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Independence and Collaboration: Why We Should Decentralize Writing Centers

Louise Z. Smith

Two strong movements in composition pedagogy, writing centers and writing-across-the-curriculum, often work at cross purposes. Intellectual and political movements often seem to require an early phase of separatism, of gathering their self-definitions into a fist. Witness the black separatism of the late '60's and feminist separatism of the early '70's. But once having said, "This is who we are and how we're different from them. Here are our authorities, our philosophies, and our methods as distinct from theirs," these movements outgrow their fierce need for separatism. The fist begins to open, to relax its grip on authority, and to welcome collaboration with other, sometimes quite variously dextrous and differently motivated, hands.

Writing centers as loci of specialized authority played a role in achieving recognition of composition as a discipline; now writing-across-the-curriculum programs share that authority among many different kinds of collaborators. Unfortunately, institutional structures tend to resist this historical process. The resulting problems—turf wars, conflicts between centralized and distributed authority, contradictions between uniform and diverse pedagogies, and issues of exploitation—now make some writing center directors wonder if writing centers have outlived their usefulness (Kail, Trimbur).

Writing centers conflict with writing-across-the-curriculum in matters of authority and pedagogy. On the one hand, writing centers are centripetal. They invite the faculty who assign, comment upon, and grade student

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writing to “send us your writing problems.” Supervisors of goldfish-bowl writing centers and peer-tutoring programs feel pressured to adopt a uniform “best” pedagogy, knowing that whichever pedagogy they adopt must inevitably offend some part of the faculty. They also fear intruding in the traditional authoritarian syntax of teaching, “teacher teaches student” (Kail 596, 598). Communication between the faculty and the writing center staff becomes cumbersome at best, depending upon faculty referral forms and tutor report forms (Harris, *Tutoring Writing* 259-94). Writing center supervisors are “on duty” to help “peer” tutors solve problems as they arise (Bruffee 144). But because these supervisors are seldom, if ever, the same teachers who actually designed the assignment, they cannot possibly know the contexts of assigned readings and class discussions in which the various writing assignments are supposed to be prepared. The result is an inevitable tension between the authority of teachers and that of writing center supervisors. Another source of tension is that so-called peer tutors are by definition NOT—nor can they usefully pretend to be—the referred students’ peers in writing skill, experience, or confidence. Despite these tensions of authority, once “problems” become the writing center’s turf, faculty may all-too-willingly refer students with problems to the writing center, thus freeing themselves to get on with content.

On the other hand, writing-across-the-curriculum is centrifugal. Since writing is a mode of investigating content and forming concepts in many disciplines, the responsibility and authority for writing instruction are shared among many departments. Since teaching writing is everybody’s business, turf rivalries are minimized. However, unless writing-across-the-curriculum faculty have regular opportunities to articulate and modify their composition philosophies and pedagogies, the potentially fruitful variety may turn into wearying confusion (Schor, Fulwiler).

These centripetal/centrifugal tuggings also raise questions of exploitation among professors, writing center staff, and students. Writing-across-the-curriculum faculty may feel overwhelmed or imposed upon by the demanding new task of learning how to teach writing—not just assigning and perhaps editing it—as an integrated part of their courses without sacrificing “content.” Writing center tutors may see themselves as the EMT’s of academe, exhausted by ministering to sprained syntax, rhetorical contusions, and broken logic. Trimbur describes them as exploited by low pay and low esteem, resentful of serving systems and pedagogies they neither design nor control, delegated the “drudgery” of working with “basket cases” (34-35).

Students may also feel punished—sent by professors to stay after school in the writing center—and thus estranged. Instead of operating on a walk-in basis, the best writing centers now wisely urge tutor-student partners to

meet throughout a semester. While continuity offers them better results and greater personal satisfaction, even such partners work at an intellectual and social distance from the professors who assigned the writing. Student writers—wondering whether to consult their history professors, writing professors, or writing center tutors—may simply consult no one. Those most in need of help are least likely to find it.

The Queens College model (Held and Rosenberg) solves some of these problems. In basic and regular writing courses, it pairs volunteer faculty-mentors with highly qualified undergraduate team-teachers (who receive four credits for four class-hours and one seminar-hour weekly). These partners “choreograph” their steps for each class and take turns writing paper comments, grading, and holding conferences. Faculty, some initially fearful of relinquishing classroom authority, discover that division of labor offsets “loss.” Moreover, because “Equal partners demonstrate communication as *a negotiated way* rather than *the right way*,” students’ writing becomes more genuine and lively. Within these collaborations, “Independence must be maintained for the true decentralization to take effect” (819).

Another solution may be found in administratively decentralizing writing centers and in resisting pressures to assume a uniform composition pedagogy. The decentralized tutoring program in the College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Massachusetts at Boston offers an example. The program gathers together faculty and tutors, writing assignments and student essays from many departments. It then transmits these collaborators’ experiences and disseminates contemporary theory and research in composition. By both gathering and distributing, the decentralized tutoring program nurtures communal discourse on composition.

