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The Secondary School Writing Center: A Place to Build Confident, Competent Writers

Fall 2004 / Focus

by Pamela B. Childers, Dawn Fels, and Jeanette Jordan

Three secondary school writing center veterans demonstrate how these centers benefit student writers, tutors, and the school as a whole.



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The three of us led an International Writing Centers Association-sponsored all-day workshop on secondary school writing centers at the NCTE Convention. Writing centers at all levels follow the theoretical background of Bruffee, Murray, Elbow, and North, to name a few. They are not remedial facilities, as some schools would like them to be, or ESL facilities to improve basic writing in English. No, a secondary school writing center is primarily a place where we work with all students, regardless of their innate talent, to build their confidence and competency as writers. Whether we are talking about students who need to fine-tune excellent papers or students who need to discover what they really want to say, a writing center can be a safe harbor within the sometimes stormy seas of the school day. We can think of no better way to reform writing instruction.

We teach and direct writing centers at different kinds of schools, but we all started out as English teachers and have taught in public schools in New Jersey, Missouri, and Illinois. One of us currently teaches in an independent college preparatory school for boys in Tennessee. What we have discovered is that as different as our schools might be, all secondary schools have teachers who can learn to direct a writing center within the school because they have had training in teaching writing process and in how to respond to student writing. Readings and participation in IWCA-sponsored workshops, as well as national and regional writing center conferences, will only help these trained professionals to create a clear vision of how to make writing centers function in their own institutions. However, by creating such a low-risk environment (Farrell) with its goal to make students better writers and thinkers beyond the paper they are working on (North), good English teachers or even teachers of other subjects will gain as much as the students they work with in the writing center. Consider the importance of gaining confidence as one becomes a better writer. Consider how peer consultants improve their own writing by asking questions of peers and teachers. Consider the opportunity to improve reading skills while improving writing skills. Consider how a writing center can improve any teacher's own writing and teaching by developing a better understanding of the connection between students' thinking and writing processes. These are just a few advantages of a secondary school writing center.

All three of us are English teachers who chose to start or develop writing centers. Jeanette and Dawn both became involved in university writing centers in graduate school, while Pam earned a second graduate degree that focused on the teaching of writing. We all believe our strong foundations in responding to student writing and studying writing center theory and pedagogy enable us to help not only our students but also other teachers' students through our work in the writing center. If you asked each of us to describe the importance of writing centers to our profession and lives as English teachers, we would all say that the writing center work is a calling that inspires us to be better classroom teachers as well.

How Writing Centers Help Students Who Use Them

"The writing center allows every type of writer to come in and get the help they need to be successful" (Senior).

"The Write Place gives students somewhere to go to get a second opinion" (Junior).

At Glenbrook North High School, McCallie School, and University City High School, college preparatory, ESL, and at-risk students all find someone in the writing center to work with them to improve their writing, thinking, and learning. Here are a few ways that writing centers help students:

- **Writing centers create opportunities for individualized writing conferences.** The class loads that English teachers carry are prohibitive to our doing what we know is best for writers: sitting down with each and every student and discussing his or her work on a regular basis. What writing teachers WANT to do but don't have TIME to do is exactly what the writing center is all about. Students hang out in a comfortable setting and chat about their ideas and their writing. These conferences can also take place during class time. If just two writing center staff members assist a teacher with conferences in a fifty-minute class, they can conduct individual six-minute conferences with all 25 students in the class. Without the assistants, the teacher could talk with each student for a maximum of two minutes. Needless to say, six-minute conference is a lot more productive than a two-minute one.
- **Writing centers help reinforce writing as a process.** When students visit the writing center before submitting their projects, they are forced to slow down and take their work through an extra draft. When students re-visit the papers they wrote the previous day, they almost always spot many of their own mistakes. Without the trip to the writing center, they would have turned in the weak draft. Sometimes students come at the last minute for a quick fix, but soon discover that quick fixes aren't what we do. Next time they appear earlier, with an understanding that working on drafts, revising, and editing are all part of the writing process.
- **Writing improves when writers focus on the writing — not on the grade.** In "Embracing Contraries in the Teaching Process," Peter Elbow addresses the conflicts inherent in the role of a teacher and emphasizes the power of a collaborative relationship. When the teacher (or in the case of a writing center, a peer consultant) is seen "wholly [as] an ally, students are more willing to take risks, connect the self to the material, and experiment. Here is the source not just of learning but also of genuine development and growth" (221). Since writing center staff members don't assign a grade, the writer is free to focus on the words on the page without worrying about the reader's judgment. The writer has control over what happens with the revision and can ignore the reader's suggestions without fear of making the reader mad or not giving her "what she's looking for."
- **Writing centers support what the classroom teacher does.** Writing centers do not replace writing instruction in the classroom. We reinforce what goes on in the classroom, sometimes giving mini-lessons to students who have specific concerns with their writing, to assist teachers' writing instruction.
- **Writing centers create an environment where writers can bounce their ideas off others, questions can lead to new ideas, writing for**

self or publication can blossom, and resources on writing abound.

