say about the paper's thoughts or some felicity of expression.

Invaluable as the conferences of the writing center are to the tutor, there are other benefits to be gained as well. Some writing centers provide class sessions that are (or come close to being) true writing workshops, thus enabling tutors to discover whether this method of teaching writing is congenial to them. Workshops help tutors to devise ways of getting the students to practice various writing strategies and discuss them with each other. Techniques that tutors have learned for analysis of literary material can be used to teach students to recognize the rhetorical effectiveness—or the lack of it—of a student essay. Tutors may even get experience in occasional "lecturing" in these workshops as they find themselves explaining rhetorical concepts with which students may be unfamiliar. If the writing center does not offer such classroom sessions, a tutor may nevertheless be called upon to conduct a mini-workshop for three or four students who are working on the same sort of assignment.

Still another significant way in which the writing center prepares future teachers is in requiring them to learn to talk about the grammatical aspects of language. For many tutors, this is the aspect of their work for which they feel the least prepared. Like many or most native English

speakers, their own knowledge of the grammar of the language is sound but intuitive rather than conscious. While they can present a corrected version of a student's sentence they often find it impossible to explain why the old version is wrong or inadequate and the new one better. A teacher making written comments on a paper may simply mark a sentence with a cryptic marginal symbol; in the conference there is no place to hide. The tutor learns to provide an explanation, tailored to the individual student's needs, of why the version of the sentence in question is incorrect, and to discuss with him what may be done to improve it.

In addition, many centers have some version of a grammar "hotline," a service that reinforces the tutors' skills in explaining grammatical concepts. After a term or two, tutors are more confident of their understanding of grammar, more articulate in explaining it to students, and—most important—more certain that they know when some explanation is called for and in how much detail it should be given. It may be, too, that the center will require tutors to prepare handouts and exercises to provide extra practice for students. This, like any writing task, forces tutors themselves to clarify the information in their own minds in order to prepare it for written presentation to a specific audience, and thus does as much or more for their own understanding as do oral explanations.

Yet another important benefit that the writing center provides to tutors is what we might call the "vicarious" experience gained by working closely with their own peers. Working together every day offers them a camaraderie whose benefits can hardly be overstated: the opportunity of discussing, trading ideas and experiences, getting and giving support when the teaching seems to be having no effect. Such discussions broaden tutors' range of understanding and so bolster their confidences as they enter their own classrooms for the first time.

Similarly, tutors are able to supplement their immediate experience through their familiarity with what faculty members are doing in the classroom. Richard Gebhardt, in "Unifying Diversity in the Training of Writing Teachers," has emphasized the importance of confronting the great diversity of practice and theory in composition teaching with what he calls "integrating concepts" that allow the individual to find beneath the diversity a sense of unity, of coherence. At universities and colleges in which each teacher designs his or her own course, the tutors in the writing center become acquainted with many courses and the theories that underlie them. If no theory or guiding principle is evident, that too is instructive. An awareness of the results of failing to do something can be part of the tutor's preparation for teaching.

Even when all sections of the freshman course are taught from the same syllabus, enlightening differences among instructors will surface. Such differences in teaching can often be seen in assignments, for example,

how they are worded, how they are sequenced. The prospective teacher sees at first hand in the writing center how (and whether) assignments work, which ones baffle the students, which bore them, which challenge them; and it begins to be clear how often the students' success or failure in writing their papers can be attributed directly to the assignment. Or the tutor may similarly analyze differences in the way teachers conduct their classes, what kinds of readings they require, if any, what kinds of comments they make about student papers, the entire gamut of teaching techniques is opened to observation.

Writing center experience helps to minimize another of the difficulties the beginning teacher may face: the selection of a text from among the multitudes currently available. At many centers, tutors work with students from different freshman sections using a dozen or more texts of all types, and most centers have, as well, shelves full of composition texts. All this makes it easier for tutors to decide, when they are designing their own courses, whether they will employ a reader, a rhetoric, a handbook, some combination of two or three—or whether they will rely on their own handouts and use no textbook at all.

Finally, the writing center can help to prepare tutors for the future necessity of assigning grades to students' work. It is true that a significant pleasure of being a teaching assistant is the opportunity to discuss students' writing with them without having to grade it. This freedom to coach rather than to evaluate is indeed a joy. Nevertheless, the experience of having worked with so many students does help the tutor when, later, the chore of grading must be confronted. A tutor's writing center work has enabled her to see scores of student papers that represent a wide range of ability: before the tutor faces her own classroom she has acquired a soundly-based knowledge of what she can expect these students to be able to do. She has at the very least begun to learn what qualities tend to distinguish strong papers from weaker ones and how to explain these qualities to students.

The writing center's usefulness as a training ground is clearly not limited to the tutors themselves. Writing program administrators who supervise graduate teaching assistants in the classroom—or, for that matter, any composition teachers—will recognize the benefits to these teachers of working with students in the writing center. A teacher who has not tried the conferencing method of working with students, for example, will gain all the advantages described above.

