Review Article

Assessing the Efficacy of Writing Centres: A Review of Selected Evaluation Studies

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ABSTRACT

Writing practitioners, especially those in North America, have been reporting positive results from using writing centres in supporting students' writing processes. Yet the question of how efficacious a writing centre can be is seldom seriously considered. In view of this gap, this paper attempts to examine several important evaluation studies of writing centre efficacy from the limited literature of empirical research, and presents evidence from both qualitative and quantitative measurements. While the formal qualitative studies affirmed the effectiveness of writing centre in reducing students' writing apprehension and promoting positive affects to writing, the quantitative studies found that writing centre tutorials improved students' writing competence and overall grades. Nevertheless, further research is required to establish the relationship between students' satisfaction levels and the number of writing centre tutorials they received.

Keywords: Efficacy, writing centre, evaluation, qualitative and quantitative evidence

INTRODUCTION

The importance of writing ability cannot be overstated, be it writing in the first or second language. Yet, students' lack of writing skills remains a constant complaint, especially in the context of English as a second language (ESL). In the quest for an intervening mechanism, the writing centre and its virtual counterpart, the online writing laboratory (OWL) originating in North America, have been found to produce encouraging results. As the writing centre is new to this part of Asia especially Malaysia, a description and definitions of writing centre are presented before its efficacy in supporting students in writing processes is assessed.

Defining Writing Centres

The long history of writing centre development since the last century has seen the creation of more than a thousand writing centres in North America (Harris, 2004). The revolution and evolution of writing centres have resulted in writing centres taking various roles and functions at different institutions. Due to such diversity, writing centre literature has often discussed the difficulty of establishing a generic definition or a common description to represent writing centres (see for example, Harris, 2004).

Indeed, writing centres in North America can be viewed in various contexts and specifications. To begin with, there are writing centres for different levels of education. The IWCA website

(www.writingcenters.org) shows writing centre hyperlinks to secondary schools, community colleges, and universities. Secondly, a writing centre can be located in various places such as a library, a learning centre, an English Department, or a residential hall, and it may be centralized at just one location or may have several satellite centres, which can usually be found in universities with branch campuses (Haviland *et al*., 2001). Thirdly, a writing centre may be used to support various programmes, for example, first year composition, writing across the curriculum or intensive writing courses. Fourthly, funding for a writing centre may come from student fees, an English Department, a provost office or an external organization/ foundation. Writing centres also serve various clienteles such as undergraduates, postgraduates, ESL learners, the learning disabled, faculties, and local or global communities.

Furthermore, writing tutors serving at a writing centre can be peers, graduate students, faculty members, retirees, or professional consultants. The tutoring mode can be face-to-face, online, individual, small group, hybrid, synchronous, asynchronous, or telephone. The size of a writing centre also varies. It can be as big as a building complex, or just a single room. The services offered by a writing centre are also different across institutions; for example, it can provide one or all the following services such as reference resources, writing consultation, or writing workshops. A writing centre can also have various statuses; it may be adjunct to a department/discipline or free-standing, a remedial center, or a center of excellence for writing. The mission or philosophy can be biased toward supporting various types of writers or promoting writing centre pedagogy (Carino, 2001; Harris, 2004; Kinkead and Harris, 2000). Therefore, given this multifaceted and multifarious nature of a writing centre, it is indeed difficult to establish a generic definition that is acceptable to all.

The vast diversity of writing centres has somewhat limited its generalisability. Most directors of writing centre adapt the theory and practice of writing centre according to the mission of the institutions and the needs and demands of the clientele they serve. Nonetheless, despite the multiplicity and diversity, writing centres do have some common traits that distinguish them as writing centres that are either part of a learning centre or a writing programme (Harris, 2004; Waller, 2002).

