

# INSIDERS, OUTSIDERS, AND STRADDLERS: A NEW WRITING FELLOWS PROGRAM IN THEORY, CONTEXT, AND PRACTICE

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There seems little question that writing centers have been increasingly visible and accessible (Jablonski; Nagelhout and Rutz; Spigelman and Grobman). The University of Nevada, Reno (UNR) University Writing Center has raised its profile on campus and become more accessible by providing tutoring and other options, too. We provide in-class workshops on topics ranging from avoiding plagiarism to successful peer review. In addition, we have made efforts toward disciplinary writing through workshops in Social Work and Education; academic boot camp sessions in Community Health Sciences, Engineering, and Psychology; and faculty development in various fields and disciplines. These efforts are well supported by both our campus and the literature (Barnett and Blumner; Macauley and Mauriello; Mauriello, Macauley, and Koch; Nelson and Evertz).

It also seems now that writing centers should draw students to themselves and extend outward toward campus communities and sometimes beyond (Childers, et al; Eodice; Harris; Mullin, et al; Pemberton). Writing Fellows (WFs) are popular in these efforts. They can bring valued practices to places that are not writing centers. WFs can also access a wide array of disciplinary discourse communities; they can thrive in these kinds of conditions (Cairns and Anderson; Haviland, et al.; Leahy). UNR's WFs program has been operating a relatively short time but, in our two years, we have come to understand more of the complexity of WFs. Put simply, WFs do focused work in unique conditions and require focused understanding.

I am certainly not the first to think of WFs as a useful and meaningful way to extend the reach of a writing center (Conroy; Harris; Striker). Neither am I the first to think about the contexts into which they are appointed. I suppose it isn't really news, either that there is no one-size-fits-all WFs program. However, a discussion that brings together our beliefs about WFs, the real contexts for their work, and the demands made by those contexts can inform successful deployment of WFs across contexts.

This article will begin with an essential theoretical conflict around WFs: expertise. Beyond this question, we have found at UNR that there are other critical

considerations: the context for the work and the WF herself. Together, these facets of WF work can shape, reshape, and misshape the comparatively autonomous and isolated work of WFs. This article will then describe recent UNR WFs. The article will end with brief reflections and possible directions for further scholarship. Writing fellows can be wonderful; understanding them thoroughly can bring their best efforts to full fruition.

## Theoretical Conflict

Conflicting theories remain at the center of this work. Researchers argue that only those who participate directly in a discourse can really understand it fully (Bazerman; Detweiler and Peyton; Prior; Waldo). From this contextualist perspective, writing centers are the only appropriate place for inter/multidisciplinary writing support because they are the spaces freest of individual disciplinary influences (Waldo). Soliday argues that disciplinary writing represents disciplinary thinking and, without access to the thinking, the writing is much more difficult to support. Hers are not unfamiliar claims; similar arguments have been made at many points across the past 40+ years to abolish first-year composition, in no small part because of the lack of compelling evidence (decried in myriad ways) that the writing students learn in FYC translates or transfers successfully to disciplinary writing. These arguments are frequent in the contextualist scholarship considered here.

Other scholars argue that WFs should bring only rhetorical and analytical expertise to their WAC/WID assignments (Mullin, et al; Zawacki, et al). Mullin, et al is particularly compelling in her 'centrist' (centered on writing and/or the writing center) argument that values highly the rhetorical, process, and analytical options that such a fellow can bring to other disciplines. In some ways, this is a more equal exchange of information and expertise than the contextualist perspective. Zawacki, et al. also successfully argues for the bringing of writing studies, Rhetoric and Composition, to other fields. It is a very commonsensical approach in many ways because the

basic idea of a WF is bringing another field to the disciplinary writing that students are doing.

At the core of any WF's activity is confidence that the support provided will be relevant and specific. For 'contextualists,' this means that WFs are knowledgeable not only in working with student writers but in the writing required. It's a hard sell, at least early on, to convince faculty that someone from outside, with limited disciplinary expertise, will be able to move disciplinary student writing ahead.

