

## THE NES WRITING AND COMMUNICATION CENTER: THE CASE FOR STUDENT-ORIENTED WRITING CENTERS IN RUSSIA

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**Abstract.** The Writing and Communication Center (WCC) at the New Economic School (NES) turned five years old in 2016 and remains the oldest writing center in Russia. Unlike many of its counterparts throughout the country, the WCC at NES has a special focus on student writing. This article offers an overview of the WCC's philosophy and current activities and presents a case for prioritizing students in writing centers. It also provides an analysis of the session reports collected from consultants from 2013–2016 in order to identify patterns of use at the writing center and understand the needs and expectations of students who visit. Experts in the field tie the growth of the information economy to rising demand for advanced literacy in all walks of life. Developing good writing habits and skills in both native and foreign languages is becoming increasingly important not only for academic success but in a variety of professions. Writing centers therefore play a critical role in preparing students for their futures.

**Keywords:** writing centers, writing pedagogy, multilingualism, second language learning, advanced literacy

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Since the Writing and Communication Center (WCC) opened at the New Economic School (NES) in 2011, several institutions of higher education in Russia have established similar services. To date, however, the WCC at NES remains somewhat unique due to its focus on student – particularly undergraduate – writing. Most Russian writing centers prioritize faculty and graduate students. The reason why appears fairly straightforward: given the current pressure on Russian faculty and institutions to generate published research in international journals, the case for establishing centers to address the writing needs of researchers is fairly self-evident. The case for student-focused writing centers is perhaps somewhat less so. Therefore, the purpose of this essay is to detail the activities of the WCC at NES and to present a case for Russian writing centers to make students a priority.

### A Brief Overview of the WCC

The Writing and Communication Center was founded at the same time as the Joint Bachelor's Program in Economics (BAE) at NES and the Higher School of Economics (HSE). The joint program is itself an effort to import the Western model of the liberal arts college to Russia. Students in the program take a broad range of classes on their way to a specialized degree in their major, but they are allowed to pick and choose from a variety of options that enable them to meet their curricular requirements. This element of choice along with international ties (faculty hail from all over the world, and students have opportunities to study abroad) is central to the joint program's appeal. Western pedagogical traditions were also integrated, and the WCC is a key part of that. In North America, where writing labs first emerged over one hundred years ago, writing centers

are free and voluntary services offered to students in order to support them in the writing tasks they must perform during their time at university. Students are allowed to bring in writing projects and receive feedback and guidance from a trained consultant. Institutions all over the world have also adopted writing centers, which frequently also serve as a language resource at multi-lingual institutions [1–3].

There are several key writing center practices that the WCC at NES has upheld since its inception:

**Voluntarism.** Students visit the writing center of their own volition. While instructors may encourage students to seek assistance, they are asked to do so without applying coercive pressure.

**Egalitarianism.** The consultant-student relationship is meant to be different from the teacher-student relationship, where the student's goal is generally to get a good grade and to please the teacher. Therefore, in this type of relationship, it is the teacher's priorities that prevail in the encounter. In contrast, writing center consultations are to be oriented around the *student's* priorities and goals, and the consultant is supposed to guide the student's efforts to improve. A consultant can be someone who teaches their own classes, but consultants are also quite likely to be students themselves. The WCC, for example, uses recent graduates from the United States who come to work for us as interns in addition to hiring graduate students and lecturers from Moscow universities. Many writing centers worldwide also use peer tutors – highly talented students who are recruited to undergo rigorous training and work alongside professional consultants in the center. To date, however, no such program exists in Russia, though we at NES hope to start one by 2017.

**Non-directiveness.** Due to the student-centered nature of the encounter, consultants are there to provide guidance rather than to assert control over the student's writing. The

document in question is always to remain the intellectual property of the student and to reflect the best work that the student is capable of producing, not the sort of work that the consultant would produce if this were her project [4–5]. This involves using Socratic questioning to prompt students to find their own solutions with the consultant's guidance. Researchers in this area have recognized that non-directiveness is problematic when a student is writing in a foreign language. Therefore, in ESL/EFL contexts, consultants will use the consultation to help build the student's knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and academic discursive norms with an eye toward helping that student improve over the long term rather than simply correcting the text in front of her [6–9]. It should be noted that the practice of non-directive consulting exists not only for philosophical reasons but for academic integrity reasons. Many universities have policies against "collusion," which is where a student asks or hires someone who is more skilled than they are to write their paper for them [1]. Non-directiveness helps avoid even the appearance of such, ensuring that the project accurately reflects the student's abilities.