The most prominent feature or function of a writing centre is the practice of tutoring to its clientele. This tutoring is one-to-one, individualized, student-centred, non-judgmental, non-directive, and non-threatening, be it face-to-face or online (Harris, 1995). The facilitative tutor plays the role of a coach or a collaborator in helping the student writer find his or her own voice in his or her writing. The tutor achieves this purpose by providing feedback as a reader and by asking probing questions very much resembling Socratic questioning. The tutorial is student-centred as it focuses solely on the student's needs. Generally, the tutors are the students' peers, advanced or graduate students, professionals who are writing consultants, retirees, or volunteers who have been trained, but rarely the instructor who sets the writing assignment (Harris, 2004; Waller, 2002). Student writers are encouraged to experiment with different strategies of writing. They are free to work on any writing task for any course or any purpose, for example, lab reports, term papers, job application letters, resumes, dissertations, essays, and creative writing. Writing centres are generally open to all students, and tutors work with students at various levels of proficiency (Harris, 2004; Waller, 2002).

Another common function of most writing centres is the provision of reference materials for their clientele such as guidebooks, dictionaries, thesauri, grammar references, style guides, encyclopedias, worksheets on specific skills, and essay models. Writing centres are usually equipped with computers and printers for writers to refine their drafts. Certain writing centres also provide coffee and cookies to foster a relaxed and inviting atmosphere (Harris, 2004; Waller, 2002).

Evaluating Writing Centres

Many practitioners at writing centres have discussed the usefulness of writing centres in the context of Writing across the Curriculum (WAC), and have affirmed the contributions of writing centres to students' writing processes. Yet, a hard question has often been asked regarding the efficacy of a writing centre: Does writing centre tutoring improve students' writing ability? In times of budget cut and shrinking institution finance, writing centre directors are often confronted with the imperative to produce concrete evidence in justifying the continued existence of such a service. Despite the long history of writing centre praxis, there has been a serious lack of empirical or formal research that employed statistical analyses or quantifiable data (Bell, 2000; Jones, 2001; Lerner, 2003; Thompson, 2006). A review of writing centre assessment literature found that research in this area has been limited. Most research conducted on writing centre tends to be qualitative, comprising mostly reflections of the practitioners such as writing centre directors or tutors, surveys on writing centre and OWL usage, and "speculations about the theoretical possibilities of writing centers" (Jones, 2001, p.6).

The limited empirical evidence on the efficacy of writing centre might be due to the academic background of directors of writing centres who are mostly experts in language and rhetoric, and not mathematics and statistics (Bell, 2000). In addition, the very fact of the proliferation of writing centres, since the inception of the first writing centre in North America in 1934, and persistent existence of writing centres through the thick and thin of different eras, may have been thought of as testimonials to effectiveness of writing centres in writing instruction – the so-called "evidence speaks for itself." Hence, no urgency was felt by many writing centre directors to empirically assess writing centre effectiveness especially when they were constrained by servicing growing student populations (Boquet, 2002). As a result, very limited amount of qualitative and quantitative data have been produced to examine the efficacy of writing centres.

Qualitative Evidence

Qualitative assessment of effectiveness of writing centre has often been published as reflections from writing centre directors as they appraised the centres' challenges and attainment, and not so much as formal empirical research studies (see, for example, *Writing Centers in Context: Twelve Case Studies* by Harris and Kinkead, 1993). Data were usually collected through tutors' narratives of the tutorial experience, and evaluative feedback forms filled up by students immediately after a one-to-one writing tutorial (Masiello, 1992). The student feedback forms usually elicit demographic details such as first year or senior and the majoring discipline, first time or repeated tutorial, and the purpose of the writing centre tutorial. Students are given some options or a Likert scale to rate if the tutorial is helpful (or not) (Harris and Kinkead, 1993). Certain writing centres also list rhetorical areas such as invention, development, grammar, syntax, and mechanics for students to tick areas that have been attended to during the tutorial (Masiello, 1992). This kind of data collection will shed some light on the specific writing concerns students perceive as helpful.

Meanwhile, qualitative assessment has often been used to gauge the affects of the student clientele. Due to the limited literature in formal research, only two qualitative studies are discussed in this paper. The first is a case study on writing apprehension of a group of first-year tertiary students. The study found that students' anxiety about writing was remarkably reduced after attending writing centre tutorials (Taylor-Escoffery, 1992). The purpose of this case study was to find out the relationship between the use of writing centre and the perception of the functions of written language. The focus group comprised ten first year students who were randomly selected from among those enrolled in a Basic Writing course. All students taking Basic Writing were required to attend writing centre tutorials. The case study was conducted in an urban university whose students were predominantly black.

