

Toward an Alternative to the Traditional Writing Centre Model in Non-Anglophone Contexts: A Small-scale Study in Prague, Czech Republic

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Profile

Shaana Aljoe currently teaches English Composition to first-year international students at the University of New York in Prague, Czech Republic which is a private, fully-accredited, English-medium University. She founded the University's first Writing Lab and is also the English Language Programs Director. Her research interests focus on the provision of writing assistance for L2 students in non-Anglophone contexts. Having established student writing assistance at one university using the American format of provision, she now advocates for alternative forums of writing support in a European context.

Abstract

Is the most efficient form of university writing support for international students a conventional writing centre where only one-to-one tutoring is provided? In a European context, given that writing support is still a relatively new concept, the answer to this question appears to be no. Although many English-medium universities that currently exist in non-Anglophone contexts provide traditional one-to-one tutoring, mirroring a format that originates in the United States, it has become clear through one small-scale study in Czech Republic that both European students and those from other nations prefer to be tutored on a one-to-many basis. This is an account of how that preference was detected by offering students a choice between conventional and not-so-conventional forums of assistance. I propose that in a European context, the American format of one-to-one tutoring might be dispensed with in favour of a more inclusive forum of assistance described as 'one-to-many' and labelled English Composition Tutoring Classes at the institution where the discovery was made. The distinction between these classes and seminars is made in an effort avoid confusion. I conclude by suggesting that writing centre directors and tutors might rethink their traditionally formatted facilities in order to better serve the students attending their English-medium universities, especially those located in non-Anglophone contexts.

Keywords

University writing labs/centres, writing tutor, EAP, NNES, Composition studies

Introduction

The most common form of tertiary level writing support model for multilingual students is currently a writing centre where mainly one-to-one consultations with a tutor exist. The concept and practice of one-to-one consultations is a familiar one but its efficacy is worthy of consideration. Higher education researchers working with multilingual students question the efficacy of this writing support service model outside of an Anglo-American context (Leibowitz and Goodman 1997). The most common type of tertiary level writing support is a writing centre; a stand-alone entity, separate from other traditional departments where students can, on a voluntary basis, expect a one-to-one conference on aspects of academic writing with an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) trained tutor.

However, academic writing and writing support are still relatively new concepts for European students studying in the English language at English-medium institutions. It is argued here that an additional, permanently scheduled, 'one-to-many', classroom held writing support setting can further support the traditional 'one-to-one' writing support model. Moreover, if only one form of support can be provided, in a European context, the one-to-many classroom format of tutoring should be chosen instead of the traditional one-to-one model first developed in the United States.

The significance of writing support in non-Anglophone contexts

At universities, courses are traditionally administered over a period of approximately 12 weeks through a number of regularly scheduled classes that comprise one semester. Two semesters make up the conventional academic year starting in the autumn and continuing through until the spring. Many universities also provide similarly scheduled seminars in addition to classes for more advanced and/or detailed small group discussions. What distinguishes seminars from a one-to-many tutoring model is that in seminars students are tutored as one cohesive group, whereas one-to-many tutoring provides a classroom space for individuals and small groups of students to practice various aspects of writing with an EAP tutor who floats between individuals and small groups providing guidance as needed or requested.

Writing support programs, often referred to as writing labs or centres, exist at accredited institutions operating in Anglophone contexts and increasingly at those located in non-Anglophone contexts. The existence and progress of the European Association of Writing Centres, The Writing Lab Newsletter, and The Writing Center Journal are evidence of this. Writing tutors face unique challenges in our attempts to instruct international English composition students. Working at English-medium, Anglo-American, higher education institutions which are located outside of contexts where English is not the commonly spoken language inside and outside the classroom, writing support tutors have a responsibility to share their experiences in order to progress toward a global framework for writing support, and more importantly, its assessment.

Research pertaining to writing support in the form of writing centres or labs in an American or Anglophone context is rich (Clark & Healey 1996; Shakespeare 1985; Donnelly & Garrison 2003; Thompson 2006; Moberg 2010; Ryan & Zimmerelli 2006; Lerner 2003), however research into writing centres outside of this context is comparatively less. Today, in an Anglo-American context, the provision of a writing centre at many universities is commonplace. Locating a college campus without a physical or electronically accessible writing centre or tutorial service is challenging. The growing number of writing support initiatives at this level of academia underscores the importance of written English in academic contexts. This paper presents a solution to a problem encountered by an English-medium university writing centre located in a non-English geographical context. The increasing proliferation of accredited, international, English-medium, institutions suggests the need for further research into the models of the writing support that they offer.

Many of the writing support tutor training guides available focus on a readership that is U.S. based. The guides are written for tutors of English as Second Language (ESL) writers (Bruce and Rafoth 2004; Elmborg & Hook 2005; Ryan & Zimmerelli 2006). Although practitioners in Europe can learn much from these manuals, tutors located outside the U.S. have additional considerations in that they teach at English-medium tertiary institutions

comprising the school library with two chairs, one of which is occupied by an experienced EAP trained composition instructor (the tutor). Initially, the writing lab was open for a few hours once a week and, after moving to a private office to better accommodate one-to-one sessions, increased operation to three hours a day, four days a week, and consultations would last from 10 to 30 minutes where students were seen on a first-come, first-served basis.

