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Graduate Students as Partners in their Writing Instructor Training

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Eastern Kentucky University

This article addresses writing instructor preparation with a focus on challenges new instructors may face in classroom settings. Drawing on their writing center training, the contributors discuss strategies for better serving English as a Second Language (ESL) and American Sign Language (ASL) students, and explore the transformative experience of working alongside a composition professor as a Course-Embedded Consultant (CEC). The contributors address practical issues and offer solutions, including ways to better engage different populations of students. Ultimately, the contributors illustrate how treating students as partners in their writing teacher training can make instructor preparation more effective, providing new insights on CECs and on methods of engaging all students in the classroom.

Program Context

Writing center employees are one of the best examples of how students can become partners in teaching and learning. Students who work in writing centers create a mutually beneficial relationship with the university. For instance, Course-Embedded Consultants (CECs) or General Consultants (GCs) gain the skills necessary to become writing teachers, because this position requires student workers to take an active role in writing courses and provide help directly to students. CECs and GCs also complete semester-long training to keep their skills sharp. For CECs, these training sessions occur weekly and specifically focus on what their students are working on at that stage in the class. For example, if students are widely working on annotated bibliographies, all consultants will be taught strategies to use for that assignment. This serves as a refresher for most of the consultants, as they are already well-versed in the assignments that students are asked to complete in first-year writing. For GCs, these trainings consist of learning active reading strategies, giving positive and meaningful feedback, and engaging with students from different backgrounds.

A CEC must attend each writing class so that they can have an active role in the course, receive all instruction, and continue to develop a relationship with

students and the professor. They observe the professor at every class meeting and interact with the students. Because of this regular interaction, they become a bridge between the students and the professor. This helps students become more comfortable seeking help with course-related questions and sometimes more broad questions about university life in general. CECs go above and beyond to develop their relationships with students. Being so present in class also means the CEC develops a relationship with the professor over the semester, and together they work as partners to ensure student success in the course.

GCs do not attend writing classes, but they still must develop close relationships with students. Building rapport is essential to a positive and successful consultation, and for a GC, this rapport must be built within minutes rather than over the course of a semester. Each encounter with a student begins with asking how they're doing and where they are most comfortable having their consultation, and ends with wishing the student a good rest of their day. Even the smallest pieces of communication have a large impact on a student's experience, so consultants must be carefully trained to use appropriate rapport-building techniques with their students.

CECs and GCs also establish a professional and academic voice within their workplace. Consultants have the ability to take extra leadership roles in the writing center environment, and have an ongoing professional development project that continues each semester they are employed. This is similar to the professional development that is required of teachers and professors. The consultants' projects consist of reviewing training materials, creating and editing a consultant philosophy, and creating a visual or presentation for a showcase event.

Consultants at the Noel Studio for Academic Creativity often act as a liaison between the student and the professor, allowing the student to better understand assignments and concepts given by their instructors. However, they each interact with different groups of students. CECs work with assigned classes, so they see the same group throughout the entire semester. On the other hand, General Consultants work with students of all academic backgrounds. Two important groups stand out because of their specific needs: in the case of ESL and d/Deaf students, even small challenges can seem daunting, especially if others are not sure how to approach these students. Through weekly professional development sessions, GCs are trained to use specific strategies to empower and assist ESL and d/Deaf students. When GCs help build students' confidence, this in turn helps instructors: students who are more confident tend to participate more often in the classroom. The same strategies that are taught to consultants at the

Noel Studio may also be implemented in the writing classroom to boost student engagement across the board.

Analysis/Assessment

The CEC Program as Writing Instructor Training

The many aspects of being a CEC gives them skills to be used in their future careers as writing instructors. The training CECs must go through allows them to add to their knowledge about writing and its conventions so that they can aid students, but the repeated learning of these conventions also enriches the CECs themselves. Additionally, several training seminars are taught by other faculty in the university. Consultants then get specialized instruction from some of the leaders in the department. This continued growth allows CECs to be well trained in what their students are expected to complete, which in turn may be what they require their future students to complete.

Interacting with Teachers and Students as a CEC

Class observation and participation have a great benefit as well. Each semester, the CEC observes an instructor's pedagogy over the entire course of the class. Depending on how long a CEC is employed, they could work several semesters with completely different instructors between English 101 and 102. This means the CEC has the opportunity to observe a variety of pedagogies and other instructor methods. Spigelman and Grobman (2005) express this in the introduction to *On Location in Classroom Based Writing Tutoring*. They say, "varied instructional approaches expose students to a number of collaborative models and hence meet the needs of many different kinds of learners" (p.7). This means student workers who become instructors after being a CEC can then cater to a variety of learning styles due to their exposure to various pedagogies.

