From Factory to Workshop: Revising the Writing Center

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Though the tutoring of students is an ancient tradition, the tutoring of student writers in writing centers is a fairly recent phenomenon. Though certain teachers have always used their offices as informal writing labs, a place where students could come for help with a paper or a writing problem, the formal writing center began in the 1960's when English Departments were overwhelmed with the task of teaching the thousands of underprepared students admitted by new open admissions policies.

Since that time, the number of college writing centers has grown to approximately one thousand; moreover, most of these writing centers have themselves experienced substantial growth and change. The administrative excitement and commitment to the basic writer that prevailed at the beginning of the writing center movement has, in many cases, been cooled by decreasing enrollment and limited funds. Thus, while some centers continue to flourish according to their original conceptions, others have been disbanded, and many others are being forced to reassess their purposes and redefine their roles.

The writing center's current identity crisis has been, as many of you have already read, the focus of several recent issues of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*. In the September 1982 issue Phyllis Sherwood reported that the English Department of Raymond Walters College had voted to "temporarily" close the writing lab.[1] In answer to Sherwood's plea for advice, Jeanne Simpson responded that writing center directors should avoid the limited image of a remedial center, establish the center as an indispensable multi-function service, and solicit support from the ad-

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ministration and the entire university faculty—not just the English faculty.[2] Jeanette Harris's response also called for diversification of center roles—for the encouragement of and participation in research as well as increased participation in various campus-wide programs such as technical writing, writing across the curriculum, and teacher education.[3] These calls for expansion and diversification echo earlier calls—that of George Hayhoe, for example, who urges writing center expansion through public relations and outreach programs[4] and that of Willa Wolcott who reports the implementation of individualized materials-centered programs sandwiched between pre and posttests, of non-credit minicourses or workshops on such topics as essay exams and research papers, and of non-English department programs to help students achieve language competency as shown on itemized tests.[5]

By developing writing center programs that extend throughout the university community, these directors have recognized the very real danger inherent in being limited to a remedial program which may be phased out by increasing enrollment standards or which may be viewed as expendable by main-stream oriented faculty and cost-conscious administrators. Indeed, the Writing Center at East Texas State University has undergone a similar university wide extension and expansion program. Our experience has shown us that Hayhoe's observation that "once special tutoring programs are established, they tend to continue and expand"[6] is more accurate than we had anticipated.

The Writing Center—or writing lab as it was known them—was started at East Texas in the spring of 1970 when freshman composition teachers agreed to donate time and materials to an informal lab which was set up in a tiny and unpopular classroom. By the spring of 1977, the writing center had been staffed by graduate students and was seeing an average of 17 students a day, spending about an hour with each student at a tutor/student ratio of 1.5. At this time, and on into the fall of 1977 when the center, then staffed with a full-time director and several graduate students, saw approximately 20 students per day, the tutors were able to use effectively the tutor/student conference. However, when the basic writing course was mandated in the fall of 1979, the average number of students seen daily increased to 45, and in 1979, when the center responded to campus needs and developed programs in elementary education, business education, and social work, the average number of students increased to 69 per day. To handle this traffic we began frantically to develop materials and to order programmed texts and taped materials. Between 1979 and 1982, our tutoring hours were

cut rather drastically, but enrollment went down in the basic writing classes, so that tutoring the 50 students per day visiting our center was manageable, though at a tutor/student ratio of 1 to 3 we were busier than we would have liked. The situation became critical in the fall of 1982, however, when our tutoring hours were again cut and traffic increased substantially so that we were working with students for an average of 65 hours per day (60 students per day) at a tutor/student ration of 1 to 3.7. Not counting Saturdays, the weekdays were even busier; indeed, on one day we saw 131 students in a single 5½ hour period with only 22 tutoring hours—a frightening ratio of 1 to 6. That week we saw 540 students with 90 tutoring hours at the same 1 to 6 ratio.

Our experience with expansion and growth in the writing center, therefore, has made us realize that the danger inherent in limiting the services of a writing center is paralleled by the danger of expanding too much or too quickly for existing or dwindling tutor resources. This latter danger threatens not just the existence of the center but its ultimate success with individual students. More specifically, the danger is that in our zeal to be accountable and cost efficient—to prove our success to faculty and administrators—we may be seduced into paying more attention to test scores and numbers of students than to the individual student and his or her writing process. Indeed, many centers have—perhaps out of necessity, perhaps out of inertia—been transformed from workshops where an apprentice writer learns his craft from a patient and skilled master teacher to factories where harassed and overworked tutors, like job foremen, distribute assignments—tapes or handouts or combination modules—for assembly line departmental programs or class assignments.[7] This image may be exaggerated and oversimplified, but I must admit that the day we saw 131 students, I nearly panicked. That day I determined that our entire writing center program needed some serious reevaluation and, quite probably, serious redirection.