**Focus on process.** Writing centers also adopt a process-oriented approach to writing pedagogy, which means that the goal of any given consultation is not merely to help a student improve a particular document but to help her to develop good writing habits. Visiting a writing center isn't a last step before submitting an assignment or application (getting it "checked for grammar") but part of a recursive process that involves seeking feedback and engaging in revision throughout the development of a given piece of writing. It is not at all unusual for NES students to get feedback at an early stage of writing from the WCC, go home and perform revisions independently and then return a few days later to discuss the new draft.

Taken as a whole, the writing center model

on which the WCC is based is focused on preserving student ownership over their own words and ideas as well as investment in their own intellectual development outside the more formal context of the classroom. It is not merely a place for “weak” students to receive remediation [10]. Indeed, many of the very strongest students in the joint program use the WCC regularly.

What distinguishes the WCC at NES from many other writing centers in North America, however, is multilingualism. We offer consultations in both Russian and English and, in the context of English-language consultations, address language issues far more extensively than writing centers in monolingual institutions. Many NES students use the WCC primarily for the purpose of improving their English. However, North American universities are now serving a growing population of international students, and multilingualism in the Writing Center is a promising area of research [1]. Because of the populations that they serve, multilingual writing centers outside of North America stand to become leaders and models for the field. Therefore, multilingualism and the presence of language learners ought to be regarded as an asset rather than a problem.<sup>1</sup>

#### The Current Status of the WCC

The WCC turned five years old in 2016 and has managed to sustain its original mission despite turnover in leadership and staffing challenges related to the economic situation in Russia. Statistics provided below demonstrate that student consultations are increasing and the number of students using the writing center is expanding. Tutoring students, however, is not our only function.

The WCC offers regular workshops and master classes on topics like properly citing sources, English pronunciation, and writing statements of purpose for grad school applications. The WCC Director also trains and provides resources on academic writing to other instructors, and in June of 2016, we held an intensive seminar on writing pedagogy for NES teachers. Economics faculty may also send their articles to the WCC for editing, though this takes up less of our time than that of our colleagues at other universities. We are also involved in outreach to other universities. In December of 2015, NES hosted the three-day professional development conference, “Establishing Effective Writing Centers” along with HSE and the National University of Science and Technology (MISiS), and starting in the Fall term of 2016, the WCC and the Department of Humanities and Languages will begin cooperating with the Skolkovo Institute of Science and Technology (Skoltech).

Consultants are required to submit reports on each consultation, and the WCC Director uses these reports to learn more about how students use the center. *Figure 1* presents the overall number of consultations conducted during the last three academic years.

Usage of the Writing Center fell by about 13% from the first to the second year. We attribute this to a couple of factors. First, the New Economic School moved to its new location at Skolkovo in August of 2014, which made the WCC’s physical location more inconvenient for BAE students, who make up almost 80% of WCC visitors and take classes at the Shabalovskaya campus of HSE. The ruble crisis in late 2014 also put significant pressure on our budget and reduced the

<sup>1</sup> The Americans employed by the WCC at NES are all advanced learners of Russian, though they are far less likely to consult in their second language than the Russian-speaking consultants, who are actual *teachers* of their second language. Still, we believe that experience learning a second language, especially our students’ native language is absolutely critical to understanding the issues our students face. Advocates of multilingualism in North American writing centers stress the importance of having consultants who are experienced in learning a second language even if they do not consult in that language [1].

Figure 1.

**Total annual visits to the Writing and Communication Center**

	Fall Term	Spring Term	Total
2013-2014	179	124	303
2014-2015	139	125	264
2015-2016	211	171	382

number of consultation hours we could offer. The dramatic (45%) increase in 2015–2016 is the result of a semi-restored budget as well as successful adaptation to those challenges. We predict use of the WCC to continue growing as the school grows.

The total student population at NES in 2015–2016 was 418 for all programs. 136 individual students visited during that time, meaning that one out of every three students currently use the center. This proportion is slightly higher for BAE students. The WCC also gets quite a lot of repeat business. From 2013 to 2016, half of all students who made one visit to the WCC came back during that same academic year, and 78% of the students who used the WCC in 2015–2016 had used the center before (in that same year or an earlier one).

One of the roles of the WCC is to support the curricula of all programs by encouraging the use of written assessment. Student usage patterns, however, indicate that students use the WCC for coursework rather infrequently. In 2015–2016, consultations on coursework represented only 17% of our total volume. The majority of those consultations were for Advanced College Writing followed by electives in the humanities. This suggests opportunities for further outreach to faculty members in other departments.

Nearly half (48%) of all consultations are related to students' immediate futures after they graduate from NES: applications for jobs and graduate school as well as study abroad programs and internships. This trend was also noted by Kara Bollinger, who served as Assistant Director for one year during 2012–2013 and wrote about the WCC for the essay collection *Rethinking Post-*

*Communist Rhetoric* [11]. She notes the particularly high stakes of these forms of writing as well as the unfamiliarity of our students of the communicative norms involved in applying to a foreign university or international firm. I would also note that these forms of writing are also heavily autobiographical and therefore particularly challenging for students who are more comfortable writing about academic topics than about themselves. Students frequently report discomfort with the idea of “bragging” and have difficulty transforming the raw data of their lives (courses taken, standardized test scores, case championships) into narratives. This difficulty does appear to be somewhat more elevated among Russian students than their American peers.