The 'centrist' perspective focuses on work with discourse, writing, and writers that transcends discipline. The centrist WF is knowledgeable in theory and practice that informs but works from outside of disciplinary discourse. Exporting most valued theories and practices adds a range of critical perspectives to the work of student writers (and, by extension, their instructors). Thus, for these WFs, essential is the understanding that these are not local experts but experts that can offer complementary insights and approaches to inform and improve student writing regardless of the discipline or document.

Certainly, each of these positions on disciplinary expertise is an informed, well-argued perspective for writing fellows. Every WF works in the spaces between one field and another. Not unlike so much of writing center work that is ambiguous, situational, and responsive, the UNR writing fellows have had to pay deliberate attention to the contexts for their work. This does not solve the disciplinary expertise problem, but paying attention to context and the participants does provide a range of understandings and options for working responsively and acting on informed writing center theory.

### **Context is Something**

Our experiences at UNR have suggested that there are at least three essential contextual factors to think about when making a WF commitment, alongside the relationship of the fellow to the discourse or writing center community. One factor that has made a difference in our WF placements is where the course is within the curriculum. We have found that, generally, the higher the course number, the more disciplinary expertise the fellow must have in order to be successful. This is about the WFs being respected and valued, to be sure, but it is much more about being able to work with writers in the discourses that they use. In one UNR curriculum, there is only one required class devoted to writing and communication, at the 300-level, and many students put it off until their senior years. Thinking and talking about writing has been a stretch for those students

because they have not really done so elsewhere in their major and are closing in on graduating and careers. Certainly, such a curricular arrangement can communicate a number of messages to students about how their chosen major values writing, not the least obvious of which is that it is a hoop through which they must jump but not one that is probably essential to their career goals.

Another contextual factor that has influenced the success of our fellows has been the instructor's agenda for writing. In courses where form or correctness are the primary focuses, UNR WFs have been less successful than where the emphasis was on increasing the writers' understanding of discourses or processes for writing, argument, or audiences. When accurate reproduction is the point, it is much easier for writers to see their work as either right or wrong, especially when the instructor engages it as such. WFs can be expected to correct, edit, and evaluate, which makes them much more vulnerable to critique and complaint if they don't agree with faculty. However, when writing processes, rhetorical choices, audiences, or reader experiences are emphasized, the WF can have a great deal more to offer because, along with her expertise, she is a unique audience and a specific reader. The opportunities for collaboration, rather than correction, are increased exponentially. Thus, the success and impact of a WF can depend a great deal on where the instructor is turning her and her students' attentions.

A third factor that has impacted UNR WFs has been the student writers' levels of matriculation through their majors. It makes sense that, as students matriculate through their majors, they should gain experience and expertise with disciplinary discourses. But, just as students accumulate this knowledge and experience, so too do they leave behind what seems less or not immediately relevant. Thus, WFs have an easier time, generally, when they are working with students who are newer to their majors because those students are less surefooted and, by extension, more welcoming of whatever resources are made available to them. With more advanced students, the appropriateness of the WF depends much more heavily on her participation in the disciplinary discourse. In the absence of that common ground, the writers simply have to spend too much time translating from and toward their writing for the fellow to be effective.

These factors, by themselves, are essential to understanding what the work of the fellows will actually look like. It is incumbent upon administrators to clarify as much as possible before the fellow begins, and these are good points of discussion with both

faculty and fellows. Faculty from other disciplines may be prone to seeing WFs through the lenses they know, such as lab assistant, intern, TA, or adjunct. The director's blanket confidence in her staff may encourage the fellow to think that she should be able to take on anything that comes her way. Careful discussion of contextual issues such as these can be important additions to the WF's professional development, if not her work within the disciplines. The lack of such discussion can create troubling ambiguity, conflicting expectations, and even exploitation in some cases. It seems obvious that expectations should be clarified, but clarity is doubly important for WFs because they often operate outside of the writing center, often in isolation, and their responsibilities are to at least two people who may not be on the same page.

