

1-1-2009

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### Recommended Citation

Ziegler, Nicole (2009) "Launching a Writing Center: A Practical Possibility," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 25: Iss. 1, Article 8.

Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1088>

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# Launching a Writing Center: A Practical Possibility

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During my undergraduate studies at Western Michigan University, I had the pleasure of working in the campus Writing Center. While there, I grew to admire the entire pedagogy of the Center: student-to-student collaboration, emphasis on *best practices* of teaching writing, communication with a variety of university classrooms and instructors, and much more. When I graduated and moved on to establish my own classroom as a high school English teacher, I continued to embrace my writing center experience and, because of that impact, was determined to establish a center at whatever school would hire me. I was in luck. In my initial interview for my current position, the principal asked me what one thing I would like to do to positively impact the district. Without hesitation I told him: I'd like to start a writing center. I didn't repress my passion for the subject and quickly won him over with the concept. He made it clear that district funding was not available for such a venture, and that it would take some negotiating to create the Center as a club worthy of a teacher stipend. I'd have to get creative. The only question left was when I could get the planning started. Little did I know then about how overwhelming the first-year teaching experience would be. And the second, and the third, and before I knew it, I was in my fourth year of teaching and still hadn't established an active writing center. However, in my own classroom, I never fully abandoned the writing center pedagogy I knew well (although I strayed from it for a little while).

Early on, I learned that peer editing, where students trade papers and make comments, wasn't working. Student commentary often came in the form of "it's good," and little more. So, I began

implementing several aspects of writing center pedagogy in my classroom: meeting students in one-on-one conferences with me, reading papers out loud, and encouraging guided revision (i.e., not giving the answer but leading writer towards it). I spent time modeling and coaching students on how to respond to student work, how to create interactive peer conferences, and how to give meaningful feedback. I made sure that with every formal writing assignment, my students were able to practice these skills with each other. I also made sure that my door was always open to students who wanted to come in and talk about their writing. Yes, this took extra time out of class, and sometimes from my lunch period, but my students' writing was changing for the better. Once students began to verbally express how useful writing conferences were in comparison to peer editing, I knew it was time to really begin plans for a writing center.

## Need and Desire for a Writing Center

We all know that, for most students, writing isn't an easy task. Authentic writing doesn't submit to a "one-and-done" mantra; rather, it is a process. Students need time to brainstorm, pre-write, draft and revise. What's more, they need feedback along the way; they need time to talk about their ideas, to discuss their organization, to test their writing on a real reader. Any extra guidance is beneficial, even to the most gifted of writers. In 1987, NCTE echoed this sentiment and published its "Resolution on Writing Centers," stating,

NCTE members recognized the important contribution writing centers have made to the success of many students at all levels of education. Be it therefore resolved, that the National Council of Teachers of English endorse the principle that the establishment of a writing center should be a long-term commitment on the part of an institution, including stable budgeting and full academic status..."

A high school writing center allows students to talk about their process or piece with a peer who is taking on an *objective* and *empathetic* perspective (something

students don't always receive from their instructors).

Further, many students need the one-on-one time the high school classroom often doesn't provide, not because we are poor teachers, but because our class sizes are on the rise and our curriculums are packed with "must-dos." As Ellen Brinkley, professor at WMU states, "Unlike their college counterparts, secondary teachers usually don't have office hours or classes staggered on alternating days. Instead, they are locked into a schedule that allows precious little, if any, time for individual conferences with students about writing...a writing center can provide that time" (Brinkley qtd. in Farrell 1). The Writing Center is a place where teachers can trust to send those students who want or need that extra one-on-one time. Inevitably, the Writing Center helps students who use the services become better writers as well as prepare them for the competency tests they face throughout their high school years. With the pressures of standardized test scores looming over teachers' heads, any extra guidance we can give students in preparation brings some relief.

