

WHY WRITING CENTERS MATTER

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Over the past twenty-five years, most post-secondary institutions in the United States have established facilities known as writing centers, although sometimes they are called writing "labs," or writing "rooms." One writing center may be enclosed in a large glass building nestled in a redwood forest, where students and tutors confer with one another in spacious, well-lit study spaces. Another may be housed in a converted, under-sized classroom, furnished with only a battered table and a shabby sofa. Whatever their physical characteristics, writing centers are now recognized as playing a vital role in the teaching of writing, one that is as pedagogically significant as that of the composition classroom. The following scenarios embody what I perceive as the essence of the writing center approach and provide a graphic representation of "why writing centers matter."

Scenario #1

You are a novice skier, and suddenly you find yourself riding a chairlift, heading inexorably up a steep snowy slope. All alone, close to panicking, you feel the chair climb higher and higher. Suddenly, the top of the slope is upon you, and you slide off, as best you can, fear in your throat, tumbling about until you gain your balance. Upright once again, you attempt to get down the hill as best you can, stumbling over your skis, losing control, standing for hours paralyzed by fear. When you finally do get to the bottom of the slope, you are cold, frightened, and bruised. You have only a vague idea of how you managed to get down and are absolutely terrified of trying again.

Scenario #2

You are a novice skier, but as you move up the snowy slope, a supportive and well-trained instructor is with you to provide instruction and assistance, one step at a time. The instructor accompanies you on the chairlift and calms your fears as you push off and begin moving down the slope. As you complete each manoeuvre, you receive feedback on what you did properly and advice about how to improve. Once you get down the slope, you feel encouraged to try again, knowing you can always ask for help if you need it. You haven't only gotten to the bottom of the slope; you have also become a better skier!

These two scenarios depict the approach to writing on which the concept of a writing center is based—that is, one can learn to ski or to write by stumbling around, making mistakes and getting hurt, but the learning will be neither efficient nor pleasant. A better way to learn is under benevolent and informed guidance, receiving feedback as needed. Writing centers provide this sort of guidance, and they “matter” because they effectively facilitate student learning. They do not simply provide a “quick-fix” for flawed student papers; instead, they are centers for individualized writing instruction, enabling students at all levels to become better writers.

Broadly defined, a writing center is a facility where all student writers from first semester freshmen to graduate students can come for an individualized writing conference with a knowledgeable, well-trained tutor or consultant. Writing center tutors work with papers at all stages of the writing process—those which are just in the process of being formulated, rough first drafts, or relatively polished efforts which need only slight additional editing. Sometimes students come to the writing center to discuss a writing topic before they have written anything at all although they more often come in with outlines or rough drafts. Talking about writing and working with drafts in progress are considered the most useful writing center activities. However, some students also work with writing center materials such as books, handouts on various facets of the writing process, tape recorders, or computers.

Over the past twenty years, composition studies has emerged as an important academic discipline. The writing center concept grew out of an increased scholarly interest in how writing skills are acquired and how best to teach university-level writing skills. In the past, although writing had always been assigned as part of university coursework, little interest had been taken in understanding how writing skill is learned or in discovering how writing could best be

taught; the teaching of writing usually meant simply the teaching of editing skills: grammar, punctuation, and usage. This new focus on composition studies, however, resulted in a "theoretical reorientation which has led to a concern with developing pedagogical strategies for intervening in the writing process at all levels" (Clark, *Writing in the Center* 2), and writing centers came to be recognized as particularly well-suited to this approach to composition pedagogy. Writing centers maintain a flexible teaching structure through which instruction can be individualized and where writers can obtain help with their writing at any stage of the process. The writing center thus represents the marriage of what are arguably the two most powerful contemporary perspectives on teaching writing: first, the writing is most usefully viewed as a process; and second, that writing curricula need to be student-centered. The new writing center, then, defines its province not in terms of some curriculum, but in terms of the writers it serves. (North 438)

This compatibility between current thinking about composition and the kind of instruction which takes place in the writing center may be summed up in the following three principles of current rhetorical theory cited by Almasy:¹

- 1) to improve one's writing, one must have dialogue with the reader;
- 2) to improve one's writing, one must understand the processes of invention and must be willing to participate in those processes;
- 3) to improve one's writing, one must have dialogue with the written product, both for revision and for editing.

