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Talking to the Boss: A Preface

Diana George

What follows might suitably be called “a talk with the boss.” It is, in fact, a talk I presented to several of our bosses at the 1987 meeting of the Midwest Association of Departments of English, held at Michigan Technological University this past summer.

Bob Denham, whose business it was to organize these meetings, had asked me the year before to speak to the group about writing centers. At the time, it seemed an easy enough task. Who among us would not be delighted at such a chance, the chance to finally speak to a room filled with the very men and women who make decisions about composition courses and composition faculty and, in many places, about the very existence of the writing center?

As my time to speak drew closer, however, I became apprehensive. My own experience told me that while English department chairs are a polite lot, they are not, on the whole, terribly interested in writing centers. Indeed my session seemed out of place at a meeting in which the primary concerns were the state of the literary canon, new theories of literary interpretation, and the struggles of untenured assistant professors.

Writing centers are often staffed by what the academy would call the untenurable. When they are attached to English departments, center staff are often reminded how costly one-on-one instruction can be. When writing center directors meet with English department chairs, the meetings are nearly always about funding.

How eager could this audience be to sit and listen to me tell them about writing centers?

I should have had more faith. The audience I encountered was much more than polite. They were interested. They were concerned. They wanted to talk about writing centers. They wanted to know how to talk to their own writing center directors. They wanted to know what they could do to break down barriers that they realize exist between their faculty and their writing centers. Some of them wanted to tell me how good their centers are. Some of them have worked as tutors in those centers. They listened and asked questions and continued the conversation into the cocktail hour and past the post-dinner talk.

On the other hand, there is still much that remains to be done to mend the damaged path between the English department and the writing center. Some in the audience were still suspicious that tutors were writing their students' papers. That concern seemed such an old one that I had not even addressed it in my talk or in my thinking. It astounded me that anyone could still worry after years of reassurance that tutors have better things to do with their time than write student essays.

It was clear from most of my discussions that, though department chairs are very interested in what we do in writing centers, they still do not quite have a handle on what exactly happens when they send students for help. Instead of wanting less responsibility for the writing center, many wanted more. One woman told me that her department had opened a rival writing center to counter an existing center that she despaired of ever changing. Her motives were good. (The center she inherited was a required remedial workbook-based lab with untrained tutors and a director who was resistant to change.) Her method, however, seems unfortunate. Instead of working toward something that the department and the center could be proud of, she simply allowed the first lab to continue despite the fact that hundreds of students were still required to be herded through it every year.

I came away from the Midwest ADE meeting with some good news: Department chairs are much more interested in the workings of writing centers than we think they are. Many are enlightened. Many want to work with us. The bad news: Many still do not know us, do not know what we can offer them, do not know how we work with students.

Perhaps it is time for another talk with the boss.

The Writing Center and the English Department: An Address to the Midwest ADE Meeting, June, 26, 1987

I want you to begin by just thinking about your own institution. You might try visualizing the Writing Center. Who runs it? Who works in it? What was your last discussion with the writing center director like?

Take your time and think: Think about your last class. Which, if any, of your students from that last class would you have considered sending to the writing center? Why?

Keep those thoughts in mind as I talk because they might serve useful as you listen.

I am going to begin with Stephen North because his 1984 *College English* article “The Idea of a Writing Center” really began this conversation. In that article, North took English department faculty to task when he accused them of “Ignorance; the members of my profession, my colleagues, people I might see at MLA or CCCC or read in the pages of *College English*, do not understand what I do. They do not understand what does happen, what can happen, in a writing center.”

That was three years ago (more, if you consider the time it takes to write an article and then see it in print), but this May I became convinced that what North had said then still seems very true. I travelled with Nancy Grimm, the director of our Reading/Writing Center to the University of Chicago’s critical thinking seminar. The discussion was provocative and exciting when the group talked about what our students ought to be getting in the way of critical thinking skills. Every time, however, someone asked about students who did not seem quite ready for some of the lessons suggested in the seminar, one of the speakers would say, “Well, I guess you would just send that person to the writing lab.”

That response convinced me that a good many of my colleagues still do not know what happens in writing centers, so I have come today to talk to you about the business of those places.

