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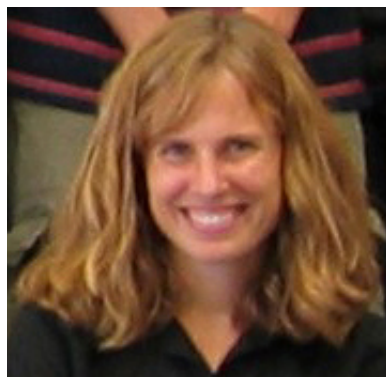
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Between the Lines: Writing Center Classes in Pedagogical Perspective

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Practical suggestions for meeting the challenges of writing center classes



Melissa Tedrowe

The CFP for this spring 2007 issue of *Praxis* invites us to consider the writing center and the classroom as separate entities with complementary, but ultimately distinct, practices, methods, and goals. This perspective is by no means new. When the first writing labs emerged in the 1940s, they imagined themselves as a counterpoint to the traditional classroom; indeed, many initial explorations of what writing centers could become began with an assertion of what they were not. [1] From those earliest years until now, however, a third entity has existed alongside these seemingly dichotomous forms. The writing center class (or “workshop,” as it’s sometimes called) does represent an alternative to the traditional classroom. [2] It typically meets a handful of times at most; students earn neither credits nor grades for attending, and they sign up voluntarily. At the same time, the material and pedagogical conditions of the writing center class—a group of students, an “expert” instructor, handouts, desks, a chalkboard—can appear quite conventional. In short, by combining elements of the traditional classroom and the writing center, the writing center class is a hybrid form. Those who want to offer this kind of instruction—and there are many reasons to do so—must carefully negotiate that hybridity if they want to succeed.

The Good

The size of the writing center in which I currently teach makes it possible for us to offer more than 60 sections of 30 different classes each semester. Because my first writing center was much smaller, we could offer only two or three. From working in very different contexts like these, I came to believe that classes benefit a writing center in a number of unique ways. First and foremost,

they send powerful messages about whom a writing center serves. It's one thing to proclaim "we exist for everyone," but it's another to circulate a catalogue with offerings for graduate students writing research proposals, upper-level undergraduates working on application essays, faculty designing assignments, and first-year, returning, or transfer students studying effective argumentation. At **The Writing Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison**, we create our lineup for such a deliberately wide audience. A smaller writing center could reap the same publicity benefits by offering only a couple classes each term, however. Anyone thinking that writing center's services were one-dimensional or remedial would be encouraged to think again.

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Classes are an exceptionally effective recruitment tool for writing centers not only because they can appeal to such a diverse student population, but also, oddly enough, because they are so closely related to the traditional class. Students unfamiliar with or intimidated by the idea of one-to-one instruction find in a writing center workshop something they recognize. Many say that they first came to the writing center to take a class, and, valuing what they learned there, chose to follow up with an individual appointment (something we encourage at the end of all our classes). In short, the first step in gaining students' loyalty and trust often takes place in the classes we teach.

A different kind of benefit that classes offer is staff development. Instructors who lead these short workshops expand or refine what they know, becoming more flexible and responsive in their one-to-one sessions. (Never am I sharper on medical school applications than right after I teach a class to aspiring physicians!) These classes also help writing center staff gauge the assignments, questions, and issues they are likely to see "coming soon" in individual appointments.

The Challenges

While I'm a big fan of writing center classes, for the reasons outlined above, I also have found them incredibly frustrating; it has taken me a long time to learn to do them well. (When I asked colleagues for a word that described their experience teaching these classes, responses included "unpredictable," "overwhelming," "unfamiliar," and "daunting.") We agreed that the elements of disparate instruction that these classes fuse—those of the writing center and the traditional course—often seem to clash with one another.

Many of the problems exist at the gateway. We publicize our classes with what we think are clear titles and descriptions, and still the "wrong" students come—what they want to learn isn't what we have prepared to teach. (This happens less frequently when students sign up for semester-long courses.) Or few students come, prompting us to wonder if the time we put into the design, preparation, and publicity of that class could have been spent in better ways. (In a semester long class, attendance is compulsory.) Yet the most common and vexing challenge, in my experience, is that the students who do show up arrive with expectations that are impossible to reconcile. In the very first writing center class I taught, "Literary Analysis: No Problem!," my forty-plus students included a first-year undergrad just learning to write a college-level literature paper, a senior planning an honors thesis on Proust, a visiting professor from the comparative literature department wanting to brush up on

MLA mechanics, and a junior economics major hoping to publish his creative nonfiction in *Harper's*. Again, this kind of heterogeneity is far less likely in longer credit-based course.