The research methodology consisted of a pre- and post-writing apprehension test, and

interviews to elicit the students' perceptions on the functions of writing. On the students' first visit to the writing centre at the beginning of the semester and prior to attending a writing centre tutorial, they were asked to respond to the Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension Test. By the end of the semester and after the respondents had attended several writing centre tutorials, they were asked to respond to the same writing apprehension test. The results showed that the writing centre experience had helped to reduce the writing apprehension level of these students. The writing centre experience was also found to have improved their perceptions and understanding of the use of written language, especially in the domains of expressive and transactional writing.

The above finding is supported by two anecdotal evidences. The first reported that students were found to become more confident writers and perceived the writing centre service more positively than students who did not attend writing centre tutorials (Matthews, 1994), while the second affirmed students' use of the writing centre had resulted in them producing writing that was "easier to read, better organized, and had fewer of the typical writing mistakes" (Jones, 2001, p.12).

In another study conducted by Paul Ady (1988) in Rhode Island College, 96 students from four English classes were required to seek help at the college writing centre in improving their assigned essay drafts. About 66% of the respondents were first semester students and the rest were second or third year who had postponed the completion of the English requirement. Of the 96 students, only one had used the writing centre before.

After the first writing centre tutorial, the students were required to describe their tutorial experience in writing. Based on the students' descriptions, the researcher compared the students' perceptions before and after the writing centre experience. It was found that the students did not know about the writing centre or how a writing centre tutorial was conducted. Before attending the first tutorial, they held negative feelings about the tutorials. In fact, many were frightened and worried that the writing centre tutors would laugh at their drafts. They also thought that the tutors would command them to change their writing or to rewrite for them. However, after just one tutorial session, their writing apprehension disappeared when they met face-to-face with the supportive and non-judgmental tutors. More than 80% of the students felt that the writing tutorials were useful and they would like to continue using the facility. They also liked the collaborative approach practiced by the tutors.

However, a small number (about 20%) of the students reported that the writing centre tutorials did not help them at all. They expected the tutors to give them more direction and more specific criticism, and they did not find the non-directive tutoring helpful. The non-directive tutoring was also resented by an ESL student who commented that the tutor did not want to tell him what was wrong with a specific sentence.

Based on the students' feedback, the researcher recommended that any tutor training programme must attend to the affective aspect of tutoring. Moreover, tutors should apply either the directive or the collaborative approach, depending on the needs of the students, and not using the non-directive approach as a blanket rule as students are different. Similarly, based on the students' generally positive perceptions, improved attitudes and feelings towards the writing centre (i.e. after only one session of tutorial), the researcher urged the teaching faculty to explain the virtues of the writing centre to their classes, and to encourage more students to use the centre.

The qualitative evidence from these cases suggests that there is effectiveness of writing centre intervention, in the form of one-to-one tutorial, in improving students' perception, attitudes, motivation, and confidence towards writing. These findings have strengthened the application of writing centre as an effective form of affective support in assisting students' writing processes, in addition to cognitive support, especially for ESL learners. The intangible gain in the affective domain has also been found to have led to measurable gain in students' grades

(Clark, 1993; Harris, 1995). When compared to native or English as First-Language students, ESL students tend to have higher apprehension when they are required to write in English (Cornwell and Mckay, 2000). The qualitative evidence should be able to persuade the establishment of a writing centre in any learning institution to support ESL learners.

Quantitative Evidence

Quantitative evidence for the effectiveness of writing centre can be gleaned from four strongly designed statistical research studies.

The research by Bell (2000) was designed to investigate four research concerns: 1) the student's satisfaction level in the writing centre tutorials they participated in; 2) the objectives set at the tutorials; 3) if students applied the knowledge and skills they had gained from the tutorials to their assignments; and 4) If they perceived the learning experienced in the tutorials as helpful in future. The research questionnaire employed a six-point Likert scale to measure students' responses. The purpose of the research was to ascertain "if students learned something during conferences, were able to use that knowledge in writing independently, and thought they had gained something of long-term value" (Bell, 2000, p. 18).

