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A Study of Writing Center Effectiveness

David H. Roberts

The two West Virginia colleges of this study operated off-campus branches with limited course offerings in order to provide a year or two of study at convenient locations to students who would otherwise have had to drive great distances over treacherous mountain roads. Staffing challenges at the two branches required innovative and non-traditional approaches. Using individualized instruction, the writing centers at the two remote locations, which were staffed by experienced college instructors, offered several courses at one time in one room.

The Study

In an attempt to establish the writing center as an effective environment for freshman composition instruction, individualized writing instruction at branches of Bluefield State College and Southern West Virginia Community College was compared with conventional class room writing instruction on the main campuses of the two colleges. The effects of the two modes of instruction on writing quality, the students' concepts of the nature of the writing process, and writing apprehension were compared in a pretest-posttest experimental design. Five null hypotheses were tested for significance at the .05 level of confidence to determine significant differences in the effects of the two modes of instruction on 82 students enrolled in the first semester of college English. Of the 82 students in the study, 44 received individualized instruction in one of two writing centers at off-campus satellites, and 38 received conventional classroom instruction at one of two main campus locations.

Three of the null hypotheses concerned writing quality as measured by holistic scoring, forced-choice scoring, and syntactic complexity. Another

null hypothesis concerned writing apprehension as measured by the Daly-Miller (1975) writing apprehension survey, and the final null hypothesis concerned students' perceptions of the nature of writing as measured by Hartwell's three questions. Only one null hypothesis was rejected with 95% confidence.

Student Characteristics

Forty-six percent of the students completing the semester ($n = 38$) were enrolled in the first semester of freshman composition on the main campus of either Bluefield State College in Bluefield or Southern West Virginia Community College in Logan. Fifty-four percent of the students in the study ($n = 44$) were enrolled in the same course at one of two branch sites: a converted retail store in Pineville (SWVCC) and the top floor of a new high school building in Welch (BSC). The students on the main campuses ($n = 38$) received conventional classroom instruction by experienced, full-time instructors, and the students at the continuing education locations ($n = 44$) received individualized instruction in writing centers—also by experienced, full-time instructors.

No significant difference existed between the mean ACT scores of the two groups of students. The experimental group (those receiving individualized instruction) displayed a mean ACT English score of 17.4 compared to 16.2 for the control group (those receiving conventional classroom instruction). The mean ACT composite of 15.1 for the experimental group was only slightly above the mean score of 14.3 for the control group. No significant difference existed between the scores of the students in the study and the scores of entering freshmen for the two colleges. To put the scores in a broader perspective, one might note that the national ACT scores for entering freshman that year were somewhat higher than the mean scores of entering freshman at the two colleges. The national mean ACT scores were 18.0 (English) and 18.7 (composite).

Of the students who completed the course, females outnumbered males by 59 to 23, but no other differences in the study population and the colleges' at-large populations existed. Neither college has residential facilities, so all students were commuter students. Most were graduates of West Virginia public schools; those who weren't held GED certificates. The students ranged in age from 15 to 34.

Students Dropping the Course

A total of 100 students in four towns took the pretests, but 18 of them withdrew from the course before posttests were given and were consequently omitted from the study. The drop rate of 18% was lower than

normal at the two colleges. Of the 53 experimental group students beginning the semester, 9 dropped (17%). Nine also dropped from the control group, which began with 47 students, a drop rate of 19%. Nothing about the drop rates was significant, other than their being slightly lower than the colleges' overall freshman dropout rate.

Writing Centers, West Virginia Style

The writing centers at the two remote locations offered several credit-bearing courses instead of non-credit-bearing tutorial services. For example, the SPICE Center—which was operated by Bluefield State College at Welch High School for four years—offered Developmental English, Composition One, Composition Two, and Fiction Writing. Each of the courses beyond Developmental English provided three semester hours of credit toward graduation. Both writing centers were staffed by experienced college instructors who offered several courses at one time in one room, by individualized instruction.

One of the writing centers, the SPICE Center, was located on the top floor of a new high school building in Welch. SPICE is an acronym for Self-Paced Instruction for Competency in English. The SPICE Center began with three courses in 1979. All three courses were offered at the same time, in the same room, in old one-room schoolhouse fashion, as an experiment to decrease the time the instructor spent at the satellite.