Even a teacher who has conferenced with his own students may become more acutely aware of the difficulties inexperienced students face, as his role shifts from evaluator to coach. In a conference, the teacher is aware that the typical student is expending a great deal of

attention to trying to discover clues as to "what the teacher wants." No matter how he assures the student that all he wants is for her to produce her own paper, the very best one that she can, she usually remains convinced that there is in the teacher's mind (as, she is sure, there is in every teacher's) a detailed model of a paper that must be duplicated in order to earn a good grade. Someone else's student, however, usually understands that neither person in the conference knows "what the teacher wants"; feeling less vulnerable, the student is more willing to confess to difficulties.

It is of course not the case that the tutor who has spent a year or two in the writing center has learned everything that she needs to know to be a good composition teacher. (Who of us has?) She has not, in most cases, had the opportunity of working with the strongest writers; she has not had the experience of actually planning a course and its writing assignments; she has not had to devise strategies to weld a disparate group of students into a cohesive group willing to work together as a class; she has not gone through the misery of having to assign grades.

Nor do I wish to suggest that writing center tutoring is without flaw as a way of training writing teachers. The tutorial method of teaching, as David Foster reminds us, has its drawbacks: it provides only a single person as audience for a student's paper, and it can promote an overly-close relationship between tutor and student, making necessary criticism difficult or even impossible for the instructor (143-44). The first of these drawbacks does not strongly apply to the writing center situation, however, for the student's paper will later be seen additionally by the classroom teacher at least and possibly by his whole class. The second drawback is more serious; one of the things supervisors of tutors most often warn against and just as closely monitor is too close an identification with the student on the part of the tutor. Awareness of the real effort that has gone into revising a paper sometimes blinds the tutor to its remaining weaknesses and may lead to her giving the student an unrealistic expectation of how his teacher will evaluate the paper.

In the course of writing this paper, I spoke to a number of former tutors, now conducting their own composition classes, who wrote out some of their experiences for me.<sup>1</sup> All of them enthusiastically confirmed that writing center experience was significantly helpful. A typical immediate response was, "To say it was valuable is a gross understatement." All the people who responded were grateful not only for the teaching practice afforded by the writing center but also for the insights into the problems students face. One of them, recalling her initial shock that as a new teacher in a composition program she got no assistance beyond "A course description, textbooks and a roster," went on to say that neverthe-

less her writing center work made her "paradoxically, a new experienced freshman English teacher."

Writing center work, these new teachers agreed, is invaluable in making tutors aware of the need to respect students and their work and to refrain from imposing their own ideas of what the paper should be on the student. As one former tutor put it, "We are there to help the students realize the potential of the papers they bring to us." Another noted that initially he was surprised to find that "one of the things I most often had to help students with was revising their papers with a view to coming closer to saying what it was that they really intended to say." And as yet another of the former tutors expressed it, becoming used to this concept as a tutor meant that as a new teacher "I looked at the paper's ideas and organization before its grammar and mechanics, trying to see the essay before me not as a compilation of grammatical errors, spelling mistakes and punctuation problems—which it may have been—but as my student's earnest effort to respond to my writing assignment. Trained to look for the positive in the writing center, I now tried to indicate to the student the paper's strengths or potential strengths, at least, whether major or minor ones."

One tutor confirmed another important benefit very clearly: "The writing center helps prepare tutors for teaching by giving them an opportunity to be in a position which requires constant, detailed analyses of student writing. This allows them to develop a critical perspective for evaluating freshman essays and to become aware of typical concerns of weaker writers."

One of the people I talked to was grateful for the classroom practice, for "the valuable experience of working with groups of students, holding their attention, maintaining their interest, encouraging questions, and eliciting responses; in general, functioning as an effective classroom teacher as well as a private tutor." Another said of these sessions, "Classroom experience taught me the value of the workshop approach to teaching writing. I learned that neither lecture nor class discussion can really involve students in learning the way that discussion of their own writing can. If I give students twenty minutes to write in a paragraph what an assigned essay means to them, the discussion that ensues is much more informative and spirited than what results if I simply try to get them to discuss the essay as a class."

The opportunity to work closely with other tutors was also appreciated: "The individual skills and insights of the other tutors broadened my perspective on teaching reading and writing. Furthermore, their enthusiasm and dedication to their responsibilities became contagious; the excitement of witnessing a student's slow but obvious progress rewarded all our efforts and buoyed all our spirits."

Another tutor saw her experience as an opportunity "to do a practicum with not just a few veteran instructors but with almost the entire English faculty—without ever having to leave the writing center. I stepped into freshman English armed with ideas for successful approaches and assignments and fortified with resolutions to try to avoid those methods and practices that confused, discouraged, or 'turned off' students."

It seems appropriate to let one of these former tutors have the last word in this article: "The writing center taught its tutors as much or more than it taught its students. There I learned to become a better teacher, in the true sense of that title."

## Note

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