### **Insider, Outsider, and Straddler**

In the short time that the UNR University Writing Center has been offering WFs, we have had a surprisingly wide array of experiences. Some of what I will describe may seem like rookie mistakes, and they were. However, I see great value in looking at our best and least successful fellow assignments alike. In each of these three cases, the discipline will not be mentioned specifically and a pseudonym will be used for the fellow. I will give a brief description of the fellow (insider, outsider, or straddler) and discuss factors influencing the WF-ship at hand (course level, instructor agenda, and student level). In each case, comparative affordances and limitations will be discussed toward a broad evaluation of the fellow assignment.

### **The Insider**

Our first "insider" WF came to us well recommended by his STEM professor. He had worked closely with the faculty member to whose class he would be assigned. He was a new graduate student in the discipline and a successful one, so he had also completed the capstone course he would be supporting only the semester prior. In fact, his experience was essential to his ability to meet capstone students where they were. His having completed his undergraduate degree stood him in good stead with the capstone students; it gave him credibility based on his knowledge of the field, knowledge of the curriculum, and knowledge of that specific professor's emphases for writing. The professor was calling for a somewhat unique emphasis on narrative flow in project proposals and product development reports, but this was familiar to Randy.<sup>1</sup> The students were a

step behind him in terms of matriculation, and he already understood what seemed to the students a strange way to think about writing in that discipline, so they respected Randy and his expertise.

Because Randy had never worked outside of his home department, he struggled with the structure and requirements of the WFs program, which was run from the University Writing Center. We asked him to participate in ongoing training, report regularly on his work, and complete a biweekly timesheet (se he could be paid). Continuing and escalating points of tension developed around my expectations. Eventually, I called him into my office to discuss the issues, where he told me that the training I provided was a waste of his time. He had worked enough with the professor to know what he wanted and how to tell students to do that work. He felt as though I doubted his integrity and competency because I had him report his hours. By midterm, he had disappeared almost entirely and eventually resigned.

It was easy, at first, to blame him for what seemed like arrogance, as much as it was easy for him to point to my shortcomings in his generous and thorough letter of resignation. However, in retrospect, there was a larger explanation that has become much more satisfying and workable. The cultures of the writing center and that department were dramatically different. In the former, collaboration was valued and, in the latter, independence; double-loop problem-solving was usual in the writing center and single-loop in the department;<sup>2</sup> linguistic interpretation was a priority in the writing center and mathematic certainty in the department. One potential explanation is that Randy was so immersed in the culture of his major and department that what was necessary for the writing center was dissonant, to the point of his feeling as though he was being unduly scrutinized and criticized. In short, Randy may have been too much of an insider to be a WF for us outsiders. He was great for the professor and we are not sure how helpful he was for the students, but his relationship with the writing center never really got off the ground.

### **The Outsider**

Amanda had already completed an undergraduate degree in another field when she was selected as a WF for a natural sciences professional studies course. It was a special topics course at the 400-level, focused specifically on writing, and the professor was trying to address ongoing concerns about what she and others of her colleagues saw as too frequently very poor writing among their students. Amanda was new to that particular field, and her connection to the writing

center was new as well. We provided her with ongoing training, hours in the writing center, and opportunities to develop her practice as both a Writing Fellow and a Writing Consultant in the center.

The professor wanted to focus her attentions on what she saw as the most essential issues related to writing, which tended to be mechanical issues or lower/later-order concerns. Amanda was fine with this and, truthfully, a bit relieved because the topics that she would be dealing with seemed much more concrete than others. Thus, she set about developing workshops for the class, resources and support materials that she could use with students in individual or small group consultations. Her work with the students was very well received and her tutoring hours were always full.

