

1-1-2012

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Recommended Citation

Oriani, Catherine (2012) "Review: The Successful High School Writing Center: Building the Best Program With Your Students," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 32 : Iss. 2, Article 6.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1747>

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Review: *The Successful High School Writing Center: Building the Best Program With Your Students*
Dawn Fels and Jennifer Wells, eds.

by Catherine Oriani

About the Author

Catherine Oriani, an English instructor for twenty-eight years, is currently teaching at Garden City High School on Long Island, NY where she developed the G. C. Writing Center, in existence since 2000. She has initiated and directed three high school writing centers since becoming a tutor at SUNY Albany under the direction of Stephen North. A former president of the Northeast Writing Centers Association and IWCA Summer Institute Leader, Catherine continues to advocate for the mindful and collaborative work of writing centers.

The Successful High School Writing Center, edited by Dawn Fels and Jennifer Wells, offers a timely counterpoint to quantitative assessment as well as corporate top-down structure and authority in education. Its narratives read in part like a call to action, action that thrives on collaboration, collaboration that creates community, not just of writers but of agents, agents of literacy. This collection of essays makes clear that high school students of various backgrounds and abilities, teachers from across the curriculum, teacher educators, teachers-in-training, administrators, and writing center directors can all play a valuable collaborative role in creating and growing programs that educate in profound and lasting ways. Furthermore, all can benefit from their roles through the synergy of their efforts.

In chapter 1, Ben Rafoth joins Fels and Wells in outlining some of the theory undergirding writing center pedagogy, acknowledging,

among others, the influential work of Kenneth Bruffee. They note,

Sharing knowledge with others, as writing requires, involves making the internalized talk social and public again; once it re-enters the public sphere, both tutor and student internalize that “talk.” The cycle continues with each conversation, affecting both tutor and student, and consequently affecting teaching and learning in both classrooms and writing centers. (10)

While this chapter provides a brief discussion of writing center theory, it also suggests the interdependence that writing center work thrives on as practitioners simultaneously guide students toward a greater understanding of academic discourse, “grant students agency in what they learn,” and “help them to act upon it” (13). By way of this Burkean Parlor, the authors firmly believe in the potential of writing center conferences to transform writing instruction in high schools.

The seven subsequent chapters supply narratives of various writing center programs and perspectives starting with an account of bilingual students whose past struggles with and consequent fear of writing precluded growth. Through the collaborative efforts of high school English instructor Katherine Palacio and university professor Kevin Dvorak, bilingual students, tutored by university students, overcame their anxieties and made significant progress. Palacio states, “the most striking change . . . was the increase in their confidence as writers” (26). Likewise, in a high school of 95% minority students where one-third of the parents are not native speakers of English, Kerri Mulqueen in collaboration with the St. John’s University writing center, has fashioned a program that utilizes an “eclectic mix” (31) of high school tutors trained by university tutors. In selecting peer tutors, Mulqueen stresses the importance of “identify[ing] excellent communicators rather than just excellent writers” (30).

Taking a closer look into the dynamics of peer tutoring challenges and successes, we hear from Andrew Jeter, director of a high school literacy program that provides tutoring in reading, writing, and math through the assistance of more than two hundred peer tutors and nineteen staff members. This chapter provides a veteran director’s enthusiasm and checklist guidance in establishing a peer-tutoring center. Jeter manages to present both the big picture and many details, while leaving plenty of room for site-specific decision-making.

Cynthia Dean, in her essay, explores the “delicate role” of the peer tutor (52). Sensitive to their position, Dean informs the reader of the tensions peer tutors seek to reconcile between “their tutorial identities” and “their student identities” (60). Through the efforts of Alexandra Elchinoff and Caroline Kowalski, the next chapter presents the reflections of thirteen current and former tutors who discuss the mutual benefit of peer tutoring. Peer tutor Sarah Senan comments, “by giving my tutees feedback, I am also giving myself feedback” (69). In their collective final thoughts, these contributors state, “High school writing centers enable both tutees and tutors to transform themselves as students, as writers, and as people” (78).

The next two essays offer superb examples of the synergistic possibilities writing centers present. Jennifer Wells relates the story of Mercy High School’s Reading and Writing Center that compounds its effectiveness by “purposely and explicitly integrat[ing] reading into the writing center” with a “full-time faculty position that is a hybrid of a writing center director and literacy coach” (80). This model makes ongoing, embedded professional development readily available to faculty. Jill Adams, an assistant professor of English with a desire to address “complaints about our English education pre-service teachers’ lack of field experience” (95), initiated a service-learning program that benefits both secondary and collegiate students, “a service project with pre-service teachers and college faculty donating their time and energy to be in the school to support student-writers” where the goal was “to become an integral part of the school climate” (99).

In a compelling final chapter, Dawn Fels presses for writing center evaluation that focuses “on how members of the school community come together to *do* literacy” (115). She disparages dependence on test scores and statistical data that “fail to describe the degree to which our centers deliver on their promises, fail to show how teachers and students benefit, and fail to describe teachers’ and students’ agency in their success.” Fels continues, “Writing centers cannot advocate for teachers and students if they are complicit in a process that misrepresents them” (118). After making a case for an alternative approach to writing center assessment, Fels urges writing center directors to become leaders rather than supporters of literacy and

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delivers a series of thoughtful and incisive questions designed to scrutinize the effectiveness of a program and to shape a path forward. These questions, along with a table of collaborative research projects found in the appendix, offer invaluable guidance in assessing and improving a program.

I am reminded of Bruffee's suggestion that

any effort to understand and cultivate in ourselves the kind of thought we value most requires us to understand and cultivate the kinds of community life that establish and maintain conversation that is the origin of that kind of thought. To think well as individuals we must learn to think well collectively—that is, we must learn to converse well. The first steps to learning to think better, therefore, are learning to converse better and learning to establish and maintain the sorts of social context, the sorts of community life, that foster the sorts of conversation members of the community value. (640)

As long as we are beings who communicate in words rather than numbers, we need to cultivate the appropriate means of fostering and assessing language communities. In fostering literacy, writing centers have proven themselves highly capable. Let us tell their stories. Numbers have their place, but as noted by Fels, they do not communicate the intricacies of human interaction. I commend Fels and Wells et al. for their contributions to the narratives surrounding our important work.

WORK CITED

Bruffee, Kenneth A., "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind.'" *College English* 46.7 (1984): 635-52. Print.