Establishing Writing Center Workshops

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One manageable way for writing centers to expand is through a series of workshops designed to address students' diverse writing problems. Not only can such workshops meet the specific needs of targeted student groups, but the versatile structure of workshops also makes them suitable for most institutions. The workshops can, for example, range from product-centered minicourses dealing with specific writing problems to more process-oriented workshops addressing larger writing objectives.

Despite their flexibility, workshops require careful planning to be effective. Thus, in using workshops as one means of expanding the services of the University of Florida Writing Center, we have followed a series of specific steps. This strategy does not necessarily guarantee success, but it does provide a systematic framework for weighing certain issues and for anticipating potential problems that may arise with a new workshop.

Step 1: Identify Appropriate Topics and/or Target Populations

The most successful workshops frequently seem to be those which address students' real writing needs—those the students themselves perceive. Although well-intentioned students may express an interest in workshops on such general topics as spelling or writing research papers, they often do not actually follow through and attend. In contrast, we have found that workshops on writing the essay portion of the Law School Aptitude Test or on writing the essay subject of the mandatory College Level Academic Skills Test (CLAST) bring a stronger response. Therefore, to find the best topics for workshops, we identify the most frequent problems experienced by students already using the Center, and we pay attention to faculty concerns as well. From casual comments made by students or faculty, we have developed a wide range of workshops on such topics as using word processors to revise papers, writing resumes and job-related correspondence,

and taking essay exams. In addition, we have developed an occasional workshop at the specific request of a class instructor; our most recent workshop for graduate students on using the APA style for writing articles is one such example.

Step 2: Establish Goals and Appropriate Measurement Techniques for Each Workshop

As each workshop should ideally address a specific topic or a target audience, so, too, should each workshop be developed around an individual set of goals. Although these goals may not be formally articulated, they determine the scope and content of each mini-course. For example, our technical writing workshop has the overall objective of reviewing the specialized mechanics of that field, while our ESL workshop deals with even more specific objectives, such as using articles and plurals in certain contexts or maintaining consistent verb tenses. In contrast, our CLAST workshop focuses on the broader goal of helping students develop pre-writing strategies for timed writing situations.

In order to see how well we have met our goals, we ask students at most workshops to complete a questionnaire. Although the questionnaires vary, all of them give the students a chance to evaluate a particular mini-course and to offer suggestions for future mini-courses as well. In addition, we rely heavily for our self-evaluations on the informal feedback provided by the oral comments of students and faculty.

Step 3: Initiate Contact with Faculty or Administration in Related Content Areas

Establishing early contact with appropriate faculty and administration is essential for the success of any workshop. Occasionally, the contact may be for political reasons in order for a writing center not to be perceived as overstepping its bounds or intruding upon other departments. Thus, before instituting the graduate workshop on writing theses and dissertations, our center obtained the approval both of the English Department chairman and of the dean of the Graduate School. Similarly, before undertaking our mini-course on resume writing, we discussed our objectives with the director of Career Services. Such contact has unexpectedly led to other beneficial results as when an editor from the Graduate School and a reference librarian agreed to address sessions of our graduate workshop, thereby greatly enhancing its effectiveness.

At other times, we initiate contact with faculty in order to obtain guidance for those workshops which require some specialized knowledge. For instance, in developing some specific workshops for international

students, we sought the advice of an emeritus professor who has established several overseas programs for speakers of English as a second language. Not only does faculty involvement enhance the content of a given workshop, but an additional benefit is that the faculty frequently then continue their support of these projects. For example, our materials on technical writing were initially reviewed by the professor in charge of the course; as a result of his early involvement, his 300 students now take our workshop each semester. Similarly, the history professor who supported our initial development of a history essay-writing workshop now endorses it to his class each term. Team efforts at the developmental stage, therefore, can be invaluable in strengthening the overall success of a given workshop.