This initial writing lab represented a welcome addition to the University and was a proud achievement. Adding value to my institution was heartening, and the feedback from the students who came for a consultation was also encouraging. Satisfaction surveys were mailed to students and more than half believed the addition of a writing lab for students was indeed beneficial. However, it became apparent that the lab – and its one tutor – were not enough to satisfy the demands of a student population that is 95% NNES. EAP learners deal with issues that are shaped by their perceptions and location. Researchers are becoming increasingly aware of the distinctions between writing centres within and outside of Anglophonic contexts. Writing centre professional, Muriel Harris (1986) observed that multilingual students have ‘habits, behaviour patterns, perspectives, ways of delivering information, and other cultural filters that affect writing in ways we often do not sufficiently attend to and indeed are in danger of ignoring’ (87).

Further, Gerd Brauer (2006) identified the problems that many university tutors outside of the Anglo-American experience encounter. Many students in this context misunderstand the role of the writing lab tutor, do not view writing as a process, or do not feel the need to attend at all for one reason or another (134). His experience at the University of Education in Freiberg, Germany, directly reflects the challenges that many writing tutors encounter in non-Anglophonic contexts.

The catalyst to move beyond conventional one-to-one tutoring

After the writing lab had been in operation for one year, it became clear that another form of support was necessary to address management’s concern that the writing lab, as pleasant as it was to have one, could not provide enough support to curb failure rates, therefore another writing support solution had to be found. Although the writing lab was a welcome addition to the facilities offered by the university, it did not seem to have a significant effect in terms of reducing failure rates in English Composition. In brief, a way had to be found for writing support to accommodate a greater number of students.

The Introduction of an English Composition Tutoring Class: ‘one-to-many’ tutoring

The solution came in the offer of a non-credit English Composition Tutoring Class (CTC) for students to attend on a voluntary basis. The CTC operated in virtually the same manner as a traditional one-to-one tutoring session in the writing lab, but allowed many students to obtain writing support with a tutor in a classroom environment. The CTC was given a permanent time slot in the daily schedule of university courses, and students could attend individually, in pairs, or in small groups. Again, the CTC was the responsibility of one professionally trained tutor, but students did not work together in one cohesive group as would happen in a traditional classroom or seminar.

A comparison of the established writing lab with the CTC after its first year of operation is shared here which serves to inform developers of future writing support initiatives at other non-Anglophone based, English-medium tertiary institutions. Both the writing lab and the CTC were ad hoc creations from the beginning; the CTC was a natural outgrowth from the writing lab given the diversity of the student population. The most significant differences between the two forms of writing support after only one year of operation were compelling.

It became immediately apparent that students who had never visited the lab readily visited the CTC. Reasons for this lie partly in cultural differences; two or three students sometimes visit the writing lab together where one of them would request help on an assignment. Furthermore, some students felt uncomfortable with the one-to-one consultation of the lab and felt more at ease working on their writing in a larger classroom setting.

Both the writing lab tutor and the CTC tutor are composition instructors and students reported feeling uneasy approaching their respective composition instructors for additional help. A greater number of students visited the CTC than the writing lab. This was probably more a matter of physical space, but attendance records reveal that far more students could be accommodated in one week at the CTC than in the lab.

Another observation made after the first year of offering the CTC was that students attended the CTC regularly. One reason for regular attendance is the inclusion of CTC in the regular schedule of classes. Students knew that help was available whenever they browse a full course timetable. The writing lab also appears on the schedule of classes, but the opening hours are limited which may not be convenient or even alienate some students. Furthermore, students visited both the lab and CTC. Although the incidence of confusion or alienation is rare, it is worth highlighting to show that given the geographical context, students must use their own initiative to gain as much L2 language exposure as possible. Far from being language zealots, these students realize that exposure and practice are critical to success in this context. And lastly, composition failure rates were reduced to the satisfaction of management. It is possible that students' awareness of the high composition failure rates may have also contributed to this result. The appearance of the tutoring classes on the complete courses timetable may also have alerted students to the importance of accuracy in their writing.

Due to the disparity between what multilingual students think is appropriate and what is actually acceptable academic writing, some researchers have advocated requiring first-year English composition students to attend a writing support session (Leibowitz and Goodman 1997, 87). I argue that this mandate may prove unnecessary if international EAP students are offered a less conventional, customized forum of writing assistance.

It is worth noting here, that although many writing centres also provide electronic formats of writing support, Writing support specialist, Eric Moberg (2010) asserts that "the use of both on-line and brick and mortar service delivery models allow program and institutions to accentuate the advantages of each and accommodate for weaknesses" (2). This would mean that the introduction of the CTC counterbalances the weaknesses of the one-to-one consultations occurring in the writing lab and, it seems, vice versa. Many universities are connected digitally so students have access to online assistance. This kind of help is invaluable to students, but "the technology should be seen as a tool, not a magic wand," (1). More research is needed to determine to what extent is electronic writing assistance valuable for students.

Conclusion

Support and interventions for multilingual students can take a variety of models, but the most common seems to be the North American style where a one-to-one conference is held between a tutor and a student. This report attempts to broaden the framework to accommodate student resistance to seeking help and increased student demand in an efficient manner. By experimenting with or redesigning the writing support forums offered, especially to international students in non-Anglophonic contexts, composition instructors will likely find that students respond more positively to being given a less conventional forum of assistance from which to seek help.

Although increased study has contributed much to the writing centre movement, researchers believe much more is needed that focuses on evaluating writing support at tertiary institutions in specific international contexts (Law & Murphy 1997; Donnelly & Garrison 2003; Lerner 2003; Thompson 2006). American accredited English-medium universities such as those that exist in non-English-speaking locations will likely benefit from redesigning, establishing, and maintaining Composition Tutoring Classes over traditional one-to-one tutoring conferences as a means of providing multilingual international university students the academic support needed to flourish in English-medium higher education.

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