The relationships developed have a lasting impact on the student worker as well. These can help ensure mutual success; students reach out to CECs when they need assistance with the course, which helps CECs develop their skills of working with a variety of students. This interaction can help future writing teachers understand the struggles their future students may face, as well as develop the CEC's interpersonal skills. The relationship with the professor is just as important, and the learning here is mutual--professors can also learn from the perspective of their CEC. Hall and Hughes (2011) support the idea that professors have a lot to learn from the student workers in their class: "Fellows persuade them to

reevaluate the place of their writing in their classrooms and reconsider how best to teach it... many describe the significant impact working with a Fellow has had on their teaching” (p. 35). Having a relationship with the students can give the CEC insight to offer the professors on what they think students may need adjusted in the course, which they can, in turn, employ in their future careers.

Some authors argue that CECs could interact more closely with faculty to better benefit the students. For example, Malenczyk and Rosenberg (2011) say that students should attend faculty meetings because “they speak of a collaborative relationship among peers rather than the hierarchical relationship we faculty tend to describe when we talk about student concerns” (p. 8). As stated before, CECs have valuable insights about the students as they can relate to them as peers both inside and outside of the classroom, which is something instructors cannot do.

CEC Professional Development

In addition, the CEC professional development project consists of reviewing training materials, creating and editing a consultant philosophy, and creating a visual or presentation for a showcase event. This event is held every year, and employees of the writing center attend along with other faculty and staff. Besides being an opportunity to present to a highly academic audience, one of the main purposes of this project is to let consultants look at their practices in a metacognitive way so they can continue to refine and develop their skills. Knowing how to critically review one’s practices is a skill that can be extremely useful in an academic career.

Consulting with ESL and ASL Students at the Noel Studio

Noel Studio consultants are taught to respectfully hold sessions with both ESL learners and d/Deaf students as they navigate the specific challenges that come with being a second-language learner in the composition classroom. Though not *all* of the following strategies are used at the Noel Studio, they all can be implemented in the everyday classroom to help increase students’ confidence, engagement, and overall satisfaction with the course.

Establishing Equality

Using invitational rhetoric and positive and negative politeness strategies is one of the most effective methods for helping ESL students in the composition classroom. Discussed by Alshreif (2017), invitational rhetoric invites both consultant and student to feel equal to one another and to strive for a mutual understanding

where neither exerts his or her knowledge over the other. In traditional tutor/student or even instructor/student pairings, it is assumed that the tutor or instructor is the one who contains the knowledge, and the student is there to receive it. Invitational rhetoric ensures that the student feels like a learning partner instead of the lesser part of a pair. In the Noel Studio, consultants are encouraged to sit next to the student instead of across from them, as this helps signify a partnership. Consultants are also encouraged to use phrases such as, “What would happen if we did this?” instead of saying, “You should try this.” This simple change gives the student a chance to respond with their own thoughts and opinions, opening a dialogue instead of merely editing the student’s work. Similarly, listening to the student as they talk about their experiences and the direction that they want to go with their writing encourages them to explore their own ideas without fear of being “right” or “wrong.”

Building Rapport

Consultants are encouraged to build rapport with ESL students, which begins with learning their names and continues for the entirety of the consultation. Praise and encouragement are part of this process, and serve a huge role in helping the student feel at ease. Positive and negative politeness strategies involve these two elements. Positive politeness strategies often include phrases like, “You’ve got this!” and, “Even though this is difficult, I know you can handle it.” Negative politeness strategies focus on connecting one’s struggles with those of the student, such as saying, “I know that thesis statements can be tricky, but once you have it done the rest will fall into place.” It is important to show the student that they are not the only ones who struggle with certain things; doing so will ensure that they do not feel like their second-language status is responsible for the difficulties that they experience in writing. If one connects one’s own struggles and areas of weakness to the lesson, it creates an aspect of solidarity that is beneficial to the ESL student (Alshrief). Exposing one’s own vulnerability can show the student that it is okay to be vulnerable themselves, and takes away some of the anxiety that surrounds the act of coming to a teacher for help.

