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## Writing Centers As Training Wheels: What Message Are We Sending Our Students?

Fall 2005 / Columns

by *Melissa Nicolas*

**Should writing centers employ novice graduate students as consultants? A writing center director questions the practice.**



Melissa Nicolas and son, Drew

Over twenty years ago, Stephen North began his famous essay, "The Idea of a Writing Center," by admitting that

This is an essay that began out of frustration [. . .]. The source of my frustration? Ignorance: the members of my professions, my colleagues, people I might see at MLA or CCCC or read in the pages of College English do not understand what I do. They do not understand what does happen, what can happen, in a writing center. (433)

Like North, I began this essay out of frustration, but my frustration is with my writing center colleagues. I have spent a good deal of my (albeit brief) academic career thinking about and researching the marginalization of writing centers, and I am tired of fighting the good fight for respect and recognition in composition studies, English departments, and the institution at large when writing centers sabotage themselves everyday by continuing practices that feed into our perpetual marginalization. I am tired of running up against practices that directly counter attempts I and others make to take writing centers seriously. In particular, I am concerned with the common practice of using "forced" labor in the writing center, especially when this involves using the writing center as "training wheels" for new graduate students until they are ready to ride solo in their own classrooms.

At my current institution, this training wheels model was put in place to satisfy a Board of Regents mandate that no one can teach a course until she or he has 18 credit hours of graduate course work. While I agree with this mandate because I think we do a grave disservice to our undergraduate and graduate students by having too many untrained and under-prepared TAs heading classrooms, I strongly disagree that the writing center should be used as a way-station until our students have the requisite hours of coursework.

**Writing centers sabotage themselves everyday by continuing practices that feed into our perpetual marginalization.**

This writing-center-as-training-wheels model is problematic for several reasons. First, as writing center scholars take great pains to point out (for example, see Harris) writing centers are significantly different from the classroom; to begin with, tutors do not assign grades, so the power dynamic between a tutor and client, before they even meet each other, is fundamentally and dramatically different from the power dynamic between a teacher and a student. We tutors know this. This is one of the primary benefits of the writing center that we are quick to point out to whomever we need to justify our existence.

Second, the writing-center-as-training-wheels model suggests that learning how to negotiate a relationship with a client—a relationship that very likely will have a life-span of 30 to 60 minutes—is good practice for the teacher-student dynamic that typically lasts for, at a minimum, at least 30 hours. As Muriel Harris explains in “Talking in the Middle: Why Writers Need Writing Tutors,” these relationships are not analogous in any significant way; one is not necessarily easier than the other—indeed both present their own special sets of challenges—and being successful at one has little bearing on the outcome of the other. These differences are not of degrees but of nature: tutoring and teaching are apples and oranges; tutors do not have to evaluate student writing in the same way as teachers who must ultimately assign grades. One of the very real advantages for a writer who uses the writing center is that he or she gets to experience a non-teacher relationship with a knowledgeable writer who is invested in his or her writing.

In many ways, the writing center-as-training-wheels model is unfair to both writing center clients and the future teachers in question. As we know from our practice, writing center clients often approach the writing center with trepidation. As John Trimbur reminds us, it can be frightening to think about sharing your writing with a stranger, especially someone who has been marked by the very virtue of their role as “tutor,” as an expert on writing, even if that tutor is supposed to be a peer. This is a potentially troubling combination of novices since clients may be seeking some sort of assurance about what they are trying to do in their writing, yet the tutor in this writing center-as-training-wheels-model is often only a few years removed educationally from the client. Frequently, these same tutors are more than likely working in the writing center because they are studying literature, but the writing center is the only place the department can put them because they have not yet taken enough credit hours to run a classroom. In sum, a tutor who has never taught and maybe has only read a smattering of writing center theory is most likely not prepared to offer the kind of reassurance timid and skeptical clients may need about their writing. In this case, clients are robbed of one of the most fundamental benefits of the writing center experience: the chance to talk with someone who is knowledgeable about how writing works.

## **Many beginning graduate students in English are coming to school to study literature, not to teach and tutor writing.**

This scenario, I think, paints a not-so-rosy picture for the tutors, too. I've been doing this work for awhile now, and I still can't see the connection between coming to graduate school wanting to read and criticize literature and the work many graduate students in English are asked to do in the writing center; so I'm sure that the connection for many of the tutors is, at-best, fuzzy. Of course, I'm dancing around a larger can of worms here, which is the insidious problem of the structure and staffing of first-year writing programs on an institutional level, but that is a discussion that needs to be continued on another day. My immediate concern is that the writing center sends a very confusing message to our graduate students, the future leaders of English departments, when we use it as training-wheels. The message seems to be something like this: While there are, of course, students who come to school specifically to study rhetoric and composition at the graduate level, by and large, many, many beginning graduate students in departments of English don't even know what "rhetoric and composition studies" is. In other words, many beginning graduate students in English are coming to school to study literature, not to teach and tutor writing. However, their first experience with "teaching" is being put into a writing center and told to help writers improve their writing.

I know from talking with some of these graduate students that the message they get from this set-up is that tutoring must be easy and not necessarily all that important. After all, their thinking goes, they have no particular training, expertise, or even interest in the matter, and, yet, they are given that job to do. In addition, since graduate students in this model must tutor in the writing center before they enter the classroom, the writing center is positioned as a place for novices, the not-ready-for-the-classroom place, not necessarily a place for people with skills and training. The writing center-as-training-wheels-model has not really moved us any farther away from what Peter Carino describes as early writing centers' function as spaces of remediation for both students and teachers. Indeed, in this model, the writing center is simply a place for graduate students to bide their time until they are "released" and allowed to enter the classroom.

This environment is unhealthy for all parties involved. If graduate students' first experience of the writing center is this one of forced labor, how can we expect them to become professors and departmental administrators who are advocates for the writing center as a place for informed, professional, important work? And, how can we get current administrators to see the writing center as a place that promotes writing and learning if one of the main functions of the center is to provide a place for graduate students to hang out when they need to pay their dues in the form of putting in hours?

My answer to these questions is that I don't think we can. If we really want to make the writing center less marginal, we writing center professionals must stop allowing our center to be this kind of way station. Writing center positions, whether for undergraduate peer tutors, graduate students, instructors, faculty, or professionals, need to be seen as positions of distinction. The writing center should be a place people compete to get into, not try desperately to work their way out of.

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