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The Writing Center's Role in the Writing Across the Curriculum Program: Theory and Practice

Ray Wallace

Over the last quarter of a century, university professors and administrators have discovered an alarming trend on our campuses: many graduating seniors prove deficient in writing skills. As a result, many universities recently have developed proficiency, or "exit," exams in an attempt to stop the flow of writing-deficient graduates. However, this procedure used alone is akin to throwing water on a smoldering ruin; while much smoke and confusion occur, there is no change in the final state of the once-great building. It became increasingly clear that one semester of English composition is not sufficient to turn writing deficiencies into writing proficiencies. As a result, many universities have implemented writing-across-the-curriculum programs.

Like other universities throughout the country, our institution implemented a writing-across-the-curriculum program last year. This article describes how we coordinated this program through the writing center and discusses the solutions we developed to counter the strain of an added program to our center's already overburdened mission.

After approximately two years of heated intra- and inter-disciplinary argument, it was agreed that all general education courses in our university had to develop the students' writing and/or quantitative skills. It was then that the writing center faculty was asked to help ease the problems involved in the introduction of writing skills across the curriculum. With this added program, the writing center was now home for three highly diversified, but equally important programs:

1. One-to-one and small-group tutoring in writing for all English classes.
2. Computer-assisted remedial instruction in grammar and usage.
3. Specialized tutoring in writing for the writing-across-the-curriculum program.

Freisinger and Burkland (1982) list five components by which writing-across-the-curriculum programs can be implemented and improved in the writing center. These components include the following guidelines:

1. The discipline professor can and should refer students with writing problems to the writing center; this referral can be voluntary or a course requirement.
2. The writing center tutor must understand what the discipline professor expects as an end-product from the student being tutored.
3. The writing center tutor and the discipline professor must communicate with each other. The tutor must document how each student was tutored, what tutoring methods were used, the effectiveness of these methods, and the student's response to these methods. In turn, the professor must document how these methods helped, or did not help, when the student was finally evaluated.
4. The discipline professor should provide examples of effective papers, style sheets, documentation formats, and copies of each assignment question. These documents should be filed in the writing center.
5. The discipline professor should take an active interest in the administration of the writing center. (176-177)

Theorists disagree about who should tutor writing-across-the-curriculum students in the writing center. Arfken (1982) and Steward and Croft (1982) point to the almost exclusive use of English majors as the most effective tutoring personnel. Scanlon (1986), however, comments that selecting "tutors from several disciplines . . . can substantially strengthen the services of the writing center" (40). Scanlon's argument that "the discourse in each discipline also has its own features [so] an interdisciplinary writing center needs to be staffed by tutors who are familiar with these different features" (38) helped us decide that we could use non-English majors as tutors.

Making the Writing Center Work in Practice

Before any philosophical and/or structural changes could be made, the writing center faculty and the discipline professors had to define what they

considered effective writing. Therefore, a two-day writing workshop was held in the center, and, as people gradually got to know each other's views on writing, effective and ineffective writing samples from many disciplines were discussed. From this intensive, but relaxed, workshop, both writing center faculty and discipline professors were able to agree that

1. There should be *at least* one out-of-class writing assignment of not less than 1000 words in each course.
2. The professor should set an appropriate deadline so each student could have *at least* one tutoring session in the writing center on each paper. Assignment deadlines therefore were approximately two weeks.
3. The professor should devote *at least* one class lecture to a discussion of rhetorical considerations, the writing process, documentation, and the benefits of visiting the writing center.
4. The professor should provide a copy of the assignment question to the tutor.

The writing center faculty turned to the discipline professors to nominate their most responsible majors as possible tutors. These professors developed their own criteria for the selection of tutors for the writing across the curriculum program. These criteria included the following:

- A declared major in the discipline to be tutored
- A cumulative grade-point average between 2.5 and 4.0
- Junior standing
- Two letters of recommendation from discipline professors

Even with these somewhat restrictive criteria, cross-disciplinary tutors were readily available. Such availability was due to an effective recruiting strategy used by the discipline professors. When these students were told that such tutoring experience would enhance their resumes, help them gain admittance to graduate school, or make them more marketable in terms of their interpersonal and administrative skills, the discipline professors were able to nominate so many fine student writers that the writing center faculty could then select those with the greatest potential.

