

CHANGING ATTITUDES: WRITING CENTER WORKSHOPS IN THE CLASSROOM

Holly Ryan

Pennsylvania State University, Berks

holly.ryan@psu.edu

In a recent WPA-L discussion thread initiated by a “newbie writing center director,” Christopher Ervin offers the following suggestion: “I guess my best advice, if you want to grow your writing center, is to develop relationships with various potential stakeholders across campus. Doing so would help you do a lot that you might find more difficult if you don't branch out.” Ervin's advice is practical and valuable for a writing center director, but it is also a daunting task for new faculty members. Trying to understand the historical, political, social, and economic landscapes of a new university is difficult enough, but add to that the administrative work and relationship-building necessary to effectively run or develop a writing center, and new directors can feel like they have an insurmountable challenge ahead of them. However, with a combination of inquiry-driven conversations and effective demonstrations of writing center practices, a writing center director can forge relationships with faculty across campus that lead to productive and engaged conversations about writing. In doing so, writing center directors are positioned to move their centers beyond the image of the “fix-it” shop and into a cultivator of intellectual engagement on campus. Using my interactions with a business faculty member, I hope to offer other writing center administrators and practitioners a trajectory to follow as they begin to create their own networks on campus.

In 2010, I began work as a tenure-track writing center director at a small, branch campus of a large, state institution. Prior to my hiring, writing tutoring was conducted as part of the learning center, which offers tutoring in all subjects. At the time of my hire, the writing center employed one professional tutor, who also acted as the interim coordinator, and offered one-on-one (and occasionally group) 30-minute tutoring sessions. My position drastically changed the relationship between the writing center and the learning center: the writing center became an autonomous space, with its own budget, hiring

practices, assessment procedures, research agenda, and vision. The learning center coordinator graciously helped me make this transition, providing me with the contacts, advice, and support needed to break away. As the center became its own space, it also attracted positive attention from the campus community.

The news of the new writing center coordinator spread, not out of discontentment with the previous direction of the center, but because new blood often breeds new interest in familiar scenes. I found myself stopped in the hallway by senior faculty members who welcomed me to campus and, sometimes in whispers, shared their stories of student writing. Usually, to my chagrin, these anecdotes were about the problems with students' spelling, grammar, syntax, and a general disinterest in producing “good writing.” It's unfair to make too much of these interactions, since this faculty-speak about writing is an all too common trope in writing center lore, but it does characterize a vision of the writing center as a place that will teach students how to fix the errors in their writing. Many of my interactions concluded with some indication that the faculty member was happy to be able to send students somewhere to work on their poor grammatical skills.

For those of us who have been doing writing center work for some time, this interaction is not new; we've become all too accustomed to the “fix-it” perception of writing tutoring.¹ More frustratingly, we have come to expect that some faculty will send their students to use the writing center instead of teaching writing themselves. Instead of dismissing these perspectives or falling into finger-wagging mode, we need to find ways of understanding these ideas and, when appropriate, challenging them. As Jeanne Simpson writes, “We need to accept a simple principle: people's perceptions come from their legitimate experiences and reference points, even if they lead to conclusions we don't share. Just as we do in tutoring, we need to find out what people actually know, how they know it, and what they believe about

their knowledge” (1-2). It is our responsibility, along with our composition colleagues, to listen to our peers, understand their perspectives, and engage potentially reductive views of writing and writing centers. If we do so with respect and care, we can build valuable allies across campus who will continue to spread a rich, nuanced understanding of writing and the writing center.

My first opportunity to build a new network occurred in my first month on the job. I received an email from a colleague, whom I will call Bob. He teaches the senior capstone writing-intensive business course and respectfully wanted my opinion on sending his students to the writing center to have their papers “reviewed” (personal email). He had concerns about their writing and hoped that a visit by them to the writing center would help manage those issues. Knowing our limited resource pool and some of the challenges of required tutoring sessions, I countered his request with another: could we sit down and discuss if a workshop might be a more effective strategy for meeting his needs? He agreed.

In this meeting, I wanted to respond to Simpson’s call to find out what Bob knew about the writing center, how he knew it, and what he believed about writing. I asked him to explain his reasons for asking for a required visit, what he hoped to achieve by sending his students to the center, and what he saw as the strengths and needs of his past student writers. He conveyed to me that he hoped that the writing center would provide a place for students to receive support for their writing needs since he did not feel as though he could spend time on certain writing issues in his classroom, specifically clarity, conciseness, and organization. In our discussion, it became clear that as a businessman and a teacher of the senior-level course, Bob values the final product, which is hardly surprising since many of my colleagues share this perspective. As a way of preparing students to write effective final products, Bob spends quite a bit of class time discussing audience with his students because he feels that if the students understand who they are writing for, they will do it better. Furthermore, he designs assignments that are modeled on “real-world” business situations so that students will feel motivated

to produce texts they would actually write in a business setting. He rarely has students revise their work as part of the course because he believes students will not have that opportunity in the business setting; he expects the revision to be done before they turn in the final product. I would describe his teaching of writing as a “pedagogy of authenticity”: he models his teaching on realistic situations students might encounter in their jobs.