Meanwhile, because many of the students in the course were seniors, there was growing negativity toward the course. Students were telling Amanda that the course goals were too rudimentary. Their frustration with the course and professor could not be ignored, and Amanda felt as though she had to discuss them with the professor. The professor was open to hearing the students' concerns but, because students continued to make the same mistakes, was unwilling to change her focus or approach. If Amanda had been more deeply involved in the discipline or discourse, she could probably have saved herself a lot of stress by offering to work with students on other things. Those other options could have helped to reduce the students' frustrations as well. The course has not been offered again, so no one seemed to be very happy with the results. However, had Amanda been a bit less of an outsider, she might have been able to provide more feedback and options for the faculty member and the students as well.

### The Straddler

Melanie had been asking for an opportunity to do WF work in her major, checking in with me periodically to see if any new options had presented themselves since her last check-in. She wanted to be sure that I didn't forget her, which was unlikely anyway. When an opportunity to be a WF arose, she was eager to get started. Her work as a WF has been, to date, by far the most successful (based on both student satisfaction with the support and the professor's satisfaction with the writing). She had worked in the writing center for some time and was well-versed in our theories and practices. What made her a particularly successful WF was that she was also a successful major in that field. She was tested by the all-male students with whom she worked, to be sure,

but she knew exactly how to push back and when to do so. She had (at least then) an unusual combination of expertise in the writing side and the discipline side as well.

Curiously, Melanie was a year behind the students with whom she worked and that never seemed to matter to them. The instructor was focused on flow within the documents his students were preparing and, because Melanie was seen as having a foot in both worlds, the students seemed to trust that she would not lead them into 'fluffy' writing but, rather, enable them to meet their professor's expectations from a fully-informed and disciplinarily-relevant perspective.

Thus far, Melanie is the only WF with whom we were not forced to choose between disciplinary knowledge and writing-focused knowledge. Melanie was by far the most successful of our 15 WFs thus far, in terms of positive feedback and number of students impacted. It is not yet clear how often scholars writing about WFs have been able to see/explore a circumstance such as this nor how often we will be able to provide this kind of WF here at UNR. Certainly, to date, though, this seems like the most productive solution, even if it is based on an "n" of only one.

### Looking Forward

Certainly, there are any number of other potentially contributing factors involved in WF success and failures. We have had some success with our choosing WFs and with cooperating faculty doing so. Timing is an issue, as well, including but not limited to the sense of urgency and timing of WF appointments. More specifically, our budget is proposed/approved in early April and most faculty don't ask for WFs until July, at the earliest. Another key factor could be what different faculty and majors mean when they discuss teaching writing; sometimes, that has meant assigning it, other times laying out sections of a document and point values attached. We have asked that all WFs be assigned to courses with rigorous writing requirements (per our Core Curriculum guidelines), and that has meant a range of things, too. Sometimes rigorous has meant that more than three errors on the first page earns an F. Sometimes rigorous has been defined by how many weekends a faculty member spends grading papers. Sometimes rigor has been about page length or grade value, too. And these are some of the more obvious factors that could contribute to the success of a WF. There is clearly room for clarification, if not a need.

One constant in UNR's deployment of WFs has been the vigor and seriousness with which the WFs

have approached their duties. Faculty, no matter how satisfied they were with their students' writing, have consistently commented positively on the WFs' flexibility, resourcefulness, and dedication. These qualities have certainly generated a strong sense of stability even when each WF assignment is different in some significant ways. Recognizing that fact, considering the theories chosen to inform WF practice, and thinking carefully about context and the people within them can only help to increase our understandings of this work and what makes it work. Future research should certainly consider these factors, and it might also consider others:

- What can best support the developing agency and self-efficacy of WFs?
- How can WF research lead to new insights about how writing centers support writing in the disciplines?
- What factors translate easily from Writing Consultants to Writing Fellows, and vice versa?
- How might a centrist or contextualist perspective interact with writing center theory?

Certainly, Writing Fellows can seem like a next step forward for writing centers, as those centers become even more overtly activated resources for their campuses. Writing Fellows, as representatives of writing centers, offer a number of new options for both theorizing and practicing writing center work.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> All names included are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> Chris Argyris makes this differentiation. Single-loop problem-solving includes a problem and a solution. Double-loop problem-solving includes asking why the problem occurred.

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