These principles are easily implemented in the writing center, where tutors serve as a non-evaluative, non-threatening audience providing helpful feedback and encouraging revision.

Moreover, in addition to implementing a rhetorical, process-oriented approach to the teaching of writing, the concept of writing centers is in accord with what linguists and psychologists have discovered about language development, particularly the stage model associated with Piaget and Vygotsky.² Writing centers also reinforce social constructionist theory, which views knowledge as a "social artifact created by a community of like-minded peers" (Bushman 31). In the writing center, knowledge is created through the collaborative efforts of the student, who furnishes "knowledge of the subject to be written about and knowledge of the assignments," and the tutor, who

provides "knowledge of the conventions of discourse and knowledge of standard written English" (Bruffee 10).

Thus, writing centers constitute a practical implementation of what research in composition studies has revealed about writing acquisition; moreover, they are especially well-suited for serving a diversity of student writing needs. Writing skills are now recognized as essential for a broad spectrum of courses, not only for literature and composition courses, but for science and social science courses as well. Students also have numerous writing needs which are not tied directly to courses: job and academic application letters, accompanying resumes, and a variety of forms and reports. This diversity also characterizes the students themselves, who arrive at the university with a wide variety of writing skills and abilities. Particularly at universities located in large, multinational cities, students come from many different cultures, many of them speaking and writing English as a second language. The individualized approach of the writing center is thus well-suited for this cultural complexity, since it can offer diverse services for a variety of students and writing tasks. Writing centers pride themselves on individualized instruction and flexibility—their goal is to offer each individual writer the appropriate kind and level of assistance which is most likely to result in writing improvement.

As a means of further individualizing instruction, many writing centers also offer a variety of self-help resources for students who wish to work on their own. These include computer and tape cassette programs; books and handouts concerned with general rhetorical skills or more specific topics such as grammar, spelling, vocabulary, business and technical writing, or English as a Second language; and information on specialized writing tasks such as essays analyzing literature or film, letters of application, and resumes. Many writing centers also serve as mini-libraries for composition teachers by keeping collections of professional journals and books concerned with the teaching of composition, or lessons and assignments to be shared. As its name implies, the writing center provides a hub where tutors, teachers, and students can talk about writing and share ideas in a non-threatening, comfortable environment.

The Writing Center at the University of Southern California

The Writing Center at the University of Southern California exemplifies the sort of services and resources that writing centers can provide. Since U.S.C. attracts students with widely varying writing

needs, the writing center provides an important means of addressing individual students within a large, urban setting. More than eighty tutors work in the center, and each of the twenty-five hundred students taking composition courses in the Freshman Writing Program is required to attend the writing center at least once a semester. Many students continue to avail themselves of the writing center's services throughout their university careers.

Because the U.S.C. Writing Center is a component of the Freshman Writing program, the center's approach to writing pedagogy is consistent with that of the program, and policy for both facets of the program is developed through collaborative effort. The same group of graduate students who work in the writing center teach classes in the program, and communication between the classroom instructors and writing center tutors is strongly encouraged. The writing center is especially important for working with the large number of non-native English speakers who attend U.S.C., some of whom schedule weekly individualized or group appointments with writing center tutors. The U.S.C. Writing Center also provides shelves of textbooks which both students and instructors can use and a number of handouts which focus on particular topics and genres useful for both academic and professional contexts. Examples of these handouts are "Writing About Literature," "Writing About Film," "Writing Applications For Professional Schools," and "Using the Comma." Copies of *The Writing Lab Newsletter*, *The Writing Center Journal*, and *MacWorld* are available to instructors for professional development.