In the best tradition of collaboration, I consider this talk, like just about everything else I do, a collaboration. As I prepared to talk to you today, I contacted some of the people around the country who run writing centers and who belong to the National Writing Centers Association. I wanted to ask them a simple question: If they had a chance to talk to a group of English department chairs, what is the one thing they would want to tell them about the writing center?

Like Stephen North, most of them quite simply want more access to you. They want you to know what it is they do. Some of what they wanted to tell you will not at all surprise you, though it may surprise you that they don’t seem to think that you know these things:

1. Writing centers work with individuals. They provide the one place on campus where instruction truly is flexible and non-evaluative.

Now, this is probably one of those things you already knew, but I'm going to remind you of it anyway.

One of the most obvious tasks of writing centers is to offer individualized instruction. In fact, if we can judge by her most recent work, *Teaching One-on-One*, Mickey Harris at Purdue would want to remind you that the writing center can do things that the classroom simply cannot: One-on-one instruction can be varied with the learning style of the student. Some students are more visual, some are more verbal, some more introspective or more extroverted. Some need more encouragement; others need to be left alone.

The classroom, which must rely on many generalized lessons, cannot allow for the same measure of flexibility. Writing centers cannot rely on generalized lessons. There are very few situations that are exactly duplicated in the Center. Even so-called basic writers (perhaps especially basic writers) do not make the same mistakes in the same way, so tutors have come to rely upon the work of people like Mina Shaughnessy who told us not to teach to errors but to find patterns of errors and teach to those individual patterns. Tutors must first know a great deal about a particular student and that student's writing before they can begin to design assignments that address writing problems.

Furthermore, tutors must remain nonjudgmental about both the assignment they are working with and the student who is writing the assignment. In most universities, the writing center is the only place to go for instruction that is not coupled with evaluation. We talk to students about their writing in order to help them do the work of the university. We do not then turn around and give them a C- and pass them on to the next evaluator.

Tutors can be very honest and open about the problems a student may be having with writing because they will not be called upon later to put a grade on that student's work. Classroom instructors rarely have that luxury.

The writing center finds itself working with many different kinds of students, so it can never really settle into complacency. Many centers do not see as many basic writers as you might imagine. They work with brilliant students, scared students, learning-disabled students, non-native speakers, and regular kids who are just looking for a little extra help. They even work with graduate students, so if the last class you taught was a graduate seminar, you could still think of sending those students to your writing center. Writing problems do not end with the student's first year of college. In fact, the problems simply get more sophisticated. Think of how often you want a sympathetic but honest ear for your own prose. Well, some writing centers have even worked with faculty, but most of us find that ear among friends and colleagues.

So, the first point: Centers are places for one-on-one instruction for anyone who needs and wants it.

2. They want you to recognize the resource that you have available to you for teacher training and for potential research on writing and learning.

Jeanette Harris at Texas Tech wanted me to tell you this. She wants you to realize the resource you have in the Writing Center.

It is obvious that writing centers help students learn to write. They are also, however, very useful as a context for research and teacher training.

Graduate teaching assistants can get excellent ongoing training in a good writing center. For Jeanette and others, the payoffs are obvious: You are always a better teacher after you have tutored because you cannot rely on generalized lessons. You must face very particular problems with very practical solutions.

You must be flexible. You must be sensitive. You must be totally open in your acceptance of others.

As places for research, the Center is also invaluable. We can field test, run case studies, trace the development of a particular type of student, learn much about teaching writing. The center is a research lab just waiting to be explored.

3. They want you to know how much it is that you can learn about your own departments from your writing center. (This might come under the heading: “You-may-not-be-watching-us-but-we-are-watching-you.”)

They are not talking about spying here. But, as I mentioned earlier, they do work with your students and your assignments. They can see how many different ways one course can be taught and how varied our value judgments can be.

Anna Clark from the University of Tennessee-Martin was especially concerned that I talk to you about this issue. She is extremely concerned that all too often, professors lose sight of the fact that they are working with eighteen year olds who come to them with adolescent insights. That does not mean that we should not confront them with new, more complex insights. It does mean that we cannot be entirely disappointed when they do not see precisely the same things in *A Winter's Tale* that we see.