Both the writing center faculty and the discipline professors viewed the training of these new tutors as a very important task if writing-across-the-curriculum were to succeed at the institution. The center's faculty had already been holding tutor-training sessions for the general tutors (all English majors) who were assigned to tutor the writing classes in English. However, the faculty and the other discipline professors felt that the inclusion of the new writing-across-the-curriculum tutors in the general tutor-

training sessions would be counterproductive in terms of time and goals. Therefore, these new tutors had to attend their own weekly two-hour special training workshops. The workshops were held for a total of twelve weeks. In the first hour of each workshop, selected members of the writing center faculty discussed various aspects of the composing process and tutoring techniques. In the second hour of each workshop, the discipline professors met in small groups with their discipline's tutors to explain future assignments, tutoring problems, course materials, and pertinent goals. The following is a brief outline of the twelve-week tutor-training course:

- Week #1: Introduction of the center faculty, the discipline professors, and the course content and goals. A brief discussion of the writing center layout and the ethics of tutoring.
- Week #2: Beginning to Tutor: The initial meeting, roles, models, and expectations. A discussion on how to evaluate writing and how to develop a tutee profile.
- Week #3: The Writing Process: More intensive discussion of pre-writing, writing, and rewriting tutoring techniques.
- Week #4: Discipline-Specific Writing Assignments: Small-group discussions of discipline-specific organizational/rhetorical writing patterns and individual tutoring techniques.
- Week #5: Role-Playing: How to work with the student who just wants the assignment proofread.
- Week #6: Tutoring/Counseling: How to motivate the student and an overview of counseling approaches.
- Week #7: Discipline-Specific Documentation Styles: Small-group discussions of discipline-specific styles, formats, and requirements.
- Week #8: Role-Playing: Tutoring the ESL learner. A discussion of the tutoring methods used to help these students with idioms, prepositions, tenses, count and non-count nouns, articles, and other common ESL problems.
- Week #9: Tutoring Mechanics: Grammar, punctuation and spelling. Guidelines on how to avoid proofreading for the tutee.
- Week #10: Role-Playing: Dealing with the paper which is too technical for its intended audience. Discussion of levels of formality, audience awareness, and other audience considerations.
- Week #11: Revision: How to tutor students to rethink and to reorganize their papers.
- Week #12: Evaluation: Both tutor and discipline professor evaluate each other.

Merging Theory and Practice

As the writing center became a place where professors and tutors could exchange ideas and techniques that proved effective, theory and practice merged. Although some professors were at first rather hesitant about submitting their documentation style sheets, they soon realized that they needed to update their style sheets for their own research. So, with tutors chastised into keeping better tutoring records and discipline professors persuaded that it was in their best interests to update their own writing standards, the center had accumulated over forty different examples of discipline-specific writing. By the end of the semester, these included lab reports, program documentation reports, abstracts, summaries, analyses, and mechanism descriptions. These examples, combined with individual documentation style sheets and extensive reports of which techniques worked and which did not, proved invaluable in training the next group of writing-across-the-curriculum tutors.

Conclusion

The writing center, both in theory and practice, can play an important role in the implementation of writing across the curriculum at any institution. Our institution's attempt to use the writing center worked well. While administration of the center remained securely anchored to the English discipline, other disciplines took an active interest in what was happening in the center. A completely new team of tutors was selected and trained. New insight into other disciplines' evaluation of writing was gained, and a new corpus of materials and tutoring handouts was developed.

In this situation, the writing center's role is to provide additional instruction for a group of discipline professors interested in improving their students' writing skills. The center is, and should always be, only a support service; writing-across-the-curriculum advocates should never expect writing and content to be separated in terms of instruction. As writing center personnel, we owe it to these new colleagues to provide the most effective support. If these professors demonstrate the important goals that effective written communication can achieve, then the writing center must be there to support these goals, to add to the instruction of students' writing skills, and to help these future biologists, geographers, economists, and educators reach these goals.

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Ray Wallace, formerly of the University of Hawaii at Hilo, is an assistant professor of English at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. His research interests include writing center administration and native and non-native composing differences. He would like to hear from others interested in the role of the writing center in writing-across-the-curriculum programs and in the tutoring of advanced ESL students in such programs.