After serious consideration of the situation, I recommitted myself to the workshop model of tutoring rather than the factory model. That is, I decided that our center needed to be refocused, in Muriel Harris's terms, on process rather than product, on the tutor/student conference rather than on auto-tutorial materials. In tutor staff meetings and in conversations with teaching assistants and faculty members within the department, I reemphasized the importance of writing as process and encouraged more work in the center with prewriting and rewriting.

Results of this redirection are positive, for the center is now seeing more students for help with revisions, and teaching assistants are making fewer across the board assignments of tapes and handouts. However, since we are committed not only to drop-in and referral traffic but also to full-scale programs in basic English, elementary education, business education, and social work, we are still too busy for the pure workshop model to function successfully.

Our present working model, then, is a combination of the workshop, or student and process-centered approach, and the factory, or materials-centered, approach which crept in as we were forced to take on more and more tasks with fewer tutor resources. For the present, at any rate, in order to meet our campus-wide commitments, we must retain some assembly line elements, but we try to give as much individualized help as possible even with the pre-set programs in which students work through modules composed of handouts, texts, tapes, and mastery tests. We agree with Richard Veit's injunction that materials should not be used "to replace rather than to supplement tutoring."[8] In addition, many drop-in or referral students also continue to come for help with writing or rewriting a specific paper, and we spend as much time as possible working with these students during their writing processes—asking them questions and helping them to discover what they have to say and how they want to say it. We serve as readers for these students, supplying the element of audience that is so often missing in student writing. We know from experience that this type of individual tutoring is the most demanding, and we try to avoid giving in to impatience and frustration by dictating or editing for the student or giving in to doubt and fear by substituting materials for personal explanation.

Like a piece of writing, a writing center is a living, dynamic entity. Also, like writing itself, a successful writing center must often undergo extensive revision. Over the years, our writing center, like many others, has met Muriel Harris's challenge to be "flexible, consistently changing to fit the needs of the situation."[9] Once again, writing centers are under pressure to meet the needs of a changing university community—a community which, in many cases, has reduced its emphasis on the basic English student in favor of the traditional student enrolled in regular composition and content-area classes. As writing center directors, however, I believe that our greatest current challenge is not just to change the writing center to meet the demands of the university community but to *resee* or *revise* the center as a leading force within the

university flux. As we reassess and redefine the role of the writing center, we must consider how the center can most effectively function in three areas: within itself, within the specific university community, and within the academic community as a whole.

Before the writing center can be an effective leader in the university or the broader academic profession, it must have its own clearly defined philosophy and sense of values. I believe, personally, that the best philosophy that a writing center can have is the workshop method that focuses on the student and her writing process; I also believe that the student/tutor conference is the heart of this process-centered approach. The conference method not only allows the student to work through the prewriting, writing, and rewriting stages of writing but it also gives her a real sense of audience, for the tutor reads and responds directly and immediately to her writing. This method of tutoring may also help the student to begin to understand the complex and recursive nature of writing and its value as a means of discovery. Moreover, these conference experiences are invaluable not only to the student writer but also to the tutor who may indeed learn more than a student from a session. Just as process writing demands that a writer produce her best writing, so does process tutoring demand the best of tutors.

Once the basic philosophy of the writing center has been defined or redefined, the center should re-evaluate its role in the university community. A center whose clients are limited to basic writing students is indeed losing many opportunities to help students to improve their writing, but as our experience has shown we should be careful not to expand our services beyond the scope of available resources. Starting programs is easy; maintaining them in the face of decreasing resources is not so easy. Materials-centered programs or modules, once set up, take fewer tutoring hours to run than a more individualistic process-centered approach and because of their lower cost are therefore more attractive to administrators. However, the long lasting effects of such materials-centered approaches are minimal when compared to the more extensive learning that takes place in a process-oriented conference.

