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Review

Irene L. Clark. *Writing in the Center: Teaching in a Writing Center Setting* (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt, 1985)

Jim Skelton

A number of years ago I signed on as a green-as-spring-clover reporter for a daily mid-sized newspaper. Though I had a master's degree in English and considered myself a fair country writer, I soon learned that this kind of writing, like tomorrow's front page, was to be a brand new story. First, I had to learn to gather details, more than could ever be worked into the final copy, so that the story would rise from an abundance of facts. Then came choosing a "slant," the personal viewpoint of a feature article or the order of detail emphasis in a more objective news report. A whole new method of organization had to be learned, the inverted pyramid, in which I would purposely "fizzle" the ending of every story by leaving the reader with the least important or least interesting fact.

A myriad of standard diction rules was also insisted upon. I was not allowed to write as I talked. "Pickup," by itself, had sexual connotations, so I was always to type "pickup truck." No one was allowed to "pass away" or "breathe their last." They simply "died." And driver number one never smashed his car into driver number two, regardless of what police reports said. Newspaper libel lawyers didn't work cheap, so "two cars collided into into each other."

A whole new set of newspaper punctuation and capitalization rules had to be learned, and editors kept handing back my stories with all kinds of special arrows and paragraph change markers and correction symbols, even

the dreaded and undefinable “awk,” which must have meant a lot to the editors but nothing to me. I felt like a lost freshman in Beginning Comp 1, learning to write for the first time. Inevitably came the last straw, the day I abbreviated the second word in “Women’s Association” using only the first three letters.

I needed help.

Fortunately, the editor assigned me to one of my peers, a fellow reporter, an outgoing man even younger than I but with several years in the business. All of my stories went through him, and he’d answer questions and offer advice. He could make lots of changes, but he refused to point out more than one or two in every piece to be sure I’d remember. He would point out the most important things first, my biggest blunders, and move on over time to the smaller concerns. More importantly, he would “buck me up” when he sensed I was discouraged, assuring me that he had made the same mistakes, sometimes still did, and that nobody said it was supposed to be easy. Yet wasn’t it satisfying when the story was finished and ready to print? Best of all, he helped me realize that changes and rewrites were not to be seen as signs of failure or punishment. They were, in fact, luxuries squeezed in between the tick-tick of the deadline clock, second chances to fine tune a phrase or add a new fact, to take a concoction already put together as well as we could and add a cherry on top.

I made up my mind that if I ever returned to the classroom, this would be how I would try to teach: one-to-one instruction, sitting with a writer and a piece of work, equals except for my edge in experience, helping the writer feel satisfaction when the piece was finally finished.

I was reminded of this experience and my newspaper friend by an incident described in Irene L. Clark’s *Writing in the Center: Teaching in a Writing Center Setting*. Clark, Director of the Writing Center at the University of Southern California, fondly remembers her eighth-grade sewing instructor, Mrs. Prestopino, who might well have made an excellent writing tutor. Surrounded by a flock of “silly and generally incompetent” young ladies, all struggling with graduation dresses in various stages of noncompletion, Clark recalls that Mrs. Prestopino would offer advice and assistance. Each time one of her charges needed help, Mrs. Prestopino would take time to decide exactly what part of the sewing process was causing the central problem for this particular student and would focus on that task to the exclusion of all others. As the chapter points out, the sewing instructor was adhering to sound pedagogical principles:

1. She always focused on one task at a time.
2. Her assignment of a particular task was based on an informed view of how one actually makes a dress.

At the risk of straining these analogies at the seams, if you will pardon the pun, sufficient background knowledge, the proper instructional sequence, and a caring attitude make for successful teaching in any situation and should certainly be at the heart of any successful tutor training. Though often limited by insufficient time, shrinking budgets, and perhaps lack of experienced tutors, writing center directors should attempt to provide tutors with at least a minimal understanding of how one actually writes a successful paper plus some feel for what I call the “art of tutoring.” This “art” refers to that illusive, almost intuitive ability to recognize out of many choices not only the particular writing problem or task that should be dealt with first (and which strategy best suits the situation) but also when to postpone writing problems, as my newspaper friend often did, to deal with psychological blocks such as tutee aggression, anger, avoidance, passiveness, or lack of confidence. Preparing tutors for such a complex task, even with the current assumption that tutors need not be “experts,” would surely tax even wise and kindly Mrs. Prestopino.

