

1-1-1986

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Recommended Citation

Wilson, Lucy and LaBouff, Olivia (1986) "Going Beyond Remedial: The Writing Center and The Literature Class," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 2, Article 5.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1108>

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Going Beyond Remedial: The Writing Center and The Literature Class

Lucy Wilson and Olivia LaBouff

The common image of college writing centers suggests a place that most faculty would like to ignore and most students work to avoid. Generally associated with basic writers, the writing center is often regarded as an expensive fix-it shop for students who are unskilled or unsuccessful in the area of composition. Viewed in this way, the writing center inevitably suffers the stigma that has been documented in countless journal and newsletter articles. Like home for Robert Frost's dying hired men, the writing center then becomes "the place where, when you have to go there,/ They have to take you in" (105).

The morbid tone of Frost's lines is appropriate if the above profile continues to plague writing centers. Given the recent trend to eliminate basic skills instruction from all "respectable" college campuses, writing centers may well be swept away with other sources of basic skills assistance. UCLA, for example, last year discontinued baccalaureate credit for basic skills course (Byock). Revealing a similar stance, Father Charles Casassa, S. J., Chancellor Emeritus of Loyola Marymount University, had these words to say in a recent interview: "There now is a surge to bring back excellence to education. We have slipped badly, and we should not be doing remedial work in college (Vilis 7). If such a view prevails nationwide, writing centers, perceived essentially as basic skills centers, will eventually become a mere footnote in American academic lore.

However, those who work in writing centers know that the negative stereotype does not match the reality of these centers. By experimenting

with all the stages of the writing process and by working with a variety of writers and tasks, writing centers have evolved beyond the fix-it shop era. Although they continue to provide much needed assistance to the basic writer, they can and often do provide a valuable resource to competent writers as well. Muriel Harris, tracing the history of the writing center and summarizing its current status, alludes to the need for writing center staffs to broadcast to the wider academic community precisely what the writing center can offer:

Of course, we need to talk to each other and to learn from each other, but as we grow, we're going to have to talk also in ways that the rest of the world of composition teachers and scholars can overhear us and think about our unique contribution to the teaching of writing. Otherwise, we're left in the position of being thought of as not much more than some extra help down the hall. (3)

This article reports one writing center's recent experiment in offering more than "some extra help down the hall." Loyola Marymount University's writing center (part of a larger Learning Resource Center) began four years ago by providing assistance to remedial freshman composition students, primarily through a peer tutoring program. However, responding to the needs of a much larger percentage of our students, last year we expanded our services by supplementing the teaching of writing in lower-division literature courses. Built on a cooperative relationship between the writing center staff and the English Department faculty, this experiment consists of a series of workshops that help students meet the specific reading and writing demands of literature classes. The first workshops provided general guidelines for handling the study of fiction and the writing of critical papers. Eventually we developed a workshop especially designed to help students manage a particular writing assignment given by the literature instructor.

The workshop series is not aimed primarily at students whose reading or writing skills are in need of remediation (though these students would no doubt benefit from the workshops). Rather, the literature workshops serve all students whose academic experiences have not provided them with the practical and theoretical frameworks that are essential to the study of literature at the college level.

The development of the workshops establishes two important precedents on our campus: it involves the writing center in an enterprise that serves a much wider student community than the remedial population; and it serves as a prototype that could link writing center staff not only to the English Department but to other departments as well.

Workshops such as ours reach out to the entire student population—not only to basic students, but to those with a wide range of skills and abilities. Diane E. Gruenberg, reporting the results of her survey of college basic skills

programs, claims that when centers are used by “academically strong students” and by faculty, a new message is circulated: “There is no disgrace in needing and seeking help to learn. Everyone can benefit from a fresh explanation or some extra points” (3). By offering content-area workshops, writing centers become a valuable resource to all students and faculty.

What follows is an account of how this experiment came about on our campus and what it signifies, as seen from two important perspectives: first from the viewpoint of the writing specialist working in the context of the writing center and, second, from the vantage point of the English instructor working in the context of the literature classroom. We feel that our experience can be of value to other writing center staffs—those who are considering expanding the scope of their academic offerings as well as those who have already implemented similar content-area workshops.

From the Viewpoint of the Writing Specialist

Two experiences contributed to my part in the development of the literature workshops. The first experience goes back a few years to my days as a high school English teacher. The last three years at the high school level were spent preparing some of the school’s academically superior twelfth graders for the English Advanced Placement Exam. Working with these fine students, I discovered that, although they were quite intelligent and relatively disciplined, they had difficulty writing about literature. They tended to approach each piece only as a potential source of reading pleasure. They wanted to sit back—or better yet lie down—and “enjoy” the story. When they didn’t enjoy the story, they no longer wanted to read it, much less discuss it or, worse, analyze it in an essay. I found that they needed to develop a new orientation towards literature if they were to compete effectively on the AP exam. Getting them to see a piece of literature as a crafted work of art was a tedious and enlightening experience for both me and my students. I reasoned that if these students (many of whom qualified for America’s most prestigious colleges and universities) required an orientation to the study of literature, students who line up behind the “first string” must be in even greater need.