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Then there's what happens in the class itself. Unlike semester-long courses, in a sense writing center workshops never move past opening day: meeting just once or twice, instructor and participants don't get the chance to establish rapport or work out effective dynamics. The possibility for collaboration—the linchpin of good writing center instruction, as we all know—is limited. Indeed, my early attempts at de-centering these classes only frustrated my students, who said that in a class of ninety minutes, they didn't want to “waste time” listening to their peers. It's not uncommon for students to stare at me silently, grab the handouts, and scoot (or they email to say that they want the handouts without attending the class). In this way, writing center classes can leave me feeling like I'm little more than a storehouse, as Andrea Lunsford imagines it in “Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of a Writing Center.” Because time *is* so limited, the instruction I offer can feel incredibly superficial—at least to me. I want to do a good job with these classes, but the evaluations that students complete rarely offer concrete suggestions. If they do, what works one time won't the next.

Suggestions

Through trial, error, and a good deal of talk, my colleagues and I have found that a number specific strategies help maximize the benefits and minimize the difficulties associated with this instructional medium. I offer some of these below.

- **Offer a range of classes.** By this I mean not only different topics that can appeal to different writers, but also different formats. While most of our workshops introduce a particular set of skills, concepts, or principles, we also offer draft workshops. In these students share a rhetorical task; the price of admission is a work in progress, and participants respond to each other's work. Other formats include review or “brush up” sessions, conversations about writing, and introductions to the writing center itself.
- **Personalize your publicity.** We display a guide to our upcoming classes at every tutoring station and encourage instructors to make individualized recommendations. A casual, “You should check out our class on essay exams, it might help you with that midterm you mentioned,” goes a long way. This kind of publicity also increases the likelihood that students will end up in a class that's appropriate for them.
- **Remind students that they've registered.** Along with an automated reminder that goes out to students a few days before a class, our instructors often send a personal notice. This includes a preview of what will be covered, an invitation to ask questions, and an enthusiastic *Hope to see you there!*
- **Manage expectations up front.** In class titles and descriptions, make sure that the intended audience is as unambiguous as possible. Then at the start of class, tell students explicitly what will be covered and who the primary audience is. Consider adding something along the lines of, “If this workshop seems not quite right for you, please don't feel obliged

to stay. Your time is precious and I don't want to waste it." When I say this, most students stay right in their chairs, but I feel better knowing I've been direct about our plans.

- **Stay a little more centered.** De-centering a class works best when one has the luxury of a full semester. Try shortcuts in your writing center classes. In place of individual introductions, ask for a show of hands: how many sophomores? Sociology majors? Have students chat with a neighbor rather than moving into groups. Perhaps most importantly, know that it's okay to be more directive than you are in either your writing center or semester-long teaching.
- **Be generous with materials.** If one aspect of these classes predicts student satisfaction, this is it. In their evaluations, students repeatedly tell us that they like to walk away with information-dense handouts and samples. For those who can't attend a particular class, we often make the materials available through other means—most often, in packets to be picked up at the writing center or on the web. The one caveat I would offer is that samples really depend on explanatory context, a little guidance that lets a student know what to emulate, what to avoid, and what choices are available. Although it takes extra time, I schedule a face-to-face appointment with any student who wants the materials from a class in which I distribute samples.
- **Make evaluations short and to the point.** To get as much feedback as we can from students, who often need to leave right after class finishes, our evaluation forms ask just a few open-ended questions. *How was this class useful to you? What suggestions do you have?* We also offer students multiple ways of returning their forms and, occasionally, incentive for completing them.
- **Expect the unexpected.** Because I never know who will turn up in my writing center classes, I have learned to plant myself in the here and now: *the students I thought would attend aren't here, what can I do with the ones in front of me?* My writing center training has taught me to see moments like these as opportunities for collaboration, which I take advantage of by inviting students to draw on each other's diverse expertise, even with the limited time we have available to us. At the same time, my experience in the traditional classroom has made me unafraid of setting an agenda that I deem best for the group. I know that I may not meet the needs of everyone, but I hope that some—maybe even most—will find something in my writing center class that they can use, and that makes them want to return.

Parting Thoughts

My colleagues who described writing center classes as "demanding" and "unfamiliar" also admit that they can be enriching, eye-opening, spontaneous, and fun. The trick, it seems, lies in accepting their complexity and then experimenting with what works. Writing center classes can be a pastiche: they invite us to draw from the best of writing center and traditional pedagogies to create something wholly new. In this way, these classes prompt students and instructors alike to expand our ideas not simply about what we learn but how we can best learn it.

Notes

[1] In the 1940s the writing "lab" began to dislodge itself from its physical and conceptual moorings in the traditional classroom. From the outset, most agreed that this new entity would be "what the classroom is often not—natural, realistic, and friendly" (qtd. in Carino 19). The writing lab tutor became envisioned as someone who would provide the personalized, supportive instruction that the classroom teacher, poised over grade book with red pen, could not.

[2] For an extended discussion, see Healy.

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