The SPICE Center's students were permitted to attend class on a flexible time schedule. One week a student might attend class from 6:00 to 9:00 on Tuesday night. Another week the same student might attend class on Monday morning from 10:00 until noon. The schedule was arranged to allow students to accumulate the required 40 hours of class attendance by going to class at any time the SPICE Center was open.

The SPICE Center, equipped with four conference tables, comfortable padded chairs, media equipment, resource materials, a few small tables, and a desk for the instructor, accommodated about 20 students at a time. Like many writing centers, its walls were adorned with posters, the atmosphere was light and cheery, and on close inspection pizza sauce and junk food crumbs could often be found. The SPICE Center had no student desks, no lectures, and no rigid schedules.

The SPICE Center instructor normally conducted class by sitting at the conference tables with the students, helping them discover and develop topics in one-to-one and small group conversations about the students' emerging texts. Students shared their drafts freely and frequently asked the instructor or other students for help in clarifying the targeted audience's

needs, maintaining focus, arranging paragraphs, and otherwise making in-draft changes to an emerging text.

The SPICE Center's Roots

The original version of SPICE was based on South Carolina's performance-based model of vocational education, which emphasized skills acquisition, flexible scheduling, and an open entry/open exit policy (Clemson University, et al.). The SPICE Center stressed skills acquisition and flexibility, but it also stressed face-to-face evaluation of written work, and placed a heavy emphasis of writing as a process instead of writing as a product. Minor adjustments were made throughout the SPICE Center's four year life, and although the performance-based South Carolina model was adapted for teaching composition in the SPICE Center, SPICE was not a minimum competency program, but a demanding college credit program offered through a non-traditional delivery system sponsored by the Division of Continuing Education and the Department of English.

In writing centers such as the two in the present study, instruction focuses on developing skills instead of dispersing information—a distinction sometimes characterized as “knowing-how” versus “knowing-that.” Success in the SPICE Center was defined as the ability to write well, in relation to individualized criteria; traditional classroom instruction often defines success as the ability to recall a body of information—grammar rules, conventional spelling—in relation to a norm based on the amount recalled by others in the class, or to produce a text based on a norm established by departmental or instructor concepts of an “Idealized Text” (Brannon & Knoblauch). Evaluation in the SPICE Center was criterion-referenced, i.e., all who met the criteria for an “A,” criteria set for each writing assignment (based on the writer's purpose and goals), received an “A” without regard for so-called normal distribution of grades. The SPICE Center encouraged the students to retain authority over their texts, authority and responsibility they accepted reluctantly, but soon thrived on.

Results of the Study

Only one of the five null hypotheses could be rejected with 95% confidence in the validity of the rejection. The null hypothesis that there would be no significant difference between the experimental and control groups' posttest mean T-unit lengths was rejected. Not only was the control group's posttest mean T-unit length significantly greater ($p = .014$), but the pretest-to-posttest increase of 1.50 words per T-unit for the control group was significantly greater than the .49 word increase for the experimental group ($p < .001$). Expressed another way, the experimental group's posttest mean

T-unit length increased 3.5%, while the control's posttest mean T-unit length increased three times that much, or 10.5%.

This result suggests that the conventional classroom instruction was more effective than individualized instruction in promoting syntactic maturity. However, a closer analysis of the data from individual sections of both groups indicates that the statistically significant difference in syntactic growth may be misleading because one classroom group received direct instruction in Christensen's sentence rhetoric, and the other sections did not. Omitting that section from the control group's data lowers the control's gain in mean T-unit length to .73 words, not significantly greater than that of the experimental group.

Although no significant differences existed in the posttest writing apprehension scores as measured by the Daly-Miller writing apprehension survey, both groups' mean writing apprehension scores decreased slightly, by just over 5%. Interestingly, the composite increase in mean T-unit length was just over 6%. The larger study included data from basic writers and second-semester freshmen. Data from those groups indicate a relationship, however slight, between decreased writing apprehension and increased T-unit length. Interpretation of that data from the larger group—writing samples from students in three levels of composition courses—leads one to speculate that students with the greatest increase in writing apprehension took fewer risks in constructing sentences, as evidenced by shorter T-units on the posttest. At the same time, students demonstrating large decreases in writing apprehension seemed willing to take more syntactic risks, shown by longer T-units.