### **Proposing and Receiving the Grant**

By my fourth year, I was done putting off what I had hoped to do three years earlier. In the fall of that year, I took a general leave day, set up a work station at the local Barnes and Noble, and worked for several hours to compose an eighteen-page grant application (outlining the benefits, mission, and goals) written for our district's Excellence Foundation, a group of local community members who raise money and award teachers with Innovation Grants. Although a writing center is not necessarily an "innovative" idea, as they have been around on campuses and other high schools for more than thirty years, it certainly was something novel to my district and neighboring districts as well. I applied for the maximum amount of money allotted and was both surprised and pleased when I learned news that the Foundation approved the grant.

### **Selecting Time, Space and Consultants**

At my school, it would be impossible to have the Center open during the school day, as I was the one overseeing it, and I already had a full teaching schedule. So, we carefully selected hours based on the start and end time of our school

day: students can come in for a consultation two days a week before school or three days a week after school. This allows us to cater to those students who already have after-school activities or morning activities.

My classroom is where I house the Writing Center and also where students come to make appointments. Conveniently, I can always be available to the consultants who work at the Center, step in and help if when we are busy, meet with other students from my own classes, or simply get some of my own work done. I set up a section in the back of my room to be the appointment and waiting area, but all consultations are held at student desks. Because we don't always have scheduled appointments, we also take walk-ins.

When students enter the Center, a consultant greets and hands them a clipboard containing the registration form we use to keep track of each consultation. On that form, students give their name, grade level, teacher's name, assignment type, and they indicate whether the teacher needs a copy (for proof of attendance). The bottom portion outlines some of the basic ideas of the Center

*The Writing Center is a place where teachers can trust to send those students who want or need that extra one-on-one time.*

regarding pedagogy and what students should expect from each session. We ask students to read that carefully and sign if they agree. On the back of the form, there is space for consultants to briefly summarize what they touched on during the consultation. This allows us to share with teachers what was discussed if questions ever arise. During the first year, we didn't have any teachers openly question our methods; however, having the form allows us protection and provides evidence of the consultation if necessary.

One of the most essential aspects of an effective writing center is its staff. When I wrote my grant, I specified that I wanted four to five senior students and that those students should receive compensation for their work, much like I did from WMU. Student consultants are paid hourly based on the weekly hours of operation. In addition, students are compensated for any additional workshops or presentations they host throughout the year. My rationale

for paying students is threefold: (1) I wanted to be able to influence the best students to choose the Writing Center over other local jobs and to participate in another school activity; (2) it sends a message to them and the student body that the work they do as consultants is important and serious; and (3) it allows the student consultants to see the importance of presenting themselves as young professionals.

Some may question this rationale, but it is important to me that the Center be staffed by students, not other teachers, “precisely because tutors are not classroom teachers, they often can step back and encourage their peers to apply what they have learned. That is, rather than fixing errors, a good tutor will show a student how to make changes,” encouraging students to work independently (Levin qtd. in Farrell 27). Though it is not always easy, I want to entice the best of the best students to become consultants. To them, and to me, this isn’t just another after-school activity; upon being hired, they become employees of the school district. That carries some additional weight.

In order to advertise the positions, I created an application and advertised through school-wide announcements and quick visits to junior English classes. In the grant, I included a student application form and strict guidelines for applying that I must uphold each year the grant is renewed. First, applicants need a 3.5 GPA or higher and no less than a B in any English course. I also ask for one academic writing sample, three pages or longer, double-spaced, and two letters of recommendation from two different teachers. I require that one be from an English teacher. I ask that recommendations refer specifically to the applicant’s writing skills, work ethic, social skills, public speaking skills and the ability to give and receive constructive criticism. It is important to me that the students who apply are capable of more than writing great essays. As Donald Samson notes, “English majors are not necessarily the best [writing center] tutors; a student with patience, a receptive attitude, and a facility in explaining complex ideas often will prove to be a better tutor than someone who simply displays good knowledge of the material” (qtd. in Wallace and Simpson 233). Thus, though student applicants have to fulfill many requirements, being willing and able to do so sends a message about the kind of tutor and employee they will be.

