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# All of the Answers or Some of the Questions? Teacher As Learner in the Writing Center

Lee Ann Leeson

In the fall of 1980, when I began working with students in the writing center at New York University, I thought I had, if not all the answers about teaching writing, then at least a great many of them. I hoped I might learn something new from the two expository writing classes I was teaching, but viewed my additional work in the center mainly as using skills I already had to benefit students with “writing problems.” I found, however, that teaching in a writing center, acting as an audience and facilitator for writing, seeing many of the same students individually on a regular basis, provided me with insights into the composing process that are difficult to gain in a classroom setting. The center’s individualized approach has benefits for teachers as well as for students and proves the truth of a James Thurber line, “It’s better to know some of the questions than all of the answers.”

One of the first things I learned to question in the center was my assessment of students’ writing problems. I found that in trying to provide writing strategies for a student, I sometimes misdiagnosed the initial difficulty. The question of organization is a good example. When I cannot perceive the student’s pattern of organization in a paper, my first impulse is to pull out the ideas already on the page, point out those that are “irrelevant,” and work with the student to rearrange what’s left. I tried this over and over again with one student, Barbara. It never worked. She always slipped in new ideas so that the final paper was as chaotic as the first. Mercifully, I gave up on that approach and tried asking her to point out for me the important ideas in the paper. In some cases, I simply reflected what I thought the paper said, letting her check to see if that’s what she meant. Later, I asked her to tell me how the



ideas were related. And, usually, she could explain in a fairly logical way.

I began to realize this when Barbara one day brought into the center a dramatic monologue about her experience as a salesgirl in a large, women's clothing store. The paper began with the idea that people don't believe compliments, continued with the seemingly contradictory point that the majority of customers are vain, and ended with the thought that women think their lives will change but they won't. Again, I was tempted to say, "Pick only one of these ideas and then stick to it." But, because I knew Barbara was the expert on this topic and I myself was somewhat uncertain about the "proper" organization of a dramatic monologue, I decided to listen to Barbara's logic. Basically, what she had in mind was the idea that although some customers feel so unattractive they can never believe a compliment, most are so vain they'll believe anything the salesgirl tells them. Both groups like to buy new clothes because secretly they hope a new blouse or a new dress will change their lives. The voice of the salesgirl in this monologue was appropriately cynical, and Barbara had plenty of examples to illustrate her ideas. She simply had not written in the connections to show that her first two points referred to different and contrasting groups of people, but that her conclusion related to both. She also had not clearly related her examples to these main ideas. I later learned that the reasons why Barbara left out connections were common to many students. Sometimes they were writing too fast to get everything down, and they hadn't thought, or perhaps hadn't taken the time, to go back and revise. Many times they thought the connection was obvious. Frequently, they told me that if they explained everything, the paper would be "too long," and the reader would be bored. In some cases, they needed suggestions about how these connections could be written in. The problem was explaining relationships, not fitting ideas into some preconceived pattern of organization.

A second thing I realized in the writing center was how much my ideas of effective writing techniques were influenced by the methods I use when I write. I like to generate and organize ideas by making lists and crossing out and rearranging things, but this procedure isn't useful for everyone. Because NYU's writing center is open to all students and staff, I worked with writers at many different levels of proficiency. Some of my clients were experienced and skilled writers working on graduate papers, dissertations, or professional writing. Some of these skilled writers made lists and outlines, but others organized by underlining, circling, and drawing arrows with various colored pens; some sorted slips of paper into a series of folders; others cut their drafts

into pieces and then taped them back together in more pleasing arrangements.

Freshman writers also had their own techniques. David needed to begin by sitting down and simply writing out his general ideas. Michelle, even when she could relate her topic to her own experiences, preferred to begin working by surveying library resources. Some writers, like me, worked slowly through each draft; others would dash off several pages and then spend more time in revision. All of these techniques worked for the writers who used them. I learned to begin asking students about a draft of a paper, "How did you write this? What have you done to get this far?" in order to try to understand their methods instead of immediately imposing my own.

In the writing center, I also had a much better chance to see writing assignments the way students see them. In some cases, students simply had no idea what to do, and sometimes, I too was puzzled. One such assignment from a freshman expository writing class was "Compare two poems." If only one student had arrived with this somewhat vague assignment, I might have assumed that he just was not paying attention when the instructor suggested how to go about this comparison. But two different students from two different sections arrived with first drafts swearing that "compare two poems" had been their only instruction. One student had already "compared some poems" in high school and didn't have too much difficulty in producing an acceptable second draft. The other student needed to spend a lot of time thinking over and talking about what kinds of things people can look at when they write about poetry. The first young man returned to the center with his second draft and his teacher's comments on it. The teacher had said it was a good effort but not quite "what he had in mind" and made some specific suggestions about how the paper might be improved. The student was understandably frustrated. Although the assignment appeared open-ended, the instructor actually expected students to follow fairly specific guidelines that had not, however, been revealed to them.

I began in my expository writing classes to more carefully think through my own hidden agenda for each assignment and to make my expectations clearer to students. Of course, students are often confused about even the most carefully explained assignments. Both in class and in the center, I learned to say to students, "Tell me in your own words what you're supposed to do in this paper." What they told me often provided a key to some of the problems in a composition. The very strange sentences in a paper by a foreign student had me puzzled until he happened to reveal that his teacher had asked him to base his composition on a textbook exercise in changing sentences from active to

passive voice. His confusion about this procedure accounted for most of the confusion in his paper.