Another important piece of building rapport is showing an interest in a student’s home culture. A study by two professors at Zhejiang Normal University in China also revealed that showing an interest in an ESL student’s home culture can help boost their engagement with the material and their overall satisfaction with the class (Dianbing & Xinxiao, 2017). They also state that teachers can provide a foundation for academic achievement by understanding the cultures from which their students come. They offer a few strategies that instructors can implement

in the classroom to enhance their cultural responsiveness, like encouraging students to introduce themselves “through [a] self-introduction essay, poem writing, and picture-drawing” and allowing them to “share their culture and beliefs in the various classroom discussion topics” (p. 84). A student who is encouraged to share their culture with the class might begin to feel more included and safe in the classroom, leading to an increase in their overall enjoyment of the course. Dianbing and Xinxiao discovered that students participated more often during lessons that included information about their own culture than other lessons focused solely on grammar and mechanics. Instructors can implement these culturally responsive strategies in their classroom by creating a cross-cultural curriculum that includes readings from authors of other ethnicities, and involves discussions in which students from other cultures are able to share their background with the rest of the class. Nonetheless, it is important to remember to treat students as individuals who come from another culture, and not as representatives of that culture (Fitzgerald & lanetta, 2015).

Specific Strategies for Consulting with d/Deaf Students

Students who use American Sign Language are another kind of ESL student whose specific challenges in the classroom require just as much care, attention, and respect. Though the previous strategies should also be employed with d/Deaf students to put them at ease, there are other, more specific strategies that educators can follow as well. At the Noel Studio, consultants have the opportunity to learn directly from one of the ASL instructors from the department, and are given advice and resources to help them conduct consultations with students whose first language is American Sign Language. In 2019, Dr. Linda Bozeman from ECU came to speak to the Noel Studio consultants as part of their professional development program. This seminar was then adapted into a tip sheet that is used as an everyday resource in the Noel Studio. She encouraged consultants to make eye contact with the d/Deaf student rather than the interpreter while asking questions and explaining concepts, telling them that this small change makes a student feel more respected. Additionally, she advised against speaking while writing or doing other tasks that the student would need to see visually, such as explaining a concept while illustrating it at the same time. Since the student cannot see what the consultant is doing and look at the interpreter at the same time, they might miss out on vital information. Paying attention to this small aspect of teaching in the classroom can help d/Deaf students catch more of the material and feel more comfortable. Guardino and Shirind (2012) also found that

in a classroom setting, minimizing visual distractions can help a d/Deaf student focus on the course material and absorb more of the information.

In the same way that politeness strategies and invitational rhetoric encourage educators to pay attention to what they are saying and make sure that it is positive and encouraging, there are also phrases that should be reconsidered when working with d/Deaf students. One such phrase, as listed on the Noel Studio handout entitled “Consulting ASL Students,” is the phrase “Do you understand me?” While this phrase might be innocuous to a hearing person who can discern the tone of voice to determine that it is harmless, a d/Deaf student does not have tone at their disposal. Thus, the phrase can be interpreted as doubt in the student’s ability, or even condescension. It is important to pay attention to these canned phrases and how they might be taken by a student who is used to people assuming that their differences make them unable to understand. A better phrase might be, “Did I explain that clearly?” or, “Do you have any questions?” which opens up a dialogue between the consultant and the student, empowering them to take control of their own learning.

Discussion/Consideration/Implications

Writing center consultants exemplify students as partners in teaching and learning, highlighting the valuable skills these students hone and can transfer to a career as a writing instructor. Based on the experiences CECs have over the course of their employment, they:

- continue to renew and expand knowledge of academic conventions,
- observe a variety of pedagogies from semester to semester,
- become comfortable teaching in front of students,
- develop interpersonal skills working with students,
- learn to work with colleagues concerning student learning,
- work with a diverse range of students,
- complete ongoing professional development, and
- learn to think critically to review their own practices.

All of these skills help prepare CECs for future careers as writing instructors, even if they do not know it.

The core aspects of building rapport, putting students at ease, and cultivating an environment of mutual respect prepare writing center consultants to engage with

students from different backgrounds and can also be implemented by instructors in the writing classroom as a way to help increase student engagement. Though they are trained specifically to connect to and support students, writing center consultants are an often overlooked resource when it comes to increasing student engagement. Writing instructors may find that implementing these strategies in their own classrooms can help them have more meaningful interactions with their students.

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