Getting Back to Basics

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Bridging the classroom and writing center using *A Writer's Reference*

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One of the challenges of working with students across a college campus is achieving consistency with instruction. Student writers learn varied methods for revision and receive different (and often ineffective) kinds of feedback on their writing. When peer tutors work with these writers, they often have to start with the basics and teach them how to edit and revise. They have to show them what tools exist to help them become independent writers. One of the ways that tutors bridge the gap between what students learn in the classroom and what they learn in the writing center is through their use of a writing handbook.

At Randolph-Macon College, in Ashland, Virginia, we are fortunate to be able to build on a fairly consistent freshman experience: all freshmen, regardless of ability, are required to take a freshman composition course, ENGL 185. Professors are given a basic structure with some required books and assignments. Beyond that, they are able to choose the subjects that their students read, discuss, and write about. This makes for a flexible class that gives professors plenty of autonomy while assuring that all students will receive instruction in certain basic skills. These include how to write certain types of academic papers–summary, critique, synthesis, argumentative–and how to revise, give peer feedback, and use reference materials in editing.

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In ENGL 185, professors give students feedback using Diana Hacker's *A Writer's Reference*. So first year students learn the value of using a reference book to find solutions to their writing problems. Yet for many, the skills they are taught in ENGL 185 are a mere introduction, something to be forgotten when the semester ends. Some do not see revision as an ongoing skill that writers practice. They do not see themselves as writers or as life-long learners. We know, of course, that the skills and habits we show our students need ongoing reinforcement, but that is a difficult task to achieve from one class to the next.

One way to reinforce what they have learned is to have widespread use of the same reference guide. I am working to help the college build consistent and regular use of Hacker's *A Writer's Reference* across campus and class levels. Since it's been a required reference book for all ENGL 185 classes for the last two years, all freshmen and sophomores (and many upperclassmen) own copies. I teach the tutors at the **Writing Center** how to use the book in their tutoring sessions. We keep a copy of Hacker on each table where tutors and writers have their sessions and have additional copies on our reference bookshelves.

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As tutors work with student writers on grammar, style, punctuation, or methods of citation, they turn to Hacker. In doing so, they model for the students how they can edit their own work using a resource they already own and are familiar with from their freshman composition class. As one of our tutors, Hannah Tisson, said, "I actually use Hacker for each of my papers, so it makes sense that I recommend that other writers use a writing reference guide when they compose their own papers. I refer to Hacker in literally every tutoring session."

Peer tutors have added credibility with their peers when using Hacker. It's one thing to be told to use a resource by a professor, and a completely different experience to see a peer choose to use one. When students observe their more experienced and successful peers looking up answers in a reference book, they begin to think of Hacker as useful rather than merely required.

Why does it matter whether students ever learn to use a guide? One of the greatest challenges in helping students become better writers is convincing them of the need for revision. The first step in doing so is to give them repeated opportunities to produce multiple drafts and see for themselves how their writing changes. But writers also need to know where to turn when they don't have someone to help them with revision. They need a dependable, familiar reference guide which they can easily use with confidence. Since students are notorious for avoiding textual resources, it is only through repeated and varied exposure that they will acquire that familiarity and confidence.

More experienced writers appreciate the value of reference materials and notice their absence in a tutoring session. Writing Center Director Kirsten Komara notes in her research that less experienced tutors sometimes avoid using these materials in their sessions, and that this leads writers to feel that "they would never 'get the technical stuff' enough to improve their writing" (13). The solution to this is obvious: to remind tutors of their roles and to train them in using resources that will guide them and the students they help. "Consultants are not professional editors or judges," Komara says. "They are critical readers

who can provide access to resources, such as writing techniques and styles, and textual guides and handbooks" (15).

So, our writers are first shown in Freshman Comp how to use Hacker to find answers to their writing questions, confusions, and problems. Then, when they seek additional help in the Writing Center, peer tutors walk them through solutions to their writing problems with reference to Hacker. The next step is for them to see Hacker being used in their other classes as a routine resource. That is the step we are currently developing.

As Writing Center director, I am collaborating with a writing tutor to create a workshop for faculty on different ways of using *A Writer's Reference*. Many faculty are frustrated with the process of giving feedback on student writing, perhaps because they don't have a clear method for doing so. They are familiar with commenting on the content of the paper but have more trouble with how to succinctly address grammar, style, and punctuation. If more of them are made familiar with the same reference book and are "working from the same page" as their colleagues, then students will be receiving more consistent, and consequently more helpful, feedback on their writing throughout their college experience. Once the workshop is developed, tutors can give a shorter class presentation to students in subsequent semesters.

Teaching students throughout their college careers to use the same reference guide may seem prosaic. But if these writers actually refer to a writing handbook as they work, they will have picked up a lifelong skill that they can always use for help outside an academic setting. In addition, by sharing with faculty the tricks of the trade that the Writing Center offers, we can provide a foundation for writing across the curriculum that serves a significant but sometimes unrecognized need.

Works Cited

Komara, Kirsten . "Mock Tutorials: A Dramatic Method for Training Tutors." *The Writing Lab Newsletter* 30.9 (2006): 12-15.

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