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Conference and Collaboration: Using Writing Centers in High School English Composition Instruction

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by **Anthony Scimone**, *Manhattanville College School of Education*

Writing center practices in high school pedagogy



Anthony Scimone

I often ask aspiring secondary English teachers in my methods courses what they can tell me about writing instruction. They almost always identify a number of essential best practices: careful assignment guidelines that describe rationale, product, and process; clear student-friendly criteria; models students can relate to; specific feedback that is diagnostic in nature; and opportunities for revision. I then ask them to create a chronology of those practices, blocking out instructional days that correspond to those activities. Most of them are surprised to learn that all of these are either prewriting or post-first-draft strategies. When I ask them to examine the middle portion of their instructional period, they discover that the actual drafting stage is often absent of teacher intervention. Teaching while students are actually drafting—what we might call real-time instruction as opposed to pre-writing or teaching after the fact—is relatively rare and for many an awkward business that seems to defy the deliberate steps that characterize other phases of the process. And while many high school teachers rely on the individual conference as a critical aspect of process, most see this step as a post-draft activity not as something that happens simultaneously with the creation of text. What is even more remarkable is that so few refer to composition instruction that occurs while writers are drafting work in a lab equipped with computers. However, once the writing center model is introduced, opportunities for meaningful conference and collaboration increase dramatically.

English teachers who do have access to a writing center are most likely to use a whole class instructional model. Typically, they introduce assignments in a conventional classroom then move all students to a lab for the drafting stage over the following days. There are many ways to structure this. Sometimes two or three days of drafting are followed by a return to the classroom, perhaps to share drafts or allow the instructor to focus on a particular issue; the whole class then returns to the lab for more drafting. Some teachers prefer to collect partially completed drafts to provide a quick read midway through the assignment, make whatever course corrections are necessary and then return to the writing center for the final stages. Others like to see the majority of the assignment done in the center, and once they are satisfied that students are on the right track, allow for the assignment to be completed independently.

I ask them to imagine the uselessness of watching players take layups on a basketball court, having them return to the classroom, and telling them what adjustments should be made on the following day when they return to the court. And yet, this is precisely what we do with writing instruction when we read and comment on drafts.

The essential aspect of high school writing center instruction, however, is the opportunity for immediate intervention at that moment when students writers are most in need, and a teacher's active role in guiding students throughout this phase is critical. Under these circumstances, real-time instruction takes many forms: reading over an introduction, prompting for a more apt example, or helping to devise a strategy for a more effective argument. In some schools, an additional English teacher, preferably a writing center specialist, may be present; this, of course, improves the chances that all students will have an individual conference while examining an emerging text. Ideally, the writing center consultant becomes a collaborator with the primary classroom teacher. A professional discussion about the purpose of the assignment, criteria or rubrics used, and individual students who may require a differentiated strategy is indispensable. Students who established a positive working relationship with the consultant are also more likely to seek her out during free periods or return on their own initiative to work on non-English class assignments.

There can be no doubt that writing instruction has received increased attention in the past twenty years, and secondary English teachers are more likely than ever before to see writing instruction on an equal par with the teaching of literature. Most of them, however, continue to envision writing as something that is done at home. When it is done in class, it is usually as a "rough copy" paper and pencil task that is periodically monitored, and then redrafted at home on a computer. However, this model limits the possibilities for conferring over an emerging text or having students work in collaboration.

For classroom teachers who have access to a writing center, the nature of instructional intervention changes. The most obvious difference with real-time writing instruction is the sense of immediacy. Bonnie Sunstein refers to this as a liminal state of in-betweenness where we "enter a tangled tension between our students, their texts, their readers, ourselves, our texts, and our readings of their texts" (14). Once a student's writing is visible on a computer screen, it becomes subject to a variety of real-time exchanges that involve listening, speaking, correction, affirmation, revision and much more. That intervention can come in the form of the sublime — more meaningful one-to-one discussions

of how to be rhetorically effective — or the ridiculous -- reminding students that they can't easily quote the text for support if it's at the bottom of their backpack.

High school writing centers also create a very different instructional dynamic, putting the teacher in motion around the room with the vantage point of being able to look at screens for a few minutes at a time or to sit next to a student and read text together. Under these circumstances the clichéd and little-followed advice to read your text aloud becomes a reality. None of this comes automatically, of course, but with repeated visits to the lab and a consistent protocol of reviewing on-screen work, students and teachers quickly become accustomed to a facilitator model and a method of assessment occurring simultaneously with instruction.