The second experience grew out of tutoring individual students in the writing center at Loyola Marymount University. Regularly, students came in seeking help in writing papers about short stories and novels. Typically, these students had no note-taking or marking system that was appropriate for the study of literature. Seeing students so unequipped for their task, I began to think that the writing center could assist students by showing them various ways to take notes as they read and by alerting them to the critical elements (theme, character, conflict, etc.) to watch for and to keep track of throughout their reading.

Second, I saw that students had difficulty designing topics for literature papers. Their topics would be so broad that they would be more appropriate for a book than a four-page paper, or they would be so narrow as to preclude discussion—once the students stated the topic, there was simply nothing more to say. Once students finally settled on a workable thesis, they had trouble sustaining an orderly, substantiated discussion of the topic. They either created what I call a “puff paper”—one that is fashioned out of airy generalizations, no elaboration, no support—or they wrote steady strings of concrete evidence, perhaps quotation after quotation, without any discussion to point out the significance of the evidence or to apply the evidence to the overall topic.

Here again I saw an opportunity for the writing center to offer help. The writing center staff could assist students, first of all, by having them analyze the relative merits of excellent and poor samples of critical papers written by former lower-division literature students (anonymous, of course). Second, the center could provide guidelines and practice in handling some of the major aspects of a critical paper, especially the following:

1. Selecting an appropriate, specific topic
2. Selecting references to support the paper’s thesis
3. Knowing when and how to summarize the work itself
4. Citing references.

Attendance at the first workshop was record-breaking, primarily because one of the instructors, Lucy Wilson, had offered her students some small incentive for participation. (Writing center workshops on our campus generally draw anywhere from zero to five students; this time the number rose to twenty-five.) Building on the positive response to the first workshop, I designed a second one entitled “Writing Papers About Literature” and advertised once again through the English Department. This workshop met with similar success.

Because of the interest of one faculty member and her willingness to collaborate with writing center staff, the literature workshop experiment developed to still another stage. Lucy and I planned a workshop that would help her students to narrow a topic (a particularly troublesome problem for some of her students) and plan a paper in response to one of her assignments.

In this third workshop, however, teacher and writing specialist engaged in a closer collaboration, one that required some joint planning and implied trust of the writing center’s ability to function as a partner to faculty. Also,

the third workshop established a group setting in which the writing center helped students to meet the demands of a real class assignment, not an example of a class assignment.

In designing the format and content of all the workshops, I used a rather simple triad of elements: INFORMATION, APPLICATION, AND CONNECTIONS. At the heart of the workshop is the APPLICATION of what has been presented, and it is this application that encourages students to transfer what they have learned in the workshop to their classroom assignments.

For example, in the "How to Study Fiction" workshop, after supplying students with a set of questions that would help them to analyze any piece of literature (INFORMATION), I immediately furnished them with a two-page short story to analyze using the questions as a guide (APPLICATION). Students then shared their observations, insights, and questions in a group discussion and were given the opportunity during the session to apply the set of questions to a work of literature that they were currently studying in their classes (CONNECTIONS).

In the workshop that was designed especially for Lucy's class, the main ingredients were the same as in the earlier workshops: information, application, and connections. But here the application and connections were fused into one set of activities. In this case, when students came to the practical demonstration of the material being presented, they were working directly with their own classroom assignment.

Positive student response to this as well as the two previous workshops has encouraged us to explore this type of collaboration further in the future.

From the Viewpoint of the English Instructor

My interest in the fiction workshops was twofold. As a literature instructor, I was grateful for the opportunity to enhance my students' appreciation of literature through a systematic reinforcement of their reading and critical writing skills. And as the official "liaison" between the English Department and the writing center, I saw the workshops as an excellent opportunity for diversification of the center's function, which, as Jeanette Harris has pointed out, is crucial to the survival of writing centers faced with decreasing concern for the basic student (1-2). The fiction workshops provide a way of reaching what Harris calls "the traditional, adequately prepared student," as well as the basic or ESL student.

When one of our writing specialists, Olivia LaBouff, suggested to the English Department chair that the writing center offer a workshop on "How to Study Fiction," he responded enthusiastically. He acknowledged in a

memo that one of the problems in the introductory literature class “is that so much time must be spent in discussing the stories and novels themselves, that there is very little time to discuss HOW the students should read them.”

There is, I would add, even less time to explain how students should WRITE about literature. Most of my introductory literature students have had one semester of college composition, during which they have been exposed to various forms of expository prose. On our campus, college composition assignments are primarily position papers or personal response essays on topics arbitrarily assigned by the instructor. Even the better students have had little or no college-level experience writing in response to a literary text, such as a short story or novel. For many, the writing of critical essays is hampered by even more fundamental problems. These students are unfamiliar with literature, have done very little reading of any sort, and lack the skills required to comprehend subtle or difficult texts and to respond to these texts. As a result, students are unprepared for the major tasks required of them in an introductory literature course: careful reading, note taking, responding in class discussions, and writing carefully planned critical papers and essay examinations.

