

1-1-1986

Recruiting and Training Tutors For Cross-Disciplinary Writing Programs

Leone C. Scanlon

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/wcj>

Recommended Citation

Scanlon, Leone C. (1986) "Recruiting and Training Tutors For Cross-Disciplinary Writing Programs," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 2, Article 7.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1110>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

Recruiting and Training Tutors For Cross-Disciplinary Writing Programs

Leone C. Scanlon

Most writing center tutors—whether they are undergraduates, graduate students, or faculty—have been drawn from English departments. As Joyce Steward and Mary Croft observe in the *Writing Laboratory*, frequent sources of staff are “upper-level undergraduate students, usually majors in English or English-education” and “graduate students who are teaching assistants in English.” Contributors to *Tutoring Writing* also mention recruiting from English departments. For example, Deborah Arfken suggests that recruiters “solicit nominations...from English faculty, the education department, and their respective student-majors committees” (111). Susan Glassman also looks to English majors and faculty, noting non-English majors only as an additional group (124).

Since many writing centers began in English departments, such a policy is understandable. It may also be appropriate when a center serves only students in English classes. Arfken seems to point to such an arrangement when she notes that with a successful tutoring program “English faculty will witness an upswing in lucid, cogent, and interesting student compositions...”(121). Yet such a policy unnecessarily limits the pool from which tutors may be drawn. Moreover, most writing centers serve a wider clientele, helping students in all disciplines. Such broad service is likely to increase as more and more colleges develop cross-disciplinary writing programs. As Muriel Harris comments, “The emphasis on writing in other disciplines...requires the services and facilities of a writing center for students as they write in various courses” (7). If centers are to serve all

disciplines, then we should recruit staff from all departments. We need not assume that only English departments can provide competent writers. A broader recruiting policy draws upon the strengths of writers in many fields.

For example, Clark University's students, both graduate and undergraduate, have provided a diverse pool of talented and accomplished candidates, as the following biographies of actual writing center tutors (fictional names used) indicate:

Maya, a Ph.D. candidate in psychology, had worked as a research assistant and as a teaching assistant in Clark's Psychology Department. Before coming to Clark she had tutored in the Office of Special Services of a large midwestern university, where she had been an academic counselor for handicapped students and had assisted in writing a grant proposal for the program. At Clark she was particularly interested in psychological services for blacks and women. In addition to academic papers on these subjects, she wrote poetry and fiction.

Ann, a Ph.D. candidate in economics, had been a teaching assistant in introductory economics courses. Her considerable experience as an editor included editing medical papers, court transcripts, and articles on international development. She too wrote poetry and short fiction.

Herb, a Ph.D. candidate in geography, had assisted in geography and sociology courses, worked as an editor at Clark's Center for Technology, Environment and Development, and had volunteered to tutor math and reading at a local elementary school. With five years' experience in development programs in Africa, he was fluent in Arabic.

Freda, who has a B. S. in environmental journalism from another college, worked as a secretary in one of Clark's science departments and assisted in an introductory course in environmental studies. After serving as editor for a regional environmental council newsletter, she wrote a full-length novel and a novella for young adults.

Simon, a philosophy major, first assisted in an introductory philosophy course. After graduating, he decided to stay on at Clark for a year to learn German and ancient Greek before going to graduate school in philosophy. He has since assisted in two cinema/writing courses offered by the German Department. A scholarly and independent person, he interrupted his undergraduate career to spend five years studying philosophy and literature on his own. An extraordinarily lucid and elegant writer, he is presently helping to edit the *Bibliography of Scholarship on the Relations of Literature and Science*.

In addition to their general writing competence and their varied and rich experiences, which help them to deal with the diverse students they assist, these tutors bring to their work specific knowledge of writing in their field. Although certain characteristics of writing are common to all fields, the discourse in each discipline also has its own features. An interdisciplinary writing center needs to be staffed by tutors who are familiar with these different features.

Discourse Features Across-the-Curriculum

The problems of understanding writing in other disciplines are common to faculty as well as students. Lester Faigley and Kristine Hansen studied the responses of an English teacher and a sociologist to a student paper on probation for criminals. The English teacher dealt only with surface features despite stating that the professional value of the paper would be a criterion for grading. The sociologist, on the other hand, was “impressed with the depth of [the student’s] encounter with the probation system” and considered the paper generally well written (147). Faigley and Hansen comment on the need for English teachers who want to help students in other disciplines to go beyond matters of form. “To be able to make confident qualitative judgments about writing in a discipline, they need to know how that discipline creates and transmits knowledge” (148).

Tutor training should also include theories about what is unique to different types of discourse. Some theories emphasize differences in perspective, while others emphasize shared acts of conceptualizing. For example, Elaine Maimon and her colleagues point to the different perspectives among the disciplines and describe different formats and genres (5, 110). They assert that in the humanities “the activity of contemplation is central,” perhaps distinctive (176). Examples given are literary analyses, reviews, and “the puzzle or problem paper,” often assigned in philosophy courses. On the other hand, common genres in the social sciences are term papers, reports of findings, and case studies. In these genres, particularly the last two, the data are “based on empirical observations” (236), as is true of such scientific genres as the laboratory notebook and report.