Some teachers balk at this, worrying that reading over a student's shoulder or asking to sit alongside and read what has just been written creates an uncomfortable intrusion that inhibits more than it helps. Indeed if students haven't experienced this method of conferencing, they may initially be reluctant. Preparing them for what to expect is an important first step. I ask students to tell me what a diving coach does when observing divers or a baseball coach watching participants in a batting cage. These are familiar experiences, and everyone accepts that the advice and feedback must be immediate to be useful. I ask them to imagine the uselessness of watching players take layups on a basketball court, having them return to the classroom, and telling them what adjustments should be made on the following day when they return to the court. And yet, this is precisely what we do with writing instruction when we read and comment on drafts. With high school students, suggestions for revision may or may not be understood and may or may not be executed when one or more days lapse. Writing center conferences close the time gap and allow for immediate action on the student's part and the opportunity for an equally immediate informal assessment by the teacher.

In the process of talking ideas through, students and teachers alike become engaged in a thought process that is more developed than the fleeting effect of classroom discourse.

The greatest benefit of the writing center approach is the way in which it transforms the substance of student-teacher conferences. Longer, more frequent, and more meaningful exchanges occur when the ideas influenced by those conferences can be acted on instantaneously. Concepts only touched upon in class discussions or those that take place over a paper draft seldom have the same impact or precision when it comes to clarity of expression, attention to diction, and precision of meaning. In the process of talking ideas through, students and teachers alike become engaged in a thought process that is more developed than the fleeting effect of classroom discourse. Such conferences are also less likely to deteriorate into the excessive "teacher talk" that characterizes much of the dialogic space of a classroom as discourse gives way to teacher review (Anagnostopoulos, Smith, & Nystrand 6). The imminent and expected result of the student's writing mitigates this outcome. Moreover, because the conference is personalized and linked to text creation, conceptualization and language are also more closely linked.

Early in my career as a writing center instructor, I found that a nimble office chair with well-oiled castors was indispensable. In effect I was engaging in a series of rapid consultations with individual members of an entire class. Anyone

entering the room would be likely to see me in motion moving from one monitor to another and perhaps making as many as fifteen or twenty checks. The range and variety of these conferences is one of the delightful aspects of this kind of teaching. Secondary English teachers often feel guilty about what they don't do with respect to discreet language skills such as grammar, usage and punctuation. They understand the limited value of correction if a student is unable to conceptualize a recommendation (Dornan, Rosen & Wilson 25). Caught between a knowledge that such instruction is seldom useful unless contextualized and the paucity of models that demonstrate the right way to do it, they are likely to fall back on classroom worksheets or despair altogether. Over time, writing center instruction addresses this issue in a way that is both genuine and effective. I have had more opportunities to demonstrate parallel construction or lack of pronoun agreement during those quick screen checks than in a lifetime of grammar lessons. Even more satisfying is the fact that my context is the individual student's own writing. In this conference-intensive lab environment grammatical questions arise less as matters of correctness than as expressions of style and distinctive voice (House 98).

Finally, high school writing centers offer unparalleled opportunities for collaboration. One useful practice is to ask a student who is stuck to take a walk around the room in order to read the work of a willing peer. Part of my classroom ethos has always been that we can benefit from hearing and reading each other's work. Far more damage is done by cultivating an environment of proprietary secrecy, and I am pleased when students go so far as to make suggestions to each other to check out a particular website or article. I have also known the extraordinary pleasure of watching two students who have read each other's work disagree over an interpretation or the relevance of some evidence in support of a position. This kind of collaboration results in clearer thinking and more conscious writing because it provides an immediate dialogic space (Kitsis 32). It is also an example of scholarship in its truest form.

When it comes to writing instruction, good high school teachers recognize how much depends on a classroom culture that is deliberately and gradually defined. Writing classrooms are effective, to the degree that they are immediate and dynamic, providing not only instructional guidance but real-time audiences. Writing centers, of course, are essential to this kind of teaching and learning. The Facebook generation, accustomed to sharing in a social context can also be receptive to a more academic notion of sharing, but none of this happens without teacher intervention.

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Dr. Anthony Scimone is an assistant professor at **Manhattanville College** in Purchase, New York where he teaches English education courses in methodology and literature. Prior to teaching at Manhattanville, he was a K-12 Director of English Language Arts for a public school system on Long Island. He holds a PhD in 19th century British literature from **New York University**.

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