After reading Olivia’s description of the proposed first workshop, “How to Study Fiction,” I saw the writing center workshop as a way of introducing my students to many of the works that I planned to cover during the next fourteen weeks. The workshop would give my students strategies for handling their reading assignments, thus promoting more lively and informative class discussions. This in turn could lead to better papers and, more importantly, better students.

The first problem in implementing a fiction workshop or series of workshops is getting students to the writing center. They have many demands on their time, and most students are not sufficiently self-motivated to spend an hour at a voluntary fiction workshop. Merely suggesting that attendance at the workshop will “help” their overall performance and thus enhance their grades is not adequate motivation for the students who most need the extra help. In a report on course-specific content-area writing labs, Mary Grattan has described how a sociology instructor provided incentive by offering a few points of extra credit to those who attended (2). This was my answer as well, and the response was more than satisfactory. I learned from Olivia that my students far outnumbered students from other literature classes. The reason for their attendance is clearly the fact that I’d taken time in class to stress the value of the workshop and had offered a small amount of extra credit.

Student response to the first workshop was favorable, and class discussion began to improve, though there is no way to measure the degree to

which the workshop accounted for this improvement. The second workshop, "Writing Papers about Literature," was also well attended by students from my sections. Clearly, these students were developing a special relationship with the writing center, so Olivia and I planned one more workshop, designed specifically for my students and tailored to the final writing assignment of the semester. Eighteen students took part in this workshop, many of them attending their second or third workshop despite the fact that they received no extra credit after the first one.

Informal feedback from the students was very encouraging, but for the purpose of this study we needed concrete answers to the following questions:

1. What did you find most helpful about the workshop(s) that you attended?
2. What suggestions would you make to improve future workshops?
3. Did the workshop(s) improve your comprehension and/or writing?

At the end of the semester, I asked the students who had attended any of the workshops to fill out a questionnaire. Forty-five students responded to the questionnaire.

In responding to the first question, the students indicated that the workshops helped them in several key areas. Many said that the workshops showed them "what to look for" as well as "how to look for" main points AND small details. The general consensus among the students was that as a result of the workshop they were able to focus and organize their thoughts more logically and creatively. Several students appreciated the emphasis on "application," specifically the use of sample papers and worksheets. The workshops also gave the students an opportunity to share ideas and work together in small groups. Increased confidence in their analytical skills was seen as a useful by-product of the workshops, and two students stated that they now had a better idea of what teachers look for in student essays.

The second question, which asked for suggestions for improvements in future workshops, elicited a remarkably consistent response: more time per workshop and more sections (at different times) of each. Several students singled out the third workshop, which was tailored to the final essay assignment, and asked that more like this one be offered. The idea of using one class period early in the semester was suggested by some students as a way of introducing them to the writing center and its facilities. One student applauded the use of extra credit as a motivation factor.

When asked, in the third question, whether the workshops improved their comprehension and/or writing, most of the students responded that the workshops helped them in one or more of the following areas: reading

comprehension, note-taking, outlining, focusing a topic, and writing. Three students mentioned improvement in their grades (though one lamented that his or her second paper received a lower grade). The responses to the third question indicated that the students were grateful for the opportunity to receive extra help and showed an awareness on their part that these workshops were initiated for their benefit. The students appreciated our concern for the difficulties that they had experienced with the materials and methods of the introductory literature course.

The student responses to this questionnaire are an indication of the considerable and relatively untapped potential that writing centers have to contribute to the literature classroom experience. My students exhibited increased acceptance of the demands placed by the literature class upon their thinking and writing skills, for the workshops reinforced the very points that I had made in the classroom, in individual conferences, and in my written comments on their essays.

In order for the workshops to provide such reinforcement, however, cooperation from the instructors is essential. I wasn't present at any of the workshops, but my continuing support for the experiment helped to shape my students' perception of the workshops and of the writing center. When attempting to implement a fiction workshop, or any content-area skills program, a writing center staff relies on the instructors to publicize the workshops and encourage attendance. By sending the students a positive message about the role of the writing center on campus, instructors can counteract the "negativism" that, according to Gary Olson, is "very damaging" to students and writing center staff members (155). Writing centers can provide students with valuable course-specific assistance, but it must be a three-way cooperative effort involving the students, the writing center staff, and the instructors.

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Lucy Wilson, who received her Ph.D. from Temple University in 1982, is an assistant professor of English at Loyola Marymount University. She teaches courses in twentieth-century literature, composition, and business writing. Since 1984, she has been the English Department/Learning Resource Center Coordinator at L.M.U., serving as a liaison between the two departments.