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To Use a Writing Center or to not Use a Writing Center?

Introduction

My research question is: “What are writing centers and how effective are they?” I came up with this question because I have considered using the writing center at college a couple of times, but have had my hesitations. I have heard a few teachers suggesting the use of a writing center, but wondered how it would benefit a “good” writer. Being a busy student (as I think most college students are), I wondered if using a writing center would truly help me or if it would simply be a waste of time. I think many other students share these hesitations too, which may be a shame if a free resource like this proves to be beneficial and is not taken advantage of.

To answer my research question, I will first introduce the history of writing centers. Next, the purpose of writing centers and what writing centers actually do will be discussed. I will then move on to explain who writing center tutors are and what training they go through before they begin working. The next part of my paper will discuss how writing centers measure their effectiveness. Different ways writing centers can be evaluated will be explained. The last part of my paper incorporates my own primary research in order to find out what a writing center appointment is like.

Where Do Writing Centers Come From?

Although not officially called a “writing center,” according to John Carino, Professor of English and Director of the Writing Center at Indiana State University, forms of writing centers were apparent as early as the 1930s. In his article “Early Writing Centers: Toward a History,” Carino tells the story of Carrie Stanley at the University of Iowa who “offered small-group and one-to-one instruction, on both a referral and voluntary basis, for remedial students and very good students who might drop by in to try to straighten out minor difficulties” (106). This tutoring was done outside the classroom and resembled the idea of writing center today.

The 1930s was by no means a random time to start a writing center (or writing “lab” as they were called then). John Carino explains why:

By the 1930s, colleges and universities were beginning mass education initiatives...Children of immigrants and first-generation students began attending state institutions in large numbers...couple this changing population with the influence of John Dewey’s emphasis on pragmatic education designed for the individual student (highly influential by the 1930’s), and the time was right for writing labs. (106)

Although not intentionally made for only those students who *needed* help, because the majority of writing center users were children of immigrants and first-generation students, a writing center appeared to aim at those students who were struggling.

During the 1940s, a program by the Armed Forces was the push that writing centers needed to increase their popularity. “By the 1940s, free-standing writing labs were a recognizable part of higher education... articles in *College English* in 1944 and 1945 describe the Armed Forces’ ambitious program to provide young officers with the equivalent of two years of training in English in just two semesters” (Carino 107). Furthermore, “the GI bill in the early

fifties brought students into the academy who could benefit from labs” (Carino 109). This increased demand for tutors was the opportunity for writing centers to expand their services and recognition.

During this time, writing centers were still perceived to be a place for remedial students. Christina Murphy, who directs the Writing Center at Texas Christian University, says that “in the 1940’s and 50’s, writing centers were established to address the instructional problems of weaker students by strengthening their writing and critical thinking skills” (276). Murphy was not the only one with this thought, and I believe many people today still share this view of writing centers being geared toward weaker students.

The most commonly documented history of writing centers begins at the 1970s. This is the time writing centers became widespread. Elizabeth Boquet, professor of English and former Director of the Writing Center at Fairfield University, and Neal Learner, Director of Training in Communication Instruction for the Program in Writing and Humanistic Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, explain why in their article “After 'The Idea of a Writing Center.'” “The 1970’s saw a flourishing of writing centers nationwide as the Open Admissions movement brought larger numbers of underprepared students to higher education: writing centers were positioned as one-to-one solutions to meet the needs of these students” (Boquet and Learner 172). Still, writing centers were aimed at struggling students.

Presently, writing centers have become familiar fixtures of a college, and even high school, campus. Muriel Harris of Purdue University writes about this on the International Writing Centers Association website. “At present, there are more than a thousand writing centers in American and Canadian postsecondary schools and hundreds at the high school level.”

Additionally, writing centers have assured their status by forming ties internationally and creating their own publications.

A recognition of their professionalism and an interest in creating a International network helped to establish the International Writing Centers Association, along with regional groups throughout the United States. The two publications of the International Writing Centers Association are *The Writing Center Journal*, published twice yearly with articles on research and theoretical issues, and the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, published in ten monthly issues (September to June) with practical, immediately useful articles, announcements, and reviews of materials. (Harris)

What Do Writing Centers Do?

The idea of a writing center today has changed from the past. Stephen North, an assistant professor of English and Writing Center Director at SUNY at Albany, wrote about the role of the new writing center in his article "The Idea of a Writing Center." "Whereas in the "old" center instruction tends to take place after or apart from writing, and tends to focus on the correction of textual problems, in the "new" center the teaching takes place as much as possible during writing, during the activity being learned, and tends to focus on the activity itself" (439). The newer writing centers also make themselves more available to all students, regardless of level of education. As the Rhode Island College Writing Center website notes, "the Writing Center is for writers. Students from freshmen year through graduate school, faculty members, and even the tutors themselves take advantage of this service" ("Writing Center"). Lastly, more students go to the writing center on a voluntary basis.