Analyzing the different types of discourse according to a three-part model of explanatory, persuasive, and expressive discourse, Richard Lloyd-Jones finds that each type is characterized by a primary rhetorical trait (33). In persuasive discourse, for example, the primary trait might be the development of the argument, whereas in an expressive task it might be the elaboration of the point of view. He argues that a writer skilled in one form of discourse may not be skilled in another (37).

While Lloyd-Jones looks at features of the text, Lee Odell discusses the difficulties in analyzing the conceptual differences in apparently similar assignments. Comparing two history assignments, an analysis of how one should view Eichmann and a description of “the kind of problems a historian would have to solve in creating a historical narrative of a major battle” (48), Odell observes similarities in classifying problems but implies that, although both tasks require examining historical documents, the analysis of the clues given in the documents would be different for each task. Given such underlying difficulties, he argues that teachers need to help

students understand the conceptual demands implicit in assignments and suggests various teaching methods and heuristic procedures for doing so (49).

More work needs to be done to analyze not only the nature of similar assignments within a single discipline but also of distinctive genres across disciplines. In the foreword to Toby Fulwiler and Art Young's *Language Connections*, James Britton says that when "subject specialists and language specialists get together to consider these modes of writing appropriate to the various disciplines, we may hope to learn a great deal...in terms of the learning strategies by which specialized knowledge is generated and the strategies by which it is communicated" (vii).

One such study in that collection is Carol Berkenkotter's examination of conceptualization. In a comparison of problem-solving methods, she points to the preference in scientific and technological fields for visual and mathematical discovery modes rather than written modes. She suggests that faculty with science students who hate writing might "use visual techniques such as tree diagrams and flow charts to give students experience verbalizing the subject matter they are ordinarily taught to think about only in equations, formulas, or other nonverbal modes" (40).

James Moffett's scheme for classifying genres according to levels of abstraction provides another way of analyzing assignments across disciplines. Moffett notes, for example, the similar use of narration by the historian constructing a chronology of an event and a naturalist writing up a field trip (44), but he observes that when the historian moves from reporting to generalizing, he is being scientific (45). He also observes that the more abstract levels of discourse often incorporate the more concrete levels (48). Drawing upon the work of James Britton and others, he argues for teaching all levels of discourse. Unfortunately, what is presently taught in most writing programs is a continent of discourse rather than a universe.

Conclusion

Selecting tutors from several disciplines and acquainting them with theories pertinent to writing in different disciplines can substantially strengthen the services of writing centers. But there is another reason for looking beyond the English department for tutors: if we are to demonstrate that writing truly is a concern of all disciplines, all faculty and students must perceive that the writing center exists for them, not just for students in English. Department chairs see the connection when the writing center employs students from their discipline. Faculty feel particularly comfortable in referring students to a tutor from their own department. And when

students see a writing center tutor in their history or sociology classes, such evidence helps them to understand our assertion that writing is essential to all disciplines.

Works Cited

- Arfken, Deborah. "A Peer-Tutor Staff: Four Crucial Aspects." *Tutoring Writing*. Ed. Muriel Harris. Glenview: Scott, Foresman, 1982. 111-22.
- Berkenkotter, Carol. "Writing and Problem Solving." *Language Connections: Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum*. Eds. Toby Fulwiler and Art Young. Urbana: NCTE, 1982. 33-44.
- Faigley, Lester and Kristine Hansen. "Learning to Write in the Social Sciences." *College Composition and Communication* 36 (1985): 140-49.
- Glassman, Susan. "Tutor Training an a Shoestring." *Tutoring Writing*. Ed. Muriel Harris. Glenview: Scott, Foresman, 1982. 123-29.
- Harris, Muriel. "Growing Pains: The Coming of Age of Writing Centers." *The Writing Center Journal* 2.1 (1982): 1-8.
- Lloyd-Jones, Richard. "Primary Trait Scoring." *Evaluating Writing*. Eds. Charles Cooper and Lee Odell. Urbana: NCTE, 1977. 33-66.
- Maimon, Elaine P., et al. *Writing in the Arts and Sciences*. Cambridge: Winthrop, 1981.
- Moffett, James. *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968.
- Odell, Lee. "The Process of Writing and the Process of Learning." *College Composition and Communication* 31 (1980): 42-50.
- Steward, Joyce S. and Mary K. Croft. *The Writing Laboratory*. Glenview: Scott, Foresman, 1982.

Leone Scanlon is Director of the Writing Center at Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts. Among her publications is an article on curriculum design in *Courses for Change in Writing: A Selection from the NEH/Iowa Institute* (Boynton/Cook, 1984).