Gaining university-wide support for a process-oriented approach, however, may require some subtle reeducation not only of administrators and various content area teachers but also of some English teachers. If classroom assignments allow students to use the writing process, they will see the value of working in the center during the prewriting, writing, and rewriting stages of their writing. However, it does no good for a writing center tutor to encourage process, discovery,

and development of ideas if the students' papers are only going to be evaluated on mechanical errors or if the students' writing process is to be confined to a fifty-minute class period. When process is emphasized in both the classroom and the writing center, students can concentrate first on content and form and then deal with mechanical errors in the editing stage. Indeed, students are more motivated to work on mechanics and usage in the context of their own ungraded drafts. To avoid the ethical problem of helping students in editing their ungraded drafts, however, writing center directors might work with composition or content area teachers to set up a program in which students' first papers are written and rewritten in the center and either non-graded or S/U graded. Working with student writing in all stages and disciplines, the writing center can do much not only to encourage writing as process but also to promote writing across the curriculum.

Finally the writing center has been and should continue to be a leader throughout our profession—particularly in the area of research. Many of the recent discoveries about the writing process have stemmed from research in writing centers or related basic writing programs, but these discoveries are only a beginning. As Jeanette Harris has observed, "We badly need laboratories in which to explore unanswered questions about such issues as the nature of the relationship between reading and writing, the effect of revision on the discourse of student writers, the role of recursion in both reading and writing, the diagnosis and analysis of error, and the interaction of text and reader. Writing centers provide a context in which hypotheses can be tested, processes observed, products examined, and students interviewed."[10]

The case study approach used by Janet Emig and others, lending itself as it does to the process-centered tutor/student conference, is an ideal model for writing center research. Case studies can not only add valuable information to our aggregate knowledge of writing and learning but, more immediately, they can help us to understand and tutor the students themselves. This semester, for example, I am working with Rick, an extremely introverted student who writes reasonably correct sentences but who thinks and writes so slowly and painfully that he may write only one sentence in fifteen or twenty minutes. I hope that, as I learn more about Rick's motivation and ability, I will be able to aid not only his success but also to increase my understanding of the writing and learning processes so that I can help others to help students with similar problems.

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Broad scale writing center research can also help us to provide more effective center services. As Gary Olson has observed, "investigation into center methodology can very likely expand our vision of the writing center and reveal insights into its operation that we never before imagined."[11] Thus, though my intuition and experience inform me that the process-centered conference method of tutoring is superior to other methods, we need research to test this hypothesis. We need more research to help us determine the relative success not only of the process-centered approach as opposed to the materials-centered approach but also the relative merits of the appointment and drop-in methods, of graduate tutors and peer tutors, and of individual tutoring and group tutoring. And as we move further into the computer age, we need research to determine the effectiveness of different types of computer assisted instruction.

Donald Murray has said that a writer never really finishes a piece of writing, that she simply revises and revises until she decides to stop. So, too, the writing center—locally or nationally—cannot achieve a definitive, finished form, for centers that work are dynamic not static. As long as it exists, we must continue to revise the writing center in light of what we have learned and are learning about the writing process.

NOTES

[1]Phyllis Sherwood, "The Rise and Fall of Basic English and the Writing Lab," *Writing Lab Newsletter,* 7 (September 1982), 1-3.

[2]Jeanne Simpson, "A Note on the Collapse: Let Them Eat Cake," *Writing Lab Newsletter,* 7 (October 1982), 1-3.

[3]Jeanette Harris, "Redefining its Role of the Writing Center," *Writing Lab Newsletter,* 7 (November 1982), 1-2.

[4]George Hayhoe, "Beyond the Basics: Expanded Uses of Writing Lab," *Tutoring Writing: A Sourcebook for Writing Labs,* ed. Muriel Harris (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1982), p. 247.

[5]Willa Wolcott, "A Writing Center Reaches Out," *Writing Lab Newsletter,* 5 (May 1981), 7-9.

[6]Hayhoe, p. 248.

[7]Ruth Windover used the term "factory" and "workshop" to refer to types of revision in her article, "A Holistic Pedagogy for Freshman Composition," in *Revising: New Essays for Teachers of Writing,* ed. Ronald A. Sudol (Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1982), p. 91.

[8]Richard C. Veit, "The Case for Tutors," *New Directions for College Learning Assistance: Improving Writing Skills,* ed. Thom Hawkins and Phyllis Brooks (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1981), p. 13.

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⁹Muriel Harris, *Process and Product: Dominant Models for Writing Centers: Improving Writing Skills,* ed. Thom Hawkins and Phyllis Brooks (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1981), p. 7.

¹⁰Jeanette Harris, p. 2.

¹¹Gary Olson, "Unity and the Future of the Writing Center," *Writing Lab Newsletter,* 5 (June 1981), 6.