Ever since Stanley's tutoring in the 1930s, a writing center has been available to writers who *want* help. Christina Murphy, who directs the Writing Center at Texas Christian University, notes in her article "Freud in the Writing Center: The Psychoanalytics of Tutoring Well" that "unlike students who enroll in courses from a spectrum of reasons from "the course is required" to "it fits into my schedule," students come to a writing center for one reason only- they want help with their writing" (13). A writing center is meant to be a comfortable place where writers can discuss their concerns, without hesitation. Molly Wingate, the Writing Center Director at Colorado College, explains this in her article "Writing Centers as Sites of Academic Culture ." "To quote some of the peer tutors I have had the honor of working with, "This is a place where we can hang out with others who like to talk about writing. Caring about a comma is not a laughable offense here" (10).

Stephen North described the purpose of a writing center best in his article "The Idea of a Writing Center ." In fact, "writing center teacher-scholars seem unwilling or unable to embrace a writing center narrative that runs counter to North's original "Idea," even if it comes from the originator himself" (Boquet and Learner 180). In North's article, he wrote: "The object is to make sure that writers, and not necessarily their texts, are what get changed by instruction. In axiom form it goes like this: Our job is to produce better writers, not better writing" (438). Whereas the older writing centers focused on a specific piece of writing, the newer writing centers focus on the bigger picture. An assignment is used as a vehicle to talk about the act of writing itself. "While the conference may lead to further composing, this is rarely the time or the atmosphere for composing to happen during the conference itself" (North 442). North notes that a writing center appointment is about dialogue. James Bell, who works with students at the University of Alabama, adds to this idea by explaining that appointments should be student

centered, not tutor centered. “Structured participation should be the tutors’ method of choice. Most commonly the tutor establishes a framework or outline or skeleton of questions, and the student builds on or fills in or fleshes out the structure” (“Tutor Training” 80).

A more solid outline of what a writing center should be comes from the International Writing Centers Association website. The following guidelines a writing center should follow are: tutorials are offered in a one-to-one setting, tutors are coaches and collaborators (not teachers), each student’s individual needs are the focus of the tutorial, experimentation and practice are encouraged, writers work on writing from a variety of courses, and writing centers are available for students at all levels of writing proficiency.

To use a specific and relatable example, I did research on Rhode Island College’s Writing Center. What I found reflected North’s “Idea of a Writing Center.” The first relatable concept I noticed is the importance of dialogue. “The Writing Center is an informal, comfortable space in which writers can talk about their writing concerns with people (the tutors) who are willing to listen, share, and respond. We believe that what writers need most is an informed audience of readers as well as active discussion about how writing happens” (“Writing Center”).

Secondly, RIC’s Writing Center uses North’s philosophy of improving writers, not necessarily specific texts. “The goal of these writing conversations is not necessarily to perfect a given paper so much as it is to help students learn about their processes as they work through the writing assigned in their classes...we do not “fix” or “correct” students’ papers.” (“Writing Center”) Furthermore, grammar and spelling are usually discussed during a second appointment.

To relate to the International Writing Centers Association’s guidelines, RIC’s Writing Center uses experimentation and accommodates to all kinds of learners. “We also have a wide variety of materials, ranging from colored markers to Legos and other 3-dimensional building

tools, that are sometimes helpful for visual and/or kinetic learners. Students who learn better orally are welcome to bring a tape recorder to their sessions” (“Writing Center”). I think the idea of catering to individual learning styles is important to note because it shows the care and attention a writing center tutor has for each individual client.

Who Are Writing Center Tutors?

Now that the role of a tutor is understood, the question becomes: who are writing center tutors? According to the Rhode Island College Writing Center website, writing center tutors are usually students (undergraduates) themselves. “The Center employs peer tutors who have shown expertise in their own writing and an interest in the diverse ways in which people learn. Most are undergraduates who are majoring in a variety of disciplines, such as English, Theater, Education, and Modern Languages” (“Writing Center”).

When I used to think of writing center tutors, I imagined their job as being similar to a typical on-campus job. I figured the tutors had to have some kind of writing knowledge, but other than that, I thought they would be hired rather easily. However, I learned that many writing center tutors go through intensive training before they begin working and that their training continues after their first day. An example of what a tutor’s training looks like comes from the Rhode Island College Writing Center website:

Every tutor begins work with the Center by attending nine weeks of workshops during his or her initial summer; usually tutors continue to participate in these workshops each summer thereafter, and staff development continues throughout the academic year. Each year, the tutors attend and/or present at one or more professional conferences regionally and nationally.