Students interested in creative writing or publication opportunities can find resources in the writing center. Some schools even offer independent study courses taught by writing center directors. These courses allow students interested in specific genres of writing to find instruction. For example, McCallie School has offered independent study courses in sports writing, authoring computer games, poetry, fiction writing, and creative nonfiction.

How Writing Centers Benefit Student Consultants

“Working in the Write Place has not only improved my writing, but my self-confidence as well” (Junior tutor).

“My experience working in the writing center helped me become more familiar with the revision process. I can ask myself a series of questions that I might ask when reading another student’s paper in the writing center. Does my introduction actually introduce the paper well? Are my thoughts well supported? Am I too repetitive?” (Senior tutor).

Writing centers may be staffed by trained volunteers, professionals, peers, or a combination of these. Some schools recruit retired educators or professionals whose careers require expertise in writing. Other schools tap into nearby colleges and universities for tutors. The peer consultants may volunteer or work as part of a course requirement. Regardless of who staffs the writing center, everyone benefits:

- **Tutors become communicators.** What do the tutors learn? How to listen. How to question. How to look objectively at their own writing. How to appreciate other people’s writing styles. How to develop their own writing styles. How to think on the fly. How to communicate effectively with others. And they learn that talking about writing and discussing ideas can actually be fun!
- **Students learn that readers other than teachers can give helpful advice.** Helpfulness as a responder is not tied to intelligence or age. We all try to ensure that our writing center staff members are not only AP and Honors students for several reasons. First, if a center is staffed by a cross-section of the school, students feel more comfortable bringing in their work. They don’t feel as if they are remedial students being helped by the smart people. It’s important to create the climate that *all writers* need others with whom to discuss their ideas and review their writing. Additionally, really talented writers sometimes have difficulty letting the author take the lead and maintain ownership. Strong writers sometimes become absorbed by how they would personally write the piece and lose sight of the fact that it isn’t their paper. Some super-talented writers are, however, great writing center staff members; the key is not the writing ability but the listening ability. In fact, some of the tutors with weaknesses in their writing samples end up being some of the strongest tutors because they truly listen to what their peers are saying, and they don’t try to fix their papers. They question and guide the authors without taking over. They also learn to question and guide themselves with their

own writing based on this experience working with the writing of others.

- **Student consultants collaborate with their peers and director on publication and presentation opportunities.** These are realworld writing experiences, whether it is advertising for the writing center, a letter to parents, a script for a promotional video, or an article about writing for the school newspaper. Through the sharing of professional articles on writing, students consider the possible articles they would like to write and new ways to present ideas on aspects of writing in a classroom or small group workshop. This experience gives students knowledge that will help them in their future careers as well.

How Writing Centers Can Positively Impact Writing Throughout the School

“My students’ writing and thinking improve when we work with the writing center” (Science teacher).

“The Writer’s Room has made me a better teacher. It has really made me focus on how to create writing assignments” (Social Studies teacher).

Although some schools have their writing centers as part of the English department, they don’t have to be. We are part of a cross-curricular, school-wide program and, therefore, work with all disciplines. Since writing is integral to learning in all areas, writing centers can have a powerful impact on teaching and learning throughout the school:

- **Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) based writing centers emphasize the importance of writing as a lifelong skill regardless of a specialty field.** At Glenbrook North High School, for instance, the writing center supports a culture that values writing throughout the school. Students receive writing advisory grades in their academic areas and teachers value writing as an integral part of their classes, using writing as a tool for learning as well as a means for measuring what students have learned. Students see that writing matters in all of their classes (Farrell-Childers, Gere, and Young). Cross-curricular staffing of the writing center is an important part of the WAC program. Teachers who are on the WAC committee, Writers’ Bloc, fulfill their extra duty assignments by working in the writing center. This shows students that teachers throughout the school value writing and that it is a skill that transfers from one discipline to another. Teachers in the writing center function just like the student tutors in that they work with students on their writing in any subject area—not just their own disciplines. In all of our schools, teachers introduce students to the writing center as ninth graders. Students in science, history and English classes get to know the value of the writing center to their writing in all subjects and feel comfortable returning on their own.
- **Through school-wide staff development initiatives, writing centers create consistency and unity.** It is important that students receive consistent messages about expectations and standards. Teachers throughout the school need to be on the same page when it comes to language used with writing since it is a skill used in every class. To help

develop this unity, teachers at University City High School are trained in the methods used in The Writer's Room, and teachers are invited to volunteer in the writing center or use the methods in their classrooms. McCallie School faculty use a standard research format (MLA) and refer to the [writing center website](#) for other helpful information. At Glenbrook North, the Writers' Bloc created a series of publications. Initially, the committee published quarterly newsletters focusing on different writing issues and highlighting how teachers within the school used writing in their classes. Over the course of several summer curriculum projects, the committee also published three faculty manuals: *Designing and Assessing Assignments*, *Writing as a Tool for Learning*, and *Research and Writing Across the Curriculum*. In relation to research writing, centers work with faculty to gain a common understanding of plagiarism, keep up-to-date with the latest MLA style guidelines, and discuss reasonable expectations for various grade levels. Discussing these issues with colleagues from other departments is a valuable experience for all involved and creates a common thread that winds through the school.