Writing centers give students the chance to talk without fear to someone who wants to hear what they have to say about *A Winter's Tale*. What we

give in return is a way that they might combine their own insights with the lessons from the classroom and from critical readings. (When I talked to George Meese about this paper, he called it an “invitation to participate in university-level discourse.”) Okay. That’s what we do. We take them seriously, and we don’t have to worry that they are stepping all over our ideas.

Anna wanted me to tell you to stay connected with the center. It can provide excuses to talk to your faculty about teaching strategies, assignment making, evaluation, all of the things you rarely get the opportunity to discuss.

The next point is one that is most important:

4. They want you to be aware that the department and the center share the same objectives about teaching writing.

When I talked to Doug Hunt at Missouri, he reminded me of what is best about writing centers.

We have established a system of higher education (especially land grant institutions) for a good reason—so that students can be amazed and have their lives turned around—reverse their field of vision, so to speak.

That has nothing to do with whether the student is naturally a good student or a poor student. It has much to do with wanting to give our young people access to higher education, to give them a chance to talk to someone who takes them seriously as thinkers and as learners.

But universities rarely get the chance to treat all of their students like royalty. Instead, only the neediest and the very best get opportunities like that—opportunities to engage in the conversation of the university without worrying about saying the wrong thing.

Think again about that student that you might have sent to the writing center.

Across the country, most writing centers do not see themselves as first-aid stations. They see themselves as places in which instruction truly is individualized and in which any student is welcome. Every student looking for an individual voice, every student looking for someone to take writing seriously, is a needy student. Writing Centers serve them all.

We work with the same goals and objectives as our home departments. Writing centers are set up to work with you and your faculty. They are not set up to work against you or to work piecemeal with students. The idea that the classroom teacher can take care of the student’s thinking and that the writing center should focus on the student’s proofreading skills is a concept that is foreign to most writing centers.

In fact, in what might be called a silent rebellion, many writing centers allow you to think of them as fix-it shops if that is what makes you comfortable. But they go on to teach students how to compose, to organize, develop, argue, and focus. They handle proofreading skills much the way you do—after the real work seems finished.

It is easy to lose sight of the fact that the center's objectives really coincide with those of the department. The center staff has usually been reading the same things you have been reading about teaching writing. They belong to professional organizations, deliver papers in some of the same places you deliver papers, and write articles about writing and learning.

Now think again about your writing center. What I want to tell you is that it ought to be a place like the place described above, and you ought to encourage its growth in that direction.

The writing center's philosophy of composition (if I might call it that) should reflect your own philosophy of composition.

No matter what lip service you pay to one-on-one instruction, to process over product, to learning rhetorical strategies, or to collaboration, if you are pushing your writing center to run hundreds of students through grammar and punctuation drills or spend its time offering mini-courses so that students can pass competency exams, then that is what your department thinks ought to be going on in a composition course. You think learning to write, in the end, means learning how to spell and punctuate, and someone ought to teach students that. That someone ought, however, to be someone else. Not you.

Think of the last appointment you had with the writing center director:

Given the opportunity to tell you one thing, some of the people I contacted went on to many issues that were important to them. Not one of them, however, mentioned funding, even though we do know that writing centers are always teetering on the edge of financial disaster or they are running on creatively-used grant funding or they are existing only because of the dedication of the many underpaid though much appreciated staff.

They did not mention funding, but they did mention attitude. Regular faculty, they tell me, want to depend on the writing center (often write "go to the lab" of top of a student's paper and little else), but they don't want to believe that the staff in the center is their equal. As department chairs, you should be aware of this attitude because the way your faculty feels about the writing center staff can affect the way the center functions and the way students perceive the center.

The message: Writing centers have much to teach us about ourselves as teachers and as colleagues. We learn much about the community of the department by looking at the writing center.

I am hoping that you not only continue to fund the writing center but that, as a department, you decide where it fits. Is it simply the place where you send those students that baffle you? Or can it be a place where a different kind of university experience happens and where we learn about ourselves?

Diana George directs first-year English at Michigan Technological University, where she designed and directed the tutoring component of the Reading/Writing Center. She has published articles on teaching composition in *English Journal*, *College Composition and Communication*, and most recently, *College Teaching*. She served on the Executive Board of the National Writing Centers Association from 1983-1986.