Step 4: Determine Appropriate Workshop Format and Develop Comprehensive Materials for Student Use

The format for each workshop may vary, depending both on the scope of the material to be covered and on the audience to whom it is addressed; in addition, such factors as space and timing can also influence the structure of a workshop. (Our center first became painfully aware of just how important logistics can be when twenty-odd students, together with their course instructor, appeared for a workshop in a classroom that was preempted by another class.) Occasionally, we resolve these problems by giving a workshop during some instructor's established class meeting or by closing our center for a high-priority workshop. More often, however, we are forced to plan our workshop schedule far in advance in order to reserve space in regular classroom buildings or in the popular student union.

As the logistical details require careful planning, so, too, does the thorough development of appropriate materials demand hard work. For some workshops, a center may be able to draw upon the background of a staff member. For example, our workshop on essay exams was developed by a master's candidate in history, while our workshop on word processing was developed by an instructor knowledgeable about computers. More frequently, though, the development of materials has required us to explore a topic ourselves before we have been able to prepare the necessary examples and exercises for our workshop packets. Such was the case for our resume writing workshop, the materials for which were created only after a center instructor researched the subject and interviewed personnel managers of local companies.

But the time and effort expended in the development of these materials have been valuable in serving several purposes. First, the packets provide students with something tangible to carry away with them from the center and to serve as a reference guide for later use. Moreover, since student papers cannot be used in workshops as readily as they can in center

conferences, the materials provide an essential basis for discussing the writing process during the mini-course. Completing exercises during a workshop also enables students to participate actively in sharing information or in asking questions. Still another advantage is that these materials ensure continuity in the subject matter to be presented each term, no matter how the staffing changes.

Step 5: Train Staff to Conduct Workshops

In addition to developing materials, we have also found it important to train staff to conduct workshops. Not only is the instructional time of a workshop severely restricted, but also the audience may, at a given moment, have diverse needs and backgrounds. For example, students attending our graduate workshop on thesis writing are often at far different stages of the dissertation process. Similarly, students participating in our workshop on revising papers with a word processor are likely to have varying degrees of computer expertise, as well as equally different expectations as to what revision can mean. Thus, the instructional task in conducting workshops may be quite different from that of conferencing in a writing center or teaching in a composition class; in the case of some of our workshops, a familiarity with specialized areas of writing is also required.

Thus, reviewing materials closely with new instructors is an essential part of our staff training, as is discussing appropriate techniques. Occasionally, some of our experienced instructors have presented a new workshop to other staff members before they have given it to the students themselves. In addition, new personnel can benefit from observing an experienced instructor conduct an actual workshop or from watching videotapes of previous workshops. Through such approaches we attempt to maintain the instructional quality in our workshops despite staff changes.

Step 6: Revise Materials and Publicize Workshops

The last step reflects the ongoing demands of the workshop, as no workshop is ever really done. In the same way that classroom preparations constantly change, so too have we found it necessary to revise our workshop packets frequently. Sometimes the revision is due to external reasons. Changes in the topic format of the CLAST, for example, have required us to modify the materials for that workshop several times; similarly, the adoption of a computerized reference system in our library has rendered a portion of our original research-paper workshop obsolete. At other times, the need for revision is internal as we have become aware in the workshops themselves of an inappropriate focus or insufficient treatment of a certain section; in these instances, we modify the materials accordingly.

We also try different approaches to reach targeted groups of students for particular workshops. Thus, we contact the graduate coordinators of each department prior to the thesis-writing workshop, or we schedule an appropriate time for the technical writing workshop with the professor directing the course. In addition, throughout the term we notify the student newspaper and campus radio station of workshops that need to be announced.

Workshops, then, require a serious commitment, not only in their initial developmental stages but also in their continued presentation each term. However, by using a careful set of steps as a guide, a writing center can undertake an increasing number of workshops that will meet the diverse needs of its particular institution. Certainly, having such a strategy for establishing workshops will not address all problems that each workshop may pose. Nevertheless, by minimizing any potential difficulties, it can make the process of instituting and conducting workshops more manageable and reinforce their value as a useful tool for writing center outreach.

Willa Wolcott coordinates the Writing Center in the Office of Instructional Resources at the University of Florida. She has made presentations at the Southeastern Writing Center Association conferences and has had two articles published in the *Writing Lab Newsletter*. She serves as one of the chief readers for the statewide holistic scorings of essays written for the College Level Academic Skills Test and the Florida Teacher Certification Examination.