- **Writing centers serve as a resource, supporting classroom instruction.** Tutors can create special workshops and handouts to support classroom instruction. For example, writing center staff members go to history classes to discuss plagiarism and MLA style. Others work with librarians to support the research paper process in classes across disciplines. Writing center staff can also work with the college and career office, assisting seniors who are working on their college essays. Writing center staff members can help support teachers by talking through assignments with them, assisting them in their classes, and developing materials for their use.
- **Writing centers support and encourage the writing efforts of faculty and staff.** At University City High School, a group of writers from the faculty and community meet each month to share their writing. The Caldwell Writing Center at the McCallie School sponsors a student and faculty dinner and reading each year. At all of our schools, faculty members applying to graduate school or completing graduate work have stopped by for help with resumes, grant proposals and papers. In the writing center, teachers find a supportive ear and a critical eye to assist in writing about themselves or for themselves. Writing center directors offer an element of privacy and professionalism for staff members no matter the writing "assignment."

Conclusion

When Dave Eggers, writer and founder of 826 Valencia, a community-based writing center in San Francisco, spoke at the CEE luncheon at the NCTE convention, he mentioned the impact -- positive and negative -- of teacher comments on student papers. He could still picture the comments written on some of his high school and college papers by teachers who encouraged him. But what happens to those students who do not receive such encouragement? How can we honor what every student brings to the writing table and avoid disparaging comments that lead to feelings of ineptitude or fear? How do we improve writing in our schools and address curricular concerns? How do we

encourage our students to become their own first critical readers? How do we help them to see themselves as writers? We set up a writing center, throw open its doors, and invite writers in for a conversation about writing.

The three of us started writing centers in spaces that were underutilized in our schools and then proved the value and need for our centers. All one really needs to start a writing center is an idea of what that writing center will be. In *Teaching Lives*, Wendy Bishop uses Hemingway's words, likening the writing center to "a well-lighted place." Stephen North's "Idea of a Writing Center" gives all of us a great starting point as well. Both Bishop and North point to one of the most critical elements of a writing center's success: its mission. How will the writing center benefit students? Faculty? The school community? Will the writing center be a location or something more metaphysical that can "travel" around the school? What role will the writing center play in improving writing and writing instruction in the school? Should the writing center concern itself with improving the reading skills of writers?

For the three of us, Donald Murray's *A Writer Teaches Writing* has had an impact on the methodology we use. Murray's approach to conference teaching, which he cites as the best way to teach writing, takes a collaborative, non-directive, "responsive" approach. Muriel Harris asserts, "The writing teacher in a conference is like a coach working with the writer through all the 'ings' of writing-thinking, planning, drafting, revising, editing—even these occur almost simultaneously" (9). In fact, one of the things writers learn during conferences is that "the process" is not a step-by-step approach as the textbooks imply, but rather a process more akin to discovery, a recursive process that leads a writer in one direction, only to discover an intriguing new one. There is no better place for this discovery to take place than during a writing conference.

In Expecting the Unexpected, Murray writes that those "who want to improve writing must learn to commit an unnatural act: listening" (113). Listening is what we do in writing centers and how we can help teachers who have more students than they can instruct individually and little time to listen, question, and respond one-to-one. Murray describes a similar situation:

Again and again I was confronted with papers that were rhetorical and linguistic catastrophes. I not only had nothing constructive to say, I had nothing destructive to say. I couldn't understand the drafts well enough to attack them. But when I gave students a chance to explain what they had intended and what they did, and why, I always found that there was a theory or a misunderstood instruction or an inappropriate rule that caused the disaster. They knew what they were doing and why, and once they knew, they knew that they could suggest better ways of working in the future. (131)

For the three of us, that better way of working on writing has been through a writing center.

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Dawn Fels set up The Writer's Room at **University City High School** in St. Louis where she also taught English for several years. She recently joined Fontbonne University in St. Louis as a writing/communication arts specialist in the Kinkel Center for Academic Resources.

Jeanette Jordan has been the writing center coordinator at **Glenbrook North High School** in Northbrook, IL since 1991. During that time she has also served as the Secondary Representative on the International Writing Centers Association Board of Directors and frequently collaborated with other writing center coordinators for presentations at NCTE and IWCA Conferences. She passionately believes in the potential of writing centers to affect change within students and throughout schools and sees writing centers as constantly evolving.

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