UMass/Boston’s tutoring program fosters independence and collaboration by coordinating its work with many parts of the college-wide writing program. The Office of Academic Support and Advising (which *inter alia* teaches study skills courses and an intensive review course for the college-wide Writing Proficiency Examination required for junior-standing) refers students who request extra help with writing—whether for English or other courses—to the English Department’s tutoring program. Is this just trading Tweedledum for Tweedledee? No, because the English tutoring program itself is decentralized:

- it recruits undergraduate and graduate tutors from ALL departments, not just from the English Department;
- it offers to pair tutors with faculty-mentors *throughout the college-wide core curriculum* (a writing-across-the-curriculum program of introductory freshman and sophomore courses);

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- it assigns a tutor to every section of Freshman English; since each tutor works with two or three faculty-mentors each semester, *no single pedagogy* prevails;
- faculty from the English Department, the Office of Academic Support and Advising, and the English as a Second Language program share in teaching the required Seminar for Tutors, assuring a *variety of perspectives* on the teaching of writing, including the following:
 - the special nature of tutorial dialogue; psychological aspects of reading and writing processes;
 - alternative strategies for generating, shaping, and revising ideas;
 - ways of addressing sentence-level problems;
 - identifying “patterns of error” and understanding them as the hypotheses being tested by second-dialect and second-language learners;
 - helping writers read and write about literary and “non-literary” texts;
- Tutors, writing faculty, and Core Curriculum faculty (as well as guests from other schools, colleges, and universities in the Boston area) are invited to present and attend Composition Colloquia on current theory, research, and pedagogy.

This multi-centered structure preserves the independence of each of its components—the Office of Academic Support and Advising, the English Department faculty, the ESL Program, the Core Curriculum.

The UMass/Boston model differs from the Queens College model in representing—through its Seminar for Tutors and its flexible system of faculty-tutor partnerships—several cross-sections of composition pedagogy. The decentralized tutoring program gathers and disseminates the theories and practices embodied in three cross-sections of writing instruction in the College: the tutors’ experiences as writers, the theories considered in the tutors’ Seminar and applied to real UMass/Boston student papers, and the variety of pedagogical styles and philosophies each tutor shares with several faculty. Let’s look at these cross-sections one at a time.

Decentralization begins with the process of selecting tutors. In consultation with a member of the Office of Academic Support’s professional staff, an English professor directs the tutoring program. Together they select the tutors and teach the seminar. Graduate and undergraduate tutors are chosen from all majors through one procedure: faculty recommendation, writing samples, and an hour-long interview focusing on how they might apply their own composing processes to helping inexperienced writers gain independence. The tutors’ own writing experiences—the kinds of reading and

writing assignments, as well as the pedagogies and standards, actually used in the College—constitute one kind of cross-section.

The required Seminar for Tutors (English 475, three credits) makes no attempt to espouse “*The right way*” to teach writing. Tutors apply readings in current theory and research (e.g. Berthoff, Horton, Murray, Perl, Flower and Hayes, Hirsch, Zamel and Bartholomae) to real UM/B student papers (usually bearing comments and grades) contributed anonymously by students and faculty in English and Core Courses. Tutors keep notebooks analyzing and evaluating selected tutoring sessions. In addition, they present demonstration lessons and complete research projects that enable them to read about problems they have encountered in practice. Besides seminar credit, tutors also earn an hourly rate paid through the Office of Academic Support (or through Work-Study for those eligible) for an average of ten hours per week of actual tutoring. Most tutors continue working for several semesters after completing the seminar. Some specialize in ESL tutoring, for which another seminar is given. The old hands are welcomed back to the seminar to share their insights with the new tutors. The Seminar thus constitutes another cross-section of writing instruction.

Unlike the Queens College program, which pairs tutors with faculty volunteers, the UMass/Boston program assigns a tutor to every section of freshman English (and to Core courses in English and other departments at faculty request, a small but growing means of collaboration). Each tutor works with several partners and pedagogies, the “choreography” reflecting each professor’s preferences. Once the partners have agreed upon the extent and nature of their collaborations, tutors explain their roles to the students in their sections. With their partners’ help, they teach in class (if only briefly) in order to establish themselves as approachable and knowledgeable people (since disembodied telephone numbers or even walk-on roles practically guarantee that the students most in need of help will remain too shy or too hostile to seek it).