Rhode Island College's Writing Center uses profits made by selling snacks, and sometimes breakfast, in order to send the tutors to these regional and national conferences.

Another example of what a writing center tutor's training looks like comes from Jim Bell, who hires and trains tutors at the University of Alabama. Bell describes what kind of training he puts his tutors through in his article "Tutor Training and Reflection on Practice." "[The tutors] practiced in preparatory tutor training (ten hours). The initial tutor training included work on tutoring methods, the phases of writing process, the hierarchy of concerns regarding the written product, and administration procedures (83). At the University of Alabama Writing Center, each tutor is also required to keep a journal to reflect on their training and their role as a tutor. As part of their training, the tutors had to audiotape and reflect on one of their own conferences, observe and reflect on another tutor's conference, and receive tutoring evaluations from about ten students. All of this was discussed with the director and written about in their journals.

My research on writing center tutors definitely changed my perception of them. Because writing center tutors are students themselves, it is easy for a student considering using the writing center to compare themselves to the tutors. A potential client might feel like they are just as capable as another student (tutor) in solving his/her problems. Since the tutors are not teachers, it is important to know that they are nonetheless very qualified in helping a client with their work.

How Do Writing Centers Know They Are Making A Difference (Measure Their Effectiveness)?

Writing centers depend on evaluations in order to know if they are reaching their goals for personal and funding purposes. However, when the purpose of a writing center is to create better writers, it can be difficult to find a way to evaluate that. While researching the

effectiveness of writing centers, I did not come across one standard evaluation method that all writing centers use. In fact, Molly Wingate, director of the Writing Center at Colorado College notes in her article "Writing Centers as Sites of Academic Culture" that "writing center professionals have struggled to assure our place on campuses with annual reports full of statistics" (7). Instead, I found several different ways writing centers could be evaluated.

According to James Bell, author of "When Hard Questions Are Asked: Evaluating Writing Centers," the most common writing center evaluation procedures are: counting clients, post-conference surveys, and end-of-semester surveys. Counting clients is an easy method, but has its drawbacks. According to the International Writing Centers Association website, "when students are referred by teachers, records need to be kept of every visit if the teachers find these useful. Records are also needed to indicate how many students use the center, how often they visit, what services they use, and what evaluation is done." However, Bell notes that this method of counting clients is not sufficient because quantity does not equal quality. Many people could be attending a writing center, but are they truly benefiting?

The next most common method, surveys, also has its pros and cons. If answered honestly and by every client, surveys could be a good method of evaluating a writing center's effectiveness. However, surveys rely on volunteerism and responses can vary with time. For example, James Bell tried the survey method at his writing center in Alabama. He explained that "the Immediate Group results were enthusiastic and dramatically positive; the Two Week and Two Month groups seemed slightly less enthused and one in ten expressed some dissatisfaction" (22). Therefore, it is hard to truly know if survey results would be honest or fair.

Although they may not be as common, other methods of evaluating writing centers still exist. The International Writing Centers Association website lists other types of evaluations:

Evaluation can be made by comparing the grades, motivation, and attitudes of students who attend the writing center with those of students who do not attend. Retention statistics can reveal the center's role in helping high-risk students stay in school. Faculty evaluations can indicate how the center is assisting the faculty, and tests for attitudes and writing anxiety can measure gains in these areas.

One example of comparing writing center users versus non writing center users comes from Molly Wingate, the director of the Writing Center at Colorado College. Wingate compared the grade point averages and graduation rates of students who used the writing center two or more times with those who used the writing center once or not at all.

In a case of the class entering Colorado College in 1995 students who used the Writing Center two or more times had an average GPA of 3.32. The average GPA for the class was 3.27. Students who used the Center once or not at all had a GPA of 3.25, that is .07 lower than those who used the Center two or more times...of the students who used the Writing Center two more times, 90.1% of them graduated as compared to 74.4% of the students who used the Writing Center once or not at all. The average graduation rate was 79.2 % .(8)

Although comparing grades, attitudes, motivation etc. of writing center and non writing center users sounds like a good idea, this method has its faults too. Students who use the writing center may still have a low grade point average, and those who do not use the writing center may still have a high grade point average. Also, a writing center's goal is not to necessarily improve a grade point average. A writing center works to improve a writer. "The goal of each one-to-one conference is for the writer to learn something, to improve his or her process at that time or in the

near future”(Bell 79). Therefore, comparing recent grades does not do much justice to the idea of improving a writer *sometime* in the future.