Another 27% of consultations are devoted to developing English language skills, typically in the form of conversation practice or preparation for standardized tests like IELTS and TOEFL. Students who use the WCC for this purpose are often the most habitual visitors. Though the WCC administration wishes to push back against “native-speakerism” [12–13], students do frequently express a preference for native English speakers in these encounters. The actual data, however, indicate that students are almost as likely to consult with a native Russian speaker about English-language matters as they are with a native English speaker. In Spring 2016, for example, we had three native English speakers working in the WCC (the Director plus two other Americans) along with two experienced Russian teachers of English. If all other variables were held equal, one would expect the English speakers to collectively take 60% of the appointments and the Russian

speakers to take 40%<sup>2</sup>. The reality – 64% and 36% for all English-language consultations – was actually fairly close to that expectation. 30 of the 105 consultations *specifically* for English practice (conversation practice or test preparation) were performed by Russian consultants. Repeat visit patterns and student communications suggest that students were very satisfied with these interactions.

#### **Building Student Writing Centers in Russia: Opportunities and Challenges**

Writing centers and similar student services are proliferating all over the world, and global economic trends may continue to influence their rise. In a keynote address before the South Central Writing Center Association, Lester Faigley traces the beginnings of the contemporary writing center movement in North America to the 1970s, arguing that, “[I]t came in response to fundamental changes in the United States economy. The shift from an economy that was based on manufacturing and creating goods to one based on services, trade, and finance brought increased demands for advanced literacy. Producing ideas moved to the center of the economy, and those ideas are transmitted mostly through writing” [14]. The importance of writing in the information age has been observed by other researchers as well. In her book, *The Rise of Writing: Redefining Mass Literacy*, Deborah Brandt argues that in the information economy, writing has come to supplant reading as the signal manifestation of mass literacy: “In this economy texts serve as a chief means of production and a chief output of production, and writing becomes a dominant form of manufacturing” [15, p. 3]. Based on interviews with hundreds of people in a variety of different professions whose work largely consists of writing, Brandt indicates that,

“Writing as a mass practice thoroughly participates now in the trading of things and ideas, and in the competition for attention to things and ideas. While always connected to commercial life, the powers of writing have never been more valuable to more people in so many places, in so many ways, and at so many levels of public and private enterprise” [15, p. 46]. According to Rosstat data, the service sector in Russia is 62.6% and likely to grow [16]. Writing instruction and therefore writing centers may be absolutely essential to preparing students for life outside of the university, where the production of texts in both native and foreign languages will become more and more of a daily practice.

Writing centers in particular can fill critical gaps in instruction. Learning to write well, like learning a new language, is a long-term process. University curricula, however, rarely give instructors or students the time required to achieve the results many stakeholders have in mind. Like many of our colleagues, the Department of Humanities and Languages at NES has had to deal with unrealistic expectations about what can be accomplished by way of improving students’ language and writing skills with minimal contact hours and under less than ideal classroom conditions (such as high teacher-student ratios). The situation we have in the NES/HSE Joint Bachelor’s Program is luxurious by most standards, but students may still have little writing instruction in any language outside of the single-term English-language Advanced College Writing seminar and the Russian-language Introduction to Economics course. Thus, skills can grow stale or regress as students proceed through the program. Writing and language skills are, on the surface, priorities for institutions, but rarely is it considered feasible to take time away from math and sciences in order to attend to them consistently.

<sup>2</sup> Both Russian consultants had busy teaching schedules at other universities, while the American consultants had more free time to do walk-in hours. The Director of the WCC is also a native English-speaker and does a plurality of the consultations (28%) simply due to the nature of the job.

Writing centers therefore fill a gap institutionally and pedagogically. At the institutional level, writing centers can advocate for best practices and greater attention to writing across languages and throughout the curriculum, though they face significant challenges in getting buy-in from other faculty, who may look to the writing center less as a cooperative enterprise than as a way to outsource difficult or undesirable teaching tasks. But in the daily work that writing centers do – meeting with students – writing centers perform a role that is critical in ensuring that students continue developing these skills.