Three different groups of respondents of 45 students each were randomly selected from the writing centre student clientele. One group was given the printed questionnaire to tick their responses immediately after they had attended a 45-minute one-to-one tutorial. The second group was telephone-interviewed using the same questionnaire two weeks after they had attended a writing centre tutorial, and the third group was also telephone-interviewed two months after they had attended a tutorial.

The survey results showed that 100% of the students who responded to the questionnaire immediately after the tutorial (the Immediate Group) were satisfied with the writing tutorial and the tutorial objectives, and they were able to apply what they had learned at the tutorial in their assignments. For the group of students who

were interviewed two weeks after the tutorial (the Two-Week Group), more than 80% agreed or strongly agreed that they could apply what they had learned from the writing centre tutorial to their assignments, and they believed that the learning would continue to be useful in future. For those who were telephone-interviewed two months after the tutorial (the Two-Month Group), 75% said that they could apply what they had learned from the tutorial to their academic work, and about 66% agreed or strongly agreed that the learning from the tutorial would continue to be useful in the future. The responses from the three groups were positively convincing, especially that from the Two-Month Group, as by then, the effects of the tutorial would be assumed to have evaporated.

A shortcoming of the research might be that the data were collected by a writing centre peer tutor whom the respondents might have acquainted with, and therefore might have given supportive rating. In view of the shortcoming, the researcher replicated the survey using a student interviewer who was not associated with the writing centre. The results of the second survey were not as positive as the first one, but were still very positive overall. The contributing factor to the reduced positive percentages might be due to the shortened tutorial time from 45 minutes in the first survey to only 30 minutes in the second survey. Overall, the findings yielded some concrete data in proving the usefulness of writing centre tutorials, whether immediate, short or long terms (Bell, 2000).

A statistical study by Carino and Enders (2001) was designed to correlate the frequency of writing centre visits to students' satisfaction. The questionnaire asked the number of times the student visited the writing centre in the semester, if the consultant was courteous and interested in the student's work, if the consultant helped the student do his/her own work or did the work for the student, if the confidence of the student in completing assignments was enhanced, if the student's visits to the writing centre contributed to improved writing, and if the student would recommend the writing centre to his/her peers. Each question was followed by a

five-point Likert scale. The course instructors of English 101, English 105, and English 305 were requested to administer the questionnaires at the end of the semester. A total of 399 respondents over two semesters completed the survey questionnaires.

Overall, the findings of the survey suggested that the frequency of visits to the writing centre did not significantly correlate to the satisfaction level of the students with their writing centre tutorials. The frequency of visits also did not have any impact on the students' perceptions of the consultants' ability in helping them with the writing assignments. However, the frequency of visits did significantly improve students' confidence in writing and the perception that their writing ability had improved. Similarly, the frequency of visits did influence students in recommending the writing centre to their peers.

Contrary to the popular belief that "the more students visit a writing centre, the more s/he will like it", the results of the survey study showed that no significant correlation existed between the frequency of visits and students' satisfaction. In fact, return or repeated visits to the writing centre can be a cause of concern too as compared to zero or few visits. Too many repeated visits might indicate that the student has become over-dependent on the writing centre, when s/he should have built up the confidence and competence to be able to work independently. Nevertheless, exactly how many repeats are considered optimal or problematic? This is perhaps an area awaiting further research.

The third statistical research conducted by Lerner (2003), on a total of 488 First Year students over four academic years, was aimed to find out the relationship between writing centre use and non-use to First Year

Composition (FYC) and First Year (FY) Grade-Point Averages (GPAs). The research design used was an improvement over a similar study by the same researcher in 1997. Table 1 shows that all the differences between the users and the non-users were statistically significant, except for the mean Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) verbal scores that the researcher used to establish a similar entry point between the two groups. The research design had considered the experimental group (writing centre users) and the control group (non writing centre users), and the implication of teacher's effects that would have been balanced off by the use of a large pool of respondents. The researcher argued that by triangulating data collected from multiple years and a large sample of students and teachers on the single variable of writing centre usage, he could convincingly say that writing centre use did contribute to improved First Year Composition and First Year GPAs.