Fortunately, after years in which books necessarily dealt with the larger concerns of organizing and managing these newfangled contraptions called writing centers, help is available in publications that focus exclusively on training tutors. *Writing in the Center: Teaching in a Writing Center Setting* is one such work I’d recommend, with some reservations that I will give later. Written in an informal style with occasional witty cartoons interspersed throughout, this compact, eighty-four page text offers humane and practical advice for fledgling tutors.

The first chapter, “The Writing Process and the Writing Center,” serves as a nice apologia for writing labs, stressing the marriage between the current emphasis on teaching writing as process and the concept of the writing center as a place where tutors may positively intervene in all stages of the process. Clark cites Almasy’s four principles of rhetorical theory—that to improve one’s writing a writer must discuss his writing with a non-evaluative, non-threatening reader, must understand and participate in the processes of invention, must write when ready to write, and must have a dialogue with the written product in order to revise and edit—and points out how one-to-one conferences in a writing center session enhance instruction according to these principles.

“Prewriting in the Writing Center: Helping Students Develop Ideas,” offers familiar strategies such as brainstorming, freewriting, clustering, and Burke’s pentad to help students overcome writer’s block and the fear of exploring ideas. More interesting is Clark’s discussion of James Adams’ emotional blocks—the fear of taking a risk, no appetite for chaos, judging rather than generating ideas, inability to incubate, and lack of motivation. Clark suggests, among other prewriting strategies, Robert Zoellner’s theory

of “Talk-Write,” the idea that talking about a topic before composing will help students generate ideas and will lead to improved writing.

In “The Focus and Sequence of Instruction,” Mrs. Prestopino makes an appearance, and I can’t help but think she would frown on having this chapter on more general concerns follow a chapter on the specific task of prewriting. However, Clark offers a variety of suggestions to help tutors diagnose writing problems and decide what part of the writing process should receive immediate attention. To the principles that the tutor should focus and sequence instruction based on an informed view of the writing process and that only one or two major concepts should be discussed in each conference, Clark adds that “global aspects of discourse should be discussed before surface editing.” She points out, for example, that improving ineffective diction may be a complete waste of time if the sentences in which weaknesses occur are found to be irrelevant to the thesis of the paper. Moreover, such an approach gives the student “the false impression that he should pay attention to diction before he has clarified his thesis and organizational structures.”

“Composing Strategies” continues this emphasis by offering various strategies to address rhetorical concerns such as focus, purpose, and organization and then editing concerns such as sentence style and readability, transitions, and proofreading. I frankly prefer the quite structured approach of Reigstad and McAndrew, who assert the following priorities: thesis, development, organization, and voice before sentence structure, punctuation, usage, and spelling. Yet Clark offers some excellent advice: “To quickly reel off the strategies in which the student might need instruction and practice is usually ineffective, resulting in avoidance and confusion... . ‘One skill per session’ is a good general policy.”

The final chapter of the book tackles a problem of importance to many writing centers—how to deal with students whose first language is not English. “ESL Students and the Writing Center,” a brief nine-page chapter obviously contains no absolute or all-inclusive solutions, but Clark does return, and I think wisely, to previous themes. She advises extensive talk with ESL students about their papers since they usually speak so much more fluently than they write. Tutors are also advised to follow the same global-aspects-first approach that they would use with native speakers, keeping in mind that second language acquisition will occur more readily if the tutor assumes the role of an interested and concerned audience while establishing a relationship that minimizes the anxiety and lack of self-confidence ESL students often suffer.

As these brief chapter summaries show, *Writing in the Center* contains much helpful information on the writing process. In fact, at times so many approaches and theories are squeezed into so few pages that the book seems

to move too quickly, and some ideas are packaged like samplers when I wished for in-depth discussion. Less than one page, for example, is spent on the use of transitions, on editing and proofreading, and on narrowing the topic. I realize this may be slightly misleading since concerns such as narrowing a topic obviously may surface at other places in the text, but the charge still holds. Thus the book provides an overview of many theories, approaches, and concerns, but sometimes rushes along as if trying to fit sixteen hours of training into an eight-hour session.

Also, despite occasional exercises in which tutors engage in group discussion or write essays about writing or tutoring, Clark does not emphasize extensive writing and peer evaluation among tutors as does, for example, the so-called Brooklyn Plan pioneered by Ken Bruffee at Brooklyn College. In the preface Clark states that "effective tutoring develops through experience and practice, and no amount of reading about tutoring can substitute for spending many hours actually tutoring students in composition and evaluating the quality of that tutoring." What a book can do is "generate ideas about a process before that process is actually begun." This *Writing in the Center* does very well. However, center directors, convinced as I am that practice critiques by tutors on each other's writing can at least partially substitute for actual tutoring with lab clientele, will need to devise and add additional exercise for practice.