Once I receive the aforementioned materials,

a brief interview takes place with me, another English teacher and our district’s assistant superintendent, where students answer several standard interview questions and perform a mock consultation to see how the student would respond to another student’s writing. The first year, I received seven applications, and based on interviews and application materials, hired four of them (on a side note, I highly recommend asking colleagues to sit in on the interviews; it helped me maintain objectivity since many applicants were also students of mine). For the second year, I received eleven student applications, again with four spots to fill. Both years, we’ve been able to select a wonderfully diverse and qualified group of student writers, with whom it is a pleasure to work.

In order for consultants to be successful in their jobs, training must take place. I hold a one-day training with all of them, a time where they fill out the necessary paperwork with the district’s central office and learn about the Writing Center pedagogy. I create detailed employee handbooks (reminiscent of my time at WMU) that include an evaluation form, which I complete every nine weeks for each consultant. After reviewing the handbook, we brainstorm advertising strategies, create signs and appointment books, set hours and go over scheduling. It is a productive day that sets the bar for a very successful year.

### **The Work of the Center**

When a student comes into the Writing Center at my school, whether by appointment or walk-in, he or she can expect to be greeted by one of the consultants or me. There is some brief paperwork that each student fills out (discussed earlier), and that information helps to guide the consultation. Student consultants then sit down side-by-side with the writer somewhere in the classroom, putting the paper between them. From there, the consultant will ask the student what he or she wishes to work on during their meeting. Some students will wish to brainstorm ideas. In that case, the consultant’s role is more of a listener and transcriber.

If a student brings in a draft, the consultant will ask the student to read all or a portion of that piece out loud (as we know this is an effective way to guide revision), and will gently stop the reader to discuss any problems that may arise, first focusing on the higher order concerns

(content, ideas, clarity, organization, etc.) and then, if time, commenting on the lower order concerns (grammar, mechanics, spelling, format). The consultant may read aloud if the student is uncomfortable, provided the interactive feel of the conference is retained. It's very important to note that a consultant never writes on the student's paper. In order to help our students take ownership of their writing, they are in charge of making notes on their own paper. Most of the feedback is verbal, becoming a discussion between consultant and student. If the consultant wishes, he or she can make suggestions on a separate sheet of paper and give that to the student as well.

Consultations usually do not exceed twenty minutes; and if a student brings in a lengthy paper, the consultant may want to ask the student if there is a particular section that needs the most attention and then invite the student to return at a later time to work on the rest of the piece. I ask that all my consultants invite students back into the Center for another consultation, just to give the students that option. Figure 1 (see Appendix) illustrates the handout that I give my consultants on their training day outlining how they should conduct consultations and they keep in their employee handbook for easy reference.

### **Creating School-Wide Student and Staff Interest**

Establishing the Center is all well and good, but if there is no clientele, all is lost. It is important to reach out to the school community to inform teachers and students of the benefits and cajole them to utilize the Center on a regular basis. Imperative especially is making that connection with other teachers. To do so, I give a short presentation at the first staff meeting of the year, and student consultants also put fliers in teacher mailboxes. Once the teachers are in the know, they can share that knowledge with their students. Some teachers even require that students visit the Writing Center or offer extra credit for doing so.

When consultants give presentations to English classes, they describe what occurs during a writing consultation (to help de-mystify the idea of sitting down with a possible stranger) and stress that anyone coming to the Writing Center can come with anything related to writing and the writing process. Not every student came in with a paper; some just wanted help with ideas,

brainstorming, organization, etc. Again, a consultant's job is to offer suggestions, answer questions, and guide the writer, not edit the paper, and it's the writer's decision to take those suggestions or not. Consultants share this in class presentations and also give students a handout specifying the role of the Writing Center in their writing processes (see Appendix, Figure 2).

We advertise in a variety of ways, including bulletin boards, weekly announcements, fliers on lockers, and through special events. For instance, because most of our student clientele the first year we were open were upperclassmen (our formal composition courses are at the eleventh grade), we wanted to entice the underclassmen to use the service as well. Therefore, come Valentine's Day, the consultants went to every freshman and sophomore English class to distribute *Smarties* with a writing tip and our hours attached with a ribbon. On another occasion that first year, we teamed up with the school store to hold a raffle. Upon visiting the Center, each student could put his/her name on a raffle ticket to win school gear such as t-shirts and sweatshirts from the school store (at a discount price to us). This not only influenced students to make and keep appointments in the Center, but it also promoted business at the school store.