After considering each evaluation method, their fault’s bring us back to the issue of finding a method that truly evaluates a writing center’s goal. Claudine Griggs, Rhode Island College’s Writing Center Director, further demonstrates this point. When I asked Griggs about the effectiveness of RIC’s Writing Center, she replied:

You're initial question [“What are writing centers and how effective are they?”] is a big one. It's like asking, "What do teachers do and how effective are they?" A lot depends on the class, the teacher, and the student. At the RIC writing center, which is a peer-tutoring center, we try to be effective one student at a time. Tutoring is basically another form of teaching, and as I'm sure you know, teacher effectiveness can be difficult to measure, but our goal is to create better writers as we help students to create better papers.

Here, the goal of better papers is stated. However, I think the idea of working on a paper is almost like a study-guide. Working on papers and gaining practice on different assignments will then ultimately lead to the goal of a better writer.

What's It Like To Go To A Writing Center?

In order to do some primary research for my paper, I made my first appointment at Rhode Island College’s Writing Center. To make an appointment, I could have either called the Center or walked into the Center to schedule a time. When I called the Center, the receptionist asked me a few questions, other than what date and time I would like to schedule. She asked what my class standing was (freshman), what class the paper I needed help with was for (introduction to

psychology), if a teacher had recommended me to the center (no), and how I heard about the writing center (word of mouth). My appointment was scheduled for Saturday, November 27, 2010 at 2 p.m. Because it was a weekend, my appointment was held in the Reinhardt room of the Adams Library.

My tutor's name was Laura. As soon as I walked in the room, she tried to make me comfortable by asking if where she was sitting was okay or if I would like to sit somewhere else. After we sat down, she asked if I had any specific questions or concerns regarding my paper or my writing. I have never written a paper for my psychology teacher before this, so my concern was if I was following the directions correctly. The first thing my tutor did was read a copy of the directions. (I had come into the appointment with a copy of the directions and a rough draft of my paper.) After reading the directions, Laura asked if she would like me to have her read my paper to herself or out loud. After she finished reading, she first told me what she liked about my paper and then what could be fixed.

My paper mostly had format issues. I do not have much experience with APA format, so my tutor helped me with this. The writing center has many reference sheets for different formatting styles, so she took out an APA format sheet. Starting from the cover sheet, she went through the directions with me for each page. After the format was taken care of, she then asked again if I had any other questions before leaving. Appointments are booked on each hour, and my session took about 45 minutes.

I did not leave the session with any complaints. One of the things I liked best about my appointment was that it was a very comfortable setting. The tutor, being a student herself, was very understanding of different teacher expectations and any questions that I had. Also, she never explicitly told me to change anything about my paper. Rather, it was always a question of *if* I

wanted to change anything or how I think I should change it. For example, one of my sentences in my paper was worded weird. The tutor read it out loud and asked if I thought the sentence sounded wrong. When I agreed, she asked if I had any ideas on how to change it. We worked on it together and using both of our suggestions, I made the final decision on how that sentence should be changed.

The only thing that may not have been typical of a writing center appointment was that I worked on format and grammar during my first session. According to Rhode Island College's Writing Center's website, usually the main ideas in the paper is what gets worked on during a first session. Format, spelling, and grammar are usually discussed during a second appointment. This shows the idea of improving a writer and not a paper. However, my appointment showed that a writing center is not just for people who need help with their ideas or arguments. The tutors will focus on what an individual client needs help with.

Even being a "good" writer, I still found a writing center useful. Even if my paper was fine, it was still nice to get reassurance and hand in my paper with confidence. Even though a writing center's goal is not to necessarily improve a paper, I did get 100 on that assignment. Also, my teacher commented that the APA format was perfect.

Conclusion

After researching writing centers, I do believe that they are an important part of a college and high school campus. Students may be hesitant to visit a writing center because they might still have the idea of a past writing center; a place for remedial students. However, I think

teachers should recommend the center regardless and try to explain to the students the true purpose of a writing center.

Some teachers may try to incorporate the ideas of a writing center into their classroom, similar to Carrie Stanley's work at the University of Iowa. To do this, a teacher might want to try the idea of conferences for individual students. These conferences should be a comfortable place where writers can ask questions freely and discuss any concerns. Therefore, only constructive criticism should be given. Also, the conference should encourage dialogue and student participation. Any problems should be worked out together.

In regard to a writing centers effectiveness, a better method of evaluating a writing center still needs to be found. Surveys, counting clients, and comparing grades do not truly reflect a writing center's goal. However, how does one evaluate the goal of an improved writer, without focusing on an assignment or grade?

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