U.S.C.'s Freshman Writing Program is also keenly interested in examining the impact of computers on improving student writing, and, therefore, the writing center has two rooms of Macintosh computers. One functions both as a classroom and a drop-in lab, while the other, which functions only as a drop-in lab, is used mainly for word processing. Since computer literacy has become so important in a variety of fields and since the word processing programs available on computers so easily facilitate revision, many instructors require their students either to use their own computer or one in the Macintosh labs to write their papers. Both classroom instructors and writing center tutors sometimes work with students directly at the computer to demonstrate both brainstorming and revision strategies. The Macintosh labs also provide access to *The Electronic Handbook*, a program which furnishes immediate information about the correct format for bibliography and citations as well as punctuation and usage rules.

The computer labs in the USC Writing Center also serve as the development site for *The Researcher's Electronic Notebook*, an innovative computer project that is a topic-specific, on-line information retrieval system. It enables the writing center to become involved in helping students to acquire an effective "research" process as well as a writing process and serves as an important first step in preparing students to incorporate outside sources into their papers and ultimately to use the full range of library resources. Using hypertext computer programs, the electronic notebook allows students to establish links between chunks of information, thus simulating the associative cross-referencing characteristic of the research process. It also contains a word-processing program that enables students to write responses to prewriting questions associated with their assignment, then to take notes on and outline information in the database, and finally to draft and revise their papers. Since the computer labs are located in the writing center, students and tutors can work together at the computer screen accessing and compiling information through all stages of the writing process.

The main components of *The Researcher's Electronic Notebook* consist of the "Notebook", the "Encyclopedia", and "Citations". The Notebook resides on the student's own floppy disk, and students take notes or download and store information on their disk, much as they would if they were using a conventional notebook. The "Notebook" also contains assignments, prewriting questions, a notepad, and an outliner. The "Encyclopedia", as its name implies, contains background information and definitions for key terms and concepts associated with the assignments and topics listed in the notebook. Information in the "Encyclopedia" is structured either associatively, hierarchically, or alphabetically, and students are able to access one chunk of information from another. "Citations" consists of bibliographic information on the articles in the topic database, including abstracts. Students browse the citations to decide if they would like to read the entire article. If so, they can read a paper copy directly in the Mac Lab or photocopy the article in the College Library. If students wish to copy information from any component of the program, they may use a camera icon to "take pictures" of the information and then download the information to the electronic notebook on their own disk.

Once students have gathered sufficient information for their assignment, they can then convert it to a word-processing file which enables them to print, cut and paste, and work with the information. Thus, *The Researcher's Electronic Notebook* enables students to work

through an effective model of writing papers involving outside research, one which they can apply to other research-oriented writing tasks. Moreover, since the computer labs in the writing center will soon provide access to university library on-line databases, students will be able to obtain writing center assistance in browsing and selecting sources for a variety of topics and assignments.

When writing centers were first being established, people outside of university writing programs and English departments often questioned why writing centers were needed when, presumably, people once learned to write without them. The answer is that composition research has shown that people learn to write more efficiently, more comfortably, and more competently when they share their writing and receive substantive feedback than when they are simply assigned a topic and then left to grapple with it alone. Therefore, writing centers "matter" because they facilitate an individualized approach to writing instruction that enables a diverse student body to learn skills needed for diverse writing tasks. Writing centers also "matter" because they provide a valuable forum where students, tutors, and teachers can share ideas and develop pedagogy—they thus constitute an unusual opportunity for theory and practice to impact one another.

Today, the campus writing center is regarded as an essential component of a university's writing curriculum, both at large, prestigious research universities, four-year liberal arts colleges, and two-year community colleges. Although the idea of the writing center originated in the United States, writing centers are now becoming established in other countries such as Australia and England. As more and more educational institutions become aware of why writing centers "matter," it is likely that they will become part of established composition pedagogy all over the world.

End Notes

1. Some of this material is discussed in Irene Lurkis Clark, "The Writing Center in the United States." In *Communication Skills: Teaching and Practice. Vol II*. Eds. P.J. Hills and Margaret McLauren. London: Croom Helm, 1988.
2. See Clark, *Writing in the Center* for a discussion of these theories.

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