Finally, I must add that an occasional typographical error mars the text. For example, it attributes what appears to be the work of psychologist Carl Rogers to "Carol" Rogers. No note is given in the bibliography to check which name is correct.

The main strength of the book is found in two chapters that attempt to increase tutor self-awareness as well as awareness of the relationship between the tutor and the student who comes to the center for help. The first of these, "Preparing for Tutoring," asks tutors to acquaint themselves with their own writing procedures by writing an essay in which they answer questions such as:

1. How long did you spend writing the paper?
2. Did you spend time thinking about it before you wrote it? When do you do your thinking?
3. Did you do any research?
4. What method did you use for writing it? Outline? Rough draft? Sketchy notes?

Tutors are also asked to consider their positions on evaluation, including whether they agree or disagree with statements such as the following:

1. The papers students bring to the Writing Center should be evaluated primarily for content, not for style and structure.
2. Good spelling is important.
3. Neatness is important.
4. Low grades and poor evaluations usually create incentives for students to work harder.
5. Students who are poor writers are usually unintelligent.

Such self-awareness not only increases tutor insight into the writing process but also helps alleviate the individual biases and misconceptions of a particular tutor. Often in my tutor training I find tutors blocked in their own writing by false assumptions about the composing process, such as those Clark cites from Mike Rose's *Writer's Block: The Cognitive Dimension*. Even worse, tutors fall back on misguided but ingrained ideas—that contractions should never be used in college writing, that every paragraph must have a topic sentence, that good writing occurs only when the writer becomes inspired—when they begin to work with students. As other directors have found, it is not enough merely to teach tutors pre-packaged materials about the writing process. Just as important is to discover and correct what they think they already “know.”

Clark also encourages tutors to role play situations that might come up as they work with students. For example, she asks that they consider situations in which they might have to be more assertive than usual, such as when a student brings a paper into the center just before it is due and asks for a rewrite. How should a tutor react when a student is persistently late, or has plagiarized, or has been referred to the lab by a teacher but insists that he or she does not need help? What if the student blames the tutor for bad grades, tries to hide anxiety by continually joking, or has a teacher who marks errors incorrectly or makes extremely negative comments on every paper? Tutors are asked to practice analyzing the effect various responses might have on a student, and Clark encourages non-evaluative responses, suggesting Rogers' “non-directive listening,” where tutors paraphrase the student's comments to show awareness of and empathy with the speaker's feelings without judging either the speaker or what is said.

In “Interpersonal Communication” Clark offers three principles by which tutors can develop a comfortable and productive working situation with students who come to the lab. One principle is that students must do their own work. Tutors are warned against a “quick fix” approach in which they tell students how to revise. Instead, tutors should ask students what they wish to work on, thus involving the students in the process. Similarly, a second principle is to ask questions rather than simply provide answers. Tutors should pose open-ended questions that force the writer to think and

make choices about his or her paper. The third principle is to put the student at ease. Along with common-sense admonitions to introduce oneself and be friendly, Clark gives tutors a succinct description of the tone to strive for in a center conference:

Above all, indicate by your demeanor as well as by your words that you are there to HELP the student, not to judge him, that you approve of working through a paper in multiple drafts and that you recognize that writing is a difficult task, no matter how good a writer one might be. Help the student understand that most writers are not “inspired” and that it is not unusual for even professional writers to work hard to generate acceptable writing.

Thoughts like these might well have gone through the mind of my old newspaper friend when he started to work with me, and it is typical of the humane and yet practical tone, toward both the tutors and the students with whom they work, that shines through all of *Writing in the Center*. Though not without flaws—in particular its tendency to skim over complex material—the book is worthy of attention because it at least mentions, and often explains in full, an abundance of ideas and theories on tutoring and the writing process. It calls for and offers suggestions for choosing a logical order of instruction, and it pays particular attention to the dynamics of the tutor-student relationship as well as the tutor’s own writing habits and preconceptions. I intend to use it, in combination with other texts, in my own future training programs, with the pleasant suspicion that even Mrs. Prestopino would approve.

James Skelton is an assistant professor and Director of the Writing Center at East Central University in Oklahoma. He has published several articles and short stories and has also worked as a technical writer and as a newspaper reporter and columnist.