### **First Year Findings**

Of course, as with any new program, I was nervous about our first year. I figured we would start out slow, but grow in visits as positive word spread. For the most part, this is exactly what happened. We catered to students from grades nine through twelve and all ability levels, and from the English, science, and social studies disciplines. In total, we conducted about 215 consultations during our twenty-eight-week year (we were closed on Fridays and select vacation weeks). It's important to note again that much of our student clientele did consist of juniors and seniors, primarily because that is where our department places our core writing classes. However, out of the 215 visits, about fifty of those came from both freshmen and sophomores. It's a goal this year to increase the numbers of ninth and tenth graders, but those who did come responded well. In fact, among those students who did visit we had several return. This exceeded my expectations for the initial year.

I also asked for student commentary from a variety

of students, most of which came back positive. Much of the responses from all levels of students reflected initial surprise by how comfortable the Writing Center is and also how much the Center helped them. Many students made remarks about the bond they built with a consultant, and how that consultant helped to elicit so much growth. Here are remarks from both a student who visited often (an eleventh grader) and one who was at first skeptical of what the Center could offer her (a tenth grader):

- The Writing Center was a helpful place where I could go and not be afraid to talk out my writing dilemmas and received help from other writers so that when I faced the same issue again I could easily resolve the problem. The consultations were helpful and gave me peace of mind.
- Mrs. Ziegler! Do you see this [waving a paper in front of me]? This grade? I've never received such a high grade on a paper before. Really. It's thanks to the Writing Center.

It's commentary like this that solidify the certainty that this Center is a must for my school community and we are making a difference, perhaps just in baby steps as we enter our second year.

### **Writing Centers Are Possible**

I am lucky to teach in a community that sees the value in funding innovative ideas. However, my grant will not be forever renewable, and I will need to be creative in order to keep the Center running. It is my belief that any school can launch its own writing center. Here are some ideas:

- *Partner with NHS*: National Honors Society students are required by the Society to accumulate a certain amount of volunteer hours. Of course, you would want some feedback on students to make sure they are qualified in writing and that they have positive people skills. With some training to acclimate those students to the Center dynamic, this could be very successful. It still holds onto the premise that students are teaching students.
- *Propose a Writing Center Class*: Teachers could easily align a Writing Center class with Michigan

High School Content Expectations and create a curriculum for the class. This class could occur before school hours (zero hour), during the school day, or after school. If during the school day, students could go into other classes (with the teacher's permission) and meet with writers.

- *Invite Community Members In*: In some communities, there may be a plethora of retired adults, or even retired teachers, who may be willing to come in and work with young writers. What's more, if your school is in the area of a college or university, you may be able to get pre-service teachers to staff a writing center. If this is a possibility, the initiating teacher would want to have a period of time devoted to training such individuals, especially if they are unfamiliar with writing center pedagogy.

There's also plenty of literature on writing centers available both in text and online. If one is considering starting a center, a must-read is *The High School Writing Center: Establishing and Maintaining One* edited by Pamela B. Farrell. Although this text was published in 1989, the material in it is not dated. In the book, writing center scholars from all over the country offer practical insight into the how-tos of starting a center. Another more recent book is Richard Kent's *A Guide to Creating Student-Staffed Writing Centers: Grades 6-12*. In addition to his book, several online resources are also available. Kent manages a website called [Portaportal.com](http://Portaportal.com), which offers links to literature pertaining specifically to high school writing centers. Lastly, Jim Burke, best known for his text *The English Teacher's Companion*, established an English Companion Ning (a professional social networking site) that houses a Middle/High School Writing Center group geared toward those who currently run or wish to start a middle/high school writing center. Because of the quantity of resources available, teachers shouldn't feel alone in their desire to initiate a center at their schools; colleagues all over the country have already established much of the work and rationale.