While listening to Bob and discussing his views on writing, I was not silent about my own perspectives. It is important not to passively allow others to construct visions of the writing center and writing; as scholars and researchers, we are responsible for sharing our disciplinary knowledge. We bring a perspective that people are interested in, and Bob came to the writing center seeking my expertise. It would have been unfair and unproductive for him to leave without me holding up my end of the conversation. I conveyed to Bob that as a rhetoric and composition scholar, I typically take a different approach to teaching writing in my classroom. With an eye toward process, I tend to emphasize a writing-to-learn pedagogy. Students use writing not only as a final means of communication, but also as a mode of learning.² This perspective, of course, does not mean that I ignore the final product nor does it mean that I pretend that product-based writing is not the norm in situations outside of my classroom.

Bob and I discussed our epistemological frameworks for writing instruction and our views of the writing center. The exact details of the conversation escape me now, a year later, but the feeling of the meeting sticks with me. The conversation was productive and engaged. I remember at one point Bob said that he liked the idea of doing more writing-to-learn exercises in his classroom. We even discussed how he might incorporate more low-stakes writing and peer review exercises into his courses. For me, Bob’s interest to adding more writing-to-learn opportunities for his students is significant. Bob made a commitment to do more of the teaching of writing to his students. He acknowledged how he could work with student writing even more in his own classroom and made a

commitment to incorporate more writing instruction. In my opinion, this addition does not detract from his pedagogy of authenticity; it provides more opportunities for students to get feedback from someone who knows the field. He will have more opportunities to provide students with feedback so that they can more effectively write those final products. Through our conversation, Bob saw how he could take more control of writing.

While Bob was open to these structural course changes, he still was not sure how to support his student's ongoing struggle with organization and clarity, which was why he initially turned to the writing center for our expertise. I suggested classroom-based workshops instead of required visits to the writing center as a way to share my knowledge and prevent marginalizing writing instruction to the writing center space. By agreeing to set aside class time to two workshops, Bob would be showing his students the centrality of writing for his course. While this may seem like a small gesture on his part, I believe that it is an important investment of his time and resources. Also, by going into Bob's classroom to do two workshops, I would be demonstrating what we do in the writing center. The information the students would be receiving would be very similar to what they might get individually in a writing center session, but Bob would also see what the writing center has to offer. By modeling a writing-center pedagogy, I would be teaching Bob about what we do to support writing on our campus.

Creating the workshops would be another moment of collaboration for us. Unsurprisingly, Bob had expertise that I did not, and I needed to figure out his expectations and disciplinary conventions for the kinds of writing he assigned. I relied on Carol Haviland's valuable advice for writing center practitioners who engage in Writing Across the Curriculum endeavors:

Moving into others' classrooms is not a license to set up soapboxes to advance their own agenda. Writing Center staff needs to discover how their colleagues perceive writing and what functions of writing they want to incorporate into their existing courses. And these discussions must continue

frequently and candidly, in both the design and implementation stages, to make certain that the projects are truly departmentally-based and are appropriate to the discipline. (6)

Asking Bob to share what made "good" writing gave him the opportunity to teach me about how he and his colleagues see writing as a tool for effective communication. Bob's discussion of disciplinary conventions helped me to better understand how to tailor my workshop for his students. I feared teaching them something that would be frowned upon, so my collaboration with Bob was absolutely necessary to create a useful workshop.

As an outsider to their classroom, these workshops allowed me to engage the students in a dialogue about their own knowledge about writing. While Haviland's advice is directed at working with colleagues, it is equally applicable to working with students in these classrooms. It is not my job and it would be counterproductive "to set up soapboxes to advance [my] own agenda" (6). Instead, I began the workshops asking students questions about what they already knew about writing with clarity and concision. I encouraged them to discuss why this kind of writing is important in business. I asked them to imagine the impact of "fuzzy" writing, and we brainstormed a couple scenarios in which that kind of writing could have ill effects. By finding out "what [they] actually know, how they know it, and what they believe about their knowledge," I gained a rapport and trust with the students (6). Furthermore, I demonstrated to Bob how the writing center does not assume that students are empty vessels. We believe that students have rich writing experiences that our tutors need to know in order to successfully help student writing.

Modifying an existing workshop³ developed by the Duke Writing Studio staff, I developed a presentation that required inductive reasoning from the students. Students revised sentences for clarity and conciseness and then extrapolated the strategies they used to make those changes. This process mimics work we do in the writing center. Tutors do not offer a top down approach to writing. They usually do not tell the writer any specific "rules" about writing. Through dialogue, collaboration, and critical thinking,

the students and tutors come to an understanding about how writing works. Again, this workshop showed Bob and his students that writing center tutors do not need to be experts on writing rules, but that they are willing to learn them alongside the writer.