Holistic scoring of the writing samples showed no significant differences, either in pretests or in posttests. The writing center mean holistic score, although higher than the classroom group's mean holistic score on the pretest, fell below the classroom group's score on the posttest. In fact, the posttest score for the writing center students decreased .03 point on a six-point scale (about 1%) while the classroom group's score increased .19 point on the same scale, an increase of about 6%. Still, the differences were not significant at the .05 level of confidence, indicating that the two groups wrote equally well.

Finally, no significant difference was revealed in the writing concept index based on answers to the questions, "Why do people write?", "What do people do when they write?", and "How do people learn to write?", as posed by Patrick Hartwell at the annual conference on College Composition and Communication. In his paper, "Writers as Readers," Hartwell proposed that students he characterized as "better reader-writers" would have a more mature understanding of the nature of writing, as revealed by answers

to those three questions, than students he characterized as “poor reader-writers.” Although no writing concept differences existed between the control and experimental groups, the present study showed interesting variations on the basis of sex, with females outgrowing males in their writing concept maturity over the course of one semester ($p = .0294$), a finding that suggests that females understand the nature of the writing process more readily than males.

Implications

This experiment does not resolve the question of the effectiveness of writing center instruction. However, the experiment does show that such instruction can be as effective as classroom instruction. Indeed, if one turns to the narrow institutional questions at issue, one can argue the strengths of the writing center at the two institutions, since individualized instruction achieved the same gain in writing quality at approximately one-half the instructional cost.

Low-enrollment courses can be taught in a writing center by combining several courses in a single location, with one instructor. In the case of this study, the Bluefield State College instructor was paid for a six-hour course load to teach four different writing courses to 48 students. Conventional classroom instruction for those students would have required payment for a twelve-hour course load. In other words, the instructor, who was assigned half-time to the SPICE Center, taught four courses by individual student conference and generated 144 credit hours in the writing center; conventional classroom instruction would have required one FTE instructor to generate the same number of credit hours for four classes with similarly low enrollments. Conference-centered instruction in an open, flexible writing center allowed the instructor to generate another 150 student credit hours by teaching two conventional classes on campus, effectively doubling the teaching load.

Because this study found no significant difference in the growth of writing quality of students taught by individualized instruction in writing centers and by conventional classroom instruction, educators may wish to consider, for various reasons, alternatives to traditional classroom instruction in composition. The alternatives may be more cost-efficient for small enrollment courses and as effective as conventional classroom instruction. The alternatives include the Garrison and Murray methods of conferencing, and other applications of Moffett’s version of student-centered instruction.

Furthermore, since this study (and many others) found no statistically significant difference in the quality of the writing produced by students receiving radically different instruction, one might conclude, in the light of

Frank Smith's injunction to "prefer people to programs" ("Demonstrations" 634), that pedagogical methods, in and of themselves, turn out to be rather unimportant in the teaching of writing. Such a conclusion would follow similarly from Shuy's argument that the crucial determinants of mastering literacy are below the conscious awareness of teachers and learners ("Holistic View"), and it might lead us to realize that the teacher's attitude (Lickteig), the amount and quality of the teacher's own writing (Hartwell), and what the teacher knows about learning theory and culture (Shuy, "What the Teacher Knows") are far more important than modes of instruction. Teachers who have a positive attitude are sensitive to student learning, and are practicing writers can help students learn to write better.

In fact, Lickteig singles out attitude as the "most important ingredient in a successful composition program" (45). Teacher attitude is reflected by Hartwell, who, with Smith ("Myths"), says that writing teachers should also be competent writers. In separate publications, but with a oneness of spirit, Hartwell, Smith ("Myths"), and Murray relate their personal attitudes by admonishing writing teachers to write with their students, to write often, and to share their writing with their students in an effort to *show* their students how to write instead of *telling* them how. Shuy ("What the Teacher Knows") suggests that teachers should recognize individual cognitive styles and then tailor instruction for each person.

If teacher attitude is the critical factor in recognizing individuals and molding instruction to meet individual needs, then the writing center, with its built-in flexibility and its one-on-one instructional opportunities, is well suited for meeting individual needs and, as a bonus, proves to be a cost-efficient means of producing student credit hours.

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