Informal feedback from NES students indicates that they see visiting the WCC as an important part of their academic development. BAE student Aleksander Dorofeev, who uses the center for coursework as well as application materials, considers regular visits to be “very similar to working out. It does not make sense to memorize all the clauses of all the rules anymore. Instead, you need someone to correct your mistake again and again, before you refine your intuition, and there is no better coach than WCC.” Visits to the center are “a part of my learning habits ... For me, it is a final stage of writing process, and I feel that my work is incomplete if none of the Center’s staff reads it.” BAE student Valeria Nurieva, who frequently uses the WCC for conversation practice says that the benefits of the service have made a demonstrable difference in her life: “It really helps me at job interviews, and many interviewers compliment me on the high quality of my English speech. It was also very useful while I was on an exchange program at Bocconi University where I had to communicate with foreigners a lot. The better your English is, the easier it is to understand you and, as a result, the more foreigners want to communicate with you.”

Anastasia Zubareva, another joint program student, told the Director about how WCC consultants helped her prepare for IELTS by going beyond her already considerable language skills and addressing her thinking and test-taking strategies: “Both, John and Natasha were extremely professional and at the very outset, they knew what to do. Namely, John immediately noticed that I had no problem with the language, rather with the organization of my thought and its clear expression in limited time. Natasha, on the other hand, recognized, that the fact that I know a lot and therefore want to tell a lot was the underlying factor behind exceeding my two-minute time limit in the speaking part.”<sup>3</sup>

The WCC offers services to alumni who do occasionally make appointments when changing jobs or applying to graduate school. But because of their nature, writing centers can also help foster independence among students and help them develop the skills to direct their own learning beyond the university. Encouraging students to take ownership over their learning process is really the key. North American writing centers have their origins in writing laboratories in the 1890s, which arose in response to criticism of “the ‘mass instruction’ that had dominated American schooling at all levels,” in which “students largely learned by lecture, memorization, and recitation, and little attempt was made to individualize instruction” [17, p. 3]. Writing centers provide that individual attention while attempting to ensure that the student is the primary initiator in the interaction. This can, however, prove uncomfortable for students who are accustomed to more authoritarian educational traditions. They may resist the non-directive methods of the writing center and even question the consultant’s qualifications if he or she does not simply fix all the problems in a document herself or tell the student what to do. I should

<sup>3</sup> All quotations from students are presented in their original form. They have not been edited for grammar or spelling.

note that this form of resistance is a common and widely observed phenomenon among American students as well, though it may be somewhat more pronounced in a Russian context.

Bollinger suggests that another challenge for Russian writing centers may be a general preference in Russian culture for oral vs. written communication [11]. However, the prevalence of such a preference and its implications for writing instruction are still open questions for us at the moment. Indeed, the specific needs and challenges of Russian student writers should prove to be a fertile ground for additional research. Common sense suggests that there *must* be differences beyond language between Russian students and their peers in other countries, but common sense is likely to be a poor indicator of how and when those differences will manifest in writing centers. Though Russia and other former Soviet states have their own particular history of educational centralization and academic hierarchy, many of the pedagogical and organizational problems writing center administrators face here have precedents in the North American writing center experience. Obstinate faculty are everywhere, and all student populations have to be taught how to best use the service to their own advantage. The biggest challenge that Russian writing center administrators will likely face will purely have to do with the newness of the model and the need to adapt it to existing institutional and pedagogical frameworks.

Furthermore, while the WCC at NES can provide an organizational and pedagogical model for other student-oriented writing centers in Russia, we hesitate to draw too-drastring conclusions about the environment in Russia based on this very singular experience with a decidedly non-representative student sample (our students arrive at the program prepared to accept novel forms of instruction and may already have significant experience with international education). Cooperation

among Russian writing centers will be key to creating research paradigms that will enable administrators to best address the particular needs of their students.

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### ЦЕНТР ПИСЬМЕННОЙ И УСТНОЙ КОММУНИКАЦИИ: ОПЫТ РЭШ

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*Аннотация.* Центр письменной и устной коммуникации (ЦПиУК) в Российской экономической школе (РЭШ) в 2016 г. отмечает свое пятилетие. Это первый центр такого рода в России. В отличие от многих своих аналогов по всей стране, ЦПиУК в РЭШ уделяет особое внимание развитию письменных компетенций студентов. Статья предлагает обзор философии и деятельности ЦПиУК. Также представлен количественный анализ отчетов консультантов центра о встречах со студентами в 2013–2016 гг., который был проведен с целью выявить закономерности в обращениях в центр и понять потребности и ожидания студентов, которые его посещают. Эксперты указывают, что рост информационной экономики повышает требования к грамотности во всех областях жизни. Развитие хороших письменных навыков на родном и иностранном языках приобретает все большее значение не только в научной сфере, но и для многих других специальностей. Центры письменной и устной коммуникации, таким образом, играют важную роль в подготовке студентов к будущей профессиональной деятельности.

**Ключевые слова:** академическое письмо, центр академического письма, мультилингвизм, лингвистическая компетентность, продвинутая грамотность

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