It is true that Lerner (2003) employed improved design in this study, and the conclusion that writing centre visit was indeed effective is convincing enough to be accepted. Nevertheless, the design could have been improved further if Lerner had engaged the same number of non-users to match that of the users (see Table 1), as sample size could implicate the statistical significance and the reliability of measurement (Carino and Enders, 2001).

While the preceding quantitative studies investigated the impact of writing centre visits on students' writing ability, either through self-perception or GPAs, the following study investigated the efficacy of the writing centre from a slightly different aspect, that of the improvement in drafts in terms of global and local concerns, written by students before and after they consulted a tutor at the writing centre.

TABLE 1
The effects of writing centre use on FYC and FY GPAs

	SAT Verbal Mean Score	FYC Mean GPA	FY Mean GPA
Writing centre users (n=307)	487	3.07	2.73
Writing centre non-users (n=181)	490	2.78	2.42

Source: Adapted from Lerner (2003, p.68)

In a recent statistical study on the outcomes of a writing centre, Niiler (2005) aimed to gauge the extent of writing centre intervention that had impacted on the global (also known as rhetorical or higher order) and local (also syntactical or lower order) concerns of students' essays. He also set to find out the consistency of three expert raters in evaluating these students' essays. The study employed an improved research design over his 2003 study (Niiler, 2003). The students involved in the study were from two History and Political classes, and two FYC classes. The researcher had the co-operation of the class instructors to write the grade of each essay on a separate card. The grade cards were given to the students for them to decide if they want to have their essay grades improved through a 36-minute writing centre tutorial. The essay and the grade were returned to the students who chose not to attend a writing centre tutorial. For students who wanted to improve their grades, their original clean-copy essays were returned to them for them to consult a writing centre tutor. Another clean copy, with the name removed, was given to the researcher. Through this method, a total of 38 students had actually self-selected themselves as subjects of the study. After the writing centre tutorial, the students involved rewrote their drafts accordingly, and a clean copy with the name removed was given to the researcher. The researcher then duplicated three sets of the two stacks of pre- and post-writing centre drafts, and gave the blind copies at random to three faculty members who evaluated the drafts independently. The evaluators were not connected in any way to the writing centre, and they had vast experience in evaluating essays. There was no way for them to know if each draft was written during pre- or post-writing centre tutorials. Both the global and local aspects of each draft were assigned a score from one to five.

The results showed that the global and local ratings of pre-writing centre drafts were below the median of 3, while those of the post-writing centre drafts were above the median. This result was strengthened by the positive inter-rater correlation of two expert raters. The third rater did not produce similar strong correlation with the other two colleagues, and the researcher suggested the need for evaluation training. In comparing the improvement on both global and local concerns, the global concerns had a mean improvement of 1.03, while that of the local concerns was only 0.6. The findings provided the concrete evidence that the writing centre tutorials were able to significantly improve students' writing ability through just one 36-minute tutorial, and the improvement achieved was more global than local. This finding is in line with the fundamental practice of writing centre in giving priority to global concerns in students' drafts over local concerns. It would be interesting to replicate the study in an ESL setting to find out if similar findings could be achieved.

The quantitative evidence from the four empirical research studies affirms that the tutorial support provided by writing centres is efficacious in improving students' overall grades and writing competence, although further research is still required to establish the positive relationship between the number of visits to the writing centre and students' satisfaction.

CONCLUSION

In summing up the efficacy of writing centre, both qualitative and quantitative evidences in the writing centre scholarship have suggested the effectiveness and usefulness of the writing centre as a support service in complementing classroom efforts. The tutorial support of the writing centre is especially useful for ESL students in Malaysia who generally find writing in English a challenge. This is because writing in English requires a culmination of multiple abilities such as linguistic, cognitive, rhetorical and social skills, in addition to positive attitudes to writing (Tan *et al*., 2006). Nevertheless, it is difficult to predict if similar results could be achieved if the studies were conducted in the Malaysian contexts when writing centres are set up, given the differences in variables such as the target users, culture, and education setting. Therefore, research and development should be two inseparable activities that must go full circle in any innovation transfer: research,

develop, and more research to improve the implementation and development. As a final note, further research in determining efficacy of writing centres should include investigating the effectiveness of various tutoring techniques and tutor training.

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