Even tutors working mostly through after-class referrals keep regularly in touch with each professor, in order to understand the priorities and the assignments of the course. Tutors keep professors abreast of the work each student has undertaken and seek guidance for future tutorials. Conferences—not bales of paper-work—provide tutors with immediate guidance, vitally augmenting the necessarily more general instruction provided in the Seminar. Through these various collaborations, the techniques of which can be discussed objectively in the Seminar, the tutors learn that there are many effective ways to accomplish good writing instruction. As the Seminar gathers all these tutorial experience in, a third cross-section is formed. This flexible pairing brings two further benefits. First, it encourages more professors to collaborate. Over the years, more and more professors have

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volunteered as mentors, sharing classes and/or arranging tutorial conferences. If a professor requests a tutor without quite knowing how to collaborate, the tutor (primed by the seminar) suggests ways of sharing in-class workshops. If a professor prefers a more limited collaboration, the tutor can arrange to meet with referred individuals outside of class. Rarely, some professors prefer not to work with tutors. Then their students may request tutorial help through the Office of Academic Support, and tutors simply work independently.

The successes of such tutorials often encourage professors to invite the tutors little-by-little into their classrooms. Flexibility thus minimizes the threat of “relinquishing” authority and helps professors see tutors as helpful apprentices. Second, the dialogue entailed in flexible collaboration helps faculty to articulate and modify their ways of teaching writing. Once tutors earn trust, faculty-mentors often re-examine with them some of their favorite practices and try out other ideas the tutors bring from the Seminar. Thus distributing what it has gathered in (i.e. the three cross-sections constituted by tutor selection, the theories and sample papers used in the Seminar, and the flexible collaborations), the tutoring program functions as a tactful “change agent” throughout the college-wide writing program.

The flexibility of tutors’ roles is safeguarded from exploitation. Tutors do not take over class meetings for absent professors unless very intensive collaborations have already been established (and even then only in emergencies). For obvious reasons, tutors brought in from the cold could do little more than babysit. Nor do they merely observe classes or play “straight men,” dependable respondents in two-way “discussions” that reduce students to spectators. They generally do not select readings or design assignments (though they can spot ambiguities). They do not grade quizzes and papers. Whatever paper comments tutors write are in addition to—never instead of—professors’ comments. Thus tutors are not exploited by being delegated the onerous or labor-intensive tasks. They enter the program not just to get “a job,” but to explore themselves as writers and to practice imagining and removing the barriers to someone else’s understanding. As apprentices rewarded by credit, pay, and less tangible but more valuable opportunities, most tutors stay with the program, often combining tutoring with other attractive choices in research, in honors programs, and in college publications. Several have even prolonged their degree programs for an extra semester—just so they could keep on tutoring! Instead of feeling exploited, they know that as they give, they gain.

Still another means of gathering and disseminating current theory, research, and pedagogy both within and beyond the College is the annual series of Composition Colloquia, an outgrowth of the tutors’ Seminar. Recent colloquia have included panel discussions; one panel featured pairs

of collaborators describing their various modes of “choreography,” while another brought together professors in the Departments of History, Sociology, and Chemistry to characterize the discourse of their respective disciplines.

Other colloquia have featured individual presentations by professors in the English Department; for instance, Ann Berthoff analyzed relationships between reading and writing, Taylor Stoehr described connections between personal and academic writing, and Gillian Gane and Mame Willey demonstrated ways to teach composition with various word processors.

Sometimes a colloquium becomes a workshop applying current research; for instance, participants applied an analysis of teachers’ paper comments (Sommers) to comments they had written on three sample papers. Recent guest presentations included a descriptive explanation of the University of Pittsburgh’s Basic Reading and Writing program (Salvatori) and Professor Nancy Martin’s sharing of writing notebooks from her work with James Britton in the London Schools. Professor Rosemary Deen, with Marie Ponsot co-author of *Beat Not the Poor Desk* (Boynton/Cook, 1982) put us to work writing our own fables so that we could experience, in her words, “the power of writing a whole structure” that we were already able to write and consequently “couldn’t do wrong.” A small but growing number of guests from other writing programs in the Boston area contribute their responses to those of our own faculty and tutors, thus expanding the opportunity to create more widespread collaborations.

If writing centers have outlived their usefulness, as Kail and Trimbur suggest, it is because issues of authority, “correct” pedagogy, and exploitation have begun to obstruct sharing of the valuable, practical knowledge writing centers have helped acquire over the years. The idea of a “center” has gotten in the way. Interestingly, the features recently attributed to “ideal writing center(s)” depend upon only one kind of centralization—neither administrative nor pedagogical, but ideological “commitment to change” (Harris “Theory”). New models for integrating writing centers with writing-across-the-curriculum are beginning to appear (Haviland). Instead of discarding writing centers, we should find ways of decentralizing them so they can use their knowledge more effectively. Perhaps we can borrow Saussure’s model as a metaphor for independence and collaboration: while each professor and tutor retains his or her own theoretical and pedagogical *parole*, together their conversation—facilitated by decentralization—constitutes a vital *langue*, and on-going negotiated communication about ways of communicating.

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