Related to “What are you supposed to do?” are some other important questions, “What are you trying to do in this paper?” “What is your purpose in writing?” Listening to students talk about purpose again helped to solve writing problems. Nathan seemed to me to be the king of the unsupported generalization. His papers were peppered with statements like, “The government should set aside more wilderness areas,” and “We should be able to do whatever we choose no matter what our status or role is in society.” I worked with Nathan all year. At first I would point out the offending statement and simply tell Nathan, “You need to explain this. What do you mean here?” While that improved the paper we were working on, it did not seem to carry over to the next one. Finally, Nathan himself indirectly brought up the question of purpose. In frustration, I had said, “Nathan you are just not convincing me.” Nathan patiently explained that he wasn’t trying to convince me of anything; he was telling me his ideas. Further questioning revealed that he thought his purpose was simply to *inform* the reader of his opinion, and therefore, he felt no obligation to produce any additional explanation or evidence. I had been operating on the assumption that when a writer makes a statement like, “The government should set aside more wilderness areas,” he obviously intends to persuade me.

Understanding Nathan’s perception of purpose helped me with another student, Helene. She had written what seemed to me to be a very unconvincing futuristic description of Manhattan after a nuclear disaster in which she depicted the survivors living “in peace and harmony without discrimination or greed.” Again, I had been pointing out unsupported statements. When I finally asked Helene about her purpose, she too complained that she wasn’t trying to convince anyone. This future world was what she imagined, and now in the paper she was simply describing it. Both Nathan and Helene began to improve their writing when they started to see the need to convince and persuade the reader even in “informative” or “descriptive” writing.

This problem and many others stem from the inability of a lot of students to imagine an audience, to imagine a reader’s response to their writing. This is the most important thing I learned in the writing center. Students can imagine their papers being corrected and graded; they often cannot imagine them being read. On their first visits to the center, almost all students are most worried about having words spelled correctly and having commas in the right places. They sometimes find it difficult to accept that as a reader I have additional concerns and expect-

tations that are harder to satisfy than mechanical ones about spelling and punctuation. After I refused to merely proofread one young man's paper, he stalked out actually shouting that I had no right to discuss his ideas.

I was surprised at how many students had not themselves read back over what they had written. Step one in most conferences was to ask the student to read his or her paper aloud. The rest of the conference then usually revolved around the questions good readers ask about writing they take seriously: "What does this writing mean?" "What is this writer trying to say?" "What is this writer's attitude toward her subject?" "How does the writer want me to respond?" Though years of classroom teaching had certainly demonstrated to me that students were often unable to carry out many of my suggestions for "improving" their writing, listening to them in the center finally convinced me that they could only use those suggestions that coincided with their own perceptions of purpose and audience, and the meanings they wanted to communicate. The center also confirmed for me the idea that asked the right questions, students can often solve their own writing problems.

Even on the level of proofreading, asking questions and listening to answers was an efficient method. Asked about a misplaced comma, the student sometimes knew how to correct it or, on the other hand, revealed a personal rule such as, "I thought you always had to use a comma before 'and,'" or "I use a comma when I want the reader to pause." Helping the student discover how his rule diverged from standard English usage took longer than just pointing out the error, but the student seemed to remember it better.

What I learned in the writing center certainly affected the way I taught my expository writing classes. In formulating assignments, I paid closer attention to considerations of purpose and audience. Although the classes were already run as workshops, I increased the use of peer groups to provide writers with an audience and reader responses. I spent more time training groups to ask questions, to reflect what the writer was saying, to go beyond the level of proofreading in making suggestions, and to listen to each other. I required students to come in for individual conferences and used more of my office time to discuss writing with students rather than make written comments on their papers. When I couldn't meet with students individually, I asked them to turn in with their papers a page or two of writing explaining their purpose and audience and how they had gone about writing this particular composition. The things I wrote on student papers were now

most often phrased as questions rather than comments that pointed out errors. I carried over insights gained from individual students in the center to the problems of other writers. Knowing that Barbara's problem was really developing connections, not organization, helped me to see this same characteristic in other student papers. I found many students shared Nathan and Helene's ideas about purpose or had their own personal rules about things like using commas, making word choices, or starting new paragraphs.

All of these things about the composing process can I think be discovered by the teacher in the classroom, but the individualized writing center approach offers some special advantages. Most importantly, the writing center teacher quickly learns that knowing some of the right questions to ask is, indeed, better than knowing all of the answers. In the center, the teacher can more easily ask these questions about the student's writing and listen to his responses. Of course, all good teachers listen to students, but at the high school level there are often a lot of students, a class bell rings every forty or fifty minutes, and there is only a little time for conferences. Teachers hear, but sometimes it's hard to listen. At the college level, there is more time for individual conferences, but, too often, the discussion between student and teacher is really about grading, not about writing.

A second advantage of the writing center at NYU is the teacher training and exchange of ideas it provides. Teachers meet together once a week with the director of the center, and sometimes guest speakers, to discuss problems, strategies, and new research in composition. My thinking has grown out of suggestions made at these meetings or in informal conversation at the center. Because of the physical set up of the center—small cubicles in a larger room—teachers are less isolated than they often are in individual classrooms and offices, so it's somewhat easier to share ideas. Formal research projects are encouraged. Teachers in the center are studying the special problems of E.S.L. students, the actual procedures students follow in composing, and questions related to students' intentions when they write.

The advantages and disadvantages of an individualized writing center approach to writing are usually discussed in terms of the benefits for students. This is as it should be, but a further argument in favor of this approach is the benefits it offers to teachers. Because the center emphasizes asking questions and listening, rather than supplying ready-made answers, teachers discover new insights into the composing process and learn more effective ways of helping writers.