### **Conclusion**

I'm very passionate about the importance of one-on-one conferencing and the opportunities that peer-writing

coaches offer students who come to the Writing Center. As advocates of authentic writing and the writing process, we're doing our students, our school, and our beliefs a disservice by not more widely offering writing centers at the high school level as resources for our students. It speaks to the importance of writing across the curriculum and the impact conversation can have on one's own writing. Without a doubt, with better resources, our students will produce better products.

As we move into our second year, I did need to make some changes in order to make the Center happen financially. For instance, because the reality of 2009 is lower budgets, I elected not to ask for a stipend in order to preserve the Center. I don't see this as a setback; for me, the running of the Center doesn't monopolize my time, mainly because I've chosen and trained well a group of trustworthy, self-sufficient consultants. In fact, it offers stress relief because I know my students will be able to confer with someone about their writing, regardless of how busy I am before or after school.

It's no doubt that students and teachers alike can benefit from launching such a service in their respective

schools. It just takes a willing and persuasive teacher or teachers and some careful planning. It is my hope that by sharing my experience, and by offering additional ideas and recommended reading, this article can become a resource for those teachers who would like design a writing center for their schools.

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### Appendix

Figure 1

#### When Conducting a Consultation...

1. Greet each client with enthusiasm and a smile/make them feel comfortable.
2. Sit next to student.
3. Explain to the student how a writing consultation works (if it is the first time for the student)—emphasize that *it is interactive*.
4. Tell the student that he/she will do all the writing on the paper; you will not write on the paper.
5. Ask the student to explain the writing assignment (read assignment sheet if available).
6. Ask the student to explain what he/she wants to work on.
7. Place the paper between the two of you.
8. Ask student to read paper out loud.
9. As student is reading, listen actively! If you need to take notes, do so on your own scrap paper, but not so that it is distracting.
10. You may stop the student politely if you see a "teachable moment" and discuss.
11. Discuss high order concerns first.
12. Move into lower order concerns next if time.
13. You are making suggestions throughout the consultation. Again, it is up to the student to write them down.
14. Wrap up the consultation by asking if the student has any more questions and thank him/her for coming.
15. Invite the student back for another appointment and/or direct to computers and/or walk to the door.

**Figure 2**

**What Students Can Expect During Each Session**

1. Students can come to the Writing Center at any point in the writing process.
2. Students will sit down next to a writing consultant and first discuss the writing assignment. Students are encouraged to come with assignments from all disciplines, not just English.
3. Students will then be asked to outline some of their concerns. During this time, the consultant may take notes.
4. Then, if at the drafting stage, students will read their papers out loud to the consultant.
5. After the reading, the consultant will guide students through the revision process by addressing several aspects of the essay.
6. Toward the end of the session, the consultant will address any remaining questions.

**What Students (and/or Teachers) Should Not Expect From Consultants**

1. Editing of the paper.

The Center focuses on guided revision techniques. At no point will a consultant write on a student's paper or re-write any aspect of the essay verbally. The consultant will make suggestions to the writer and also recommend the writer record those suggestions so they are easier to remember. The writer must take ownership of the essay.

2. Addressing every possible problem.

First, the consultant will address the concerns voiced by the writer. If no concerns are voiced, the consultant is trained to start with higher order concerns (ideas, organization, clarity, etc.) and then move into lower order concerns (mechanics, punctuation, format, etc.) By no means in a half hour session can everything be addressed.

3. An Automatic 'A'.

It is up to the student to take the suggestions of the consultant. The consultant is there to aid the student with his/her writing, not turn every paper into perfection. The student should take ownership of his/her writing.

**About the Author**

**Nicole Ziegler** (mrs.ziegler@hotmail.com) teaches freshman English and AP Language and Composition at Lakeshore High School in Stevensville, Michigan where she also serves as department chair and head of the Writing Center. She is currently working on her Master's degree at Western Michigan University and lives in Kalamazoo with her husband, two dogs, and a baby girl on the way.