Since the first presentation offered students a workshop on sentence-level revisions, I developed the second to emphasize a higher-order concern. In this workshop, I taught students about reverse outlining. This strategy⁴ asks students to create an outline after they have written the paper. The outline summarizes the content and purpose of each paragraph. This process requires that students decide what belongs in each paragraph, what needs to be deleted, and if a paragraph advances the paper's claim. When I arrived in class, I shared the strategy and provided students with a sample paper written by a student who took the capstone business class the previous year. The energy in the room was palpable! Working in small groups, the students quickly found it difficult to summarize the first three or four paragraphs of the paper because of the multiple and underdeveloped ideas, but they breezed through the paragraphs that nicely cohered. The strategy proved successful for the students, but I think it also taught Bob how he could help students identify organizational issues.

This workshop, like the previous one, was meant to represent a possible writing center session. Sometimes tutors share a strategy with students-writers and then together apply the strategy to the paper. Our writing center encourages strategy-building as a way of developing the writer. In North's words, we want to "to produce better writers, not better writing" (438). At our writing center, we hope writers will transfer what they learn in tutoring sessions to other writing situations. By modeling writing center pedagogy, I hope these workshops showed Bob that the writing center is not a fix-it shop, but a space for intellectual engagement.

Since developing these workshops for Bob's class, I have conducted several similar ones for other contexts on campus (first-year composition classes, chemistry seminars, and psychology training sessions). Often these workshops were developed in response to requests from faculty members on campus who

wanted their students to use the writing center in a similar way as Bob. In each of the situations, I had a similar conversation with the faculty about their pedagogy, their goals, and how the writing center might support their students. Then, when I would run the classroom-based workshops, I envisioned myself not only teaching the students but the faculty member as well.

Our campus does offer WAC training, but, as I am learning, faculty want much more help teaching writing. Even though we can cynically assume that faculty members just want writing centers to do the work of teaching writing, I honestly believe that many of these requests come from instructors that do not know of other options. They do not feel confident enough to teach writing and, because of their anemic views of the writing center, think we can do it better. My work with Bob and a few other faculty members on campus have helped demonstrate how the writing center can support faculty on campus. In doing so, we can teach faculty more about what the writing center has to offer.

Bob's request for required tutoring in my first month of employment encouraged me to increase the number of ways students and faculty are exposed to our work. The impact these presentations have had on student writing and student perceptions is the focus of another study we are conducting on campus. However, I know the impact on Bob was significant. Following these two workshops, he wrote the following to the Associate Dean of Academic Affairs:

I have been so pleased and excited by the contributions Professor Ryan made in my classroom that I would be remiss in not passing along my feedback to you. She did an exceptional job. Her information was right on point and she presented it in an engaging and inspiring style. The best gauge for success was student behavior during Professor Ryan's presentations. I'm pleased to say they appeared to be completely receptive, engaged in learning, and appreciative of the knowledge she provided. I feel so strongly in the importance of the contribution that Professor Ryan made that I have asked her to consider providing similar presentations in my future

BA422W classes. (“Professor Ryan and the Writing Center”)

I am not sharing this email to toot my horn, although the compliment is certainly flattering. More importantly, I think this email indicates the importance of treating faculty across campus with respect and honest communication. When Bob writes that my information was “right on point,” he is saying that I was able to convey his discipline’s writing conventions effectively to the students. We had frank discussions about my lack of business experience, but the conversations and wisdom he provided during our initial conversations provided me with confidence and credibility in his classroom. His perception that the students were receptive, engaged, and appreciative indicated to me that the students did not feel as though I had set up a “soapbox.” Finally, the fact that Bob invited me back to do additional workshops in subsequent semesters tells me that he saw the value in what I did in his classroom, even though it did not match his initial request of sending students to the writing center to have their writing “reviewed” (“Use of Writing Center Resources”).

The work that I did to develop a wonderful relationship with Bob was one of the best things I did during my first year as the writing center coordinator. Not only did I develop an ally and collegial relationship with faculty outside of my academic division, but I also generated good buzz about the practices of the writing center. In his book on leadership, Michael Watkins writes, “One common mistake of new leaders is to devote too much of their transition time to the vertical dimension of influence--upward to bosses and downward to direct reports—and not enough to the horizontal dimension, namely peers and external constituencies” (186). Watkins is right. As administrators we have to be careful not to lose sight of the importance of peer relationships. I never expected such a positive email to be sent on my behalf, and I am sure that it had much more of an impact on the dean than the workshop will have as a line on my tenure dossier.

While this almost goes without saying, my relationship with Bob represents the best-case scenario when we try to shift our reputation away from the fix-

it shop. And, of course, engaging with one faculty member will not shift the entire campus perspective on writing and writing centers. Nor should it. There will inevitably be ineffective tutoring sessions, unimpressed faculty, and complicated socio-political dynamics. However, by modeling our writing center practices outside of the writing center and with our peers, we can hope to influence the perception of the writing center. When we collaborate with faculty across campus and demonstrate our services to students and faculty, we have the capacity and agency to influence how people position the writing center.

Notes

1. See North’s well-cited “The Idea of a Writing Center”.
2. See Janet Emig’s work “Writing as a Mode for Learning”.
3. The Duke Writing Studio website offers a series of handouts and tutorials on a variety of writing-related topics. The page can be found at: <http://uwp.duke.edu/writingstudio/resources/workshop-resources>.
4. Many Writing Center websites offer handouts on reverse outlining, but I particularly like Purdue’s handout on the OWL.

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