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Writing Centers and Writing-Across-the Curriculum: An Evolving Partnership

Susan Dinitz and Diane Howe

Like many writing center directors, we have welcomed new writing-across-the-curriculum programs at our institutions for they have increased our visibility. Large numbers of faculty emerge from writing-across-the-curriculum workshops ready to implement all they have learned about the process of writing, but not prepared to cope with the time required to meet individually with students or monitor multiple drafts of papers. A likely partnership suggests itself: professors can require students to meet with peer tutors to work on drafts of papers. As one program director observed, “everyone knows the real support for WAC has to come from writing center tutors.”

Recent articles have described such relationships between writing centers and specific courses. Carol Peterson Haviland (formerly at the writing center at Montana State University) recounts projects that “begin with the course instructor and assignment design and then move to collaborative instruction in the classroom and one-to-one writing center conferences with students” (28). Mary Grattan describes similar programs at J. Sargent Reynolds Community College (3). Several directors have taken tutoring out of the writing center and into the classroom by assigning tutors to classes. For example, the writing center at Queens College “pairs volunteer faculty-mentors with highly qualified undergraduate team-teachers” (Smith 5) and the writing center at UMass/Boston “assigns a tutor . . . to core courses in English and other departments at faculty request” (Smith 7). At Brown University, students in courses throughout the curriculum are required to discuss drafts with Writing Fellows assigned to the classes (Haring-Smith 16).

All of these descriptions of relationships between the writing center and specific courses are glowing success stories praising the benefits to the

center, the students, and the faculty. But our experience suggests that without adequate resources, providing tutoring support to entire classes can lead to practical, pedagogical, and philosophical problems. One of us, Diane Howe, directs the writing center at Champlain College, a small, two-year college with a strong career orientation. The other, Susan Dinitz, directs the writing center at the University of Vermont, a medium-sized state university. Though our institutions are very different, we found that in providing tutoring support to entire classes, we had encountered identical problems. As a result, we have experimented with another model: writing center staff as facilitators for group critiques.

Model One: Required Sessions at the Writing Center

Diane had been “contracting” with faculty in various disciplines since she began her center in 1984. Students in several courses were required to review drafts with a writing tutor. Sue had established similar relationships with classes since 1985. But as our programs have grown, this model has created more and more problems:

Scheduling. Setting up the tutoring sessions can be a monstrous task. For example, in the fall of 1986 Sue placed herself in the position of scheduling 200 education students into the writing center twice during the semester. Identifying 400 tutoring slots, creating a tutor schedule to fill these slots, getting the 200 students signed up in the appropriate slots, dealing with students who missed appointments—these purely mechanical tasks required hours of work. An instructor at Champlain wanted each of twenty legal-secretarial students to come to the center four times during the semester. With one-hour appointments, this meant eighty hours, or two entire weeks, of our schedule filled with this class alone.

Faculty Development. In making arrangements with faculty, the director often ends up discussing the assignment. These discussions, while fulfilling our mission to provide writing support, it can be awkward. We are usually called in after the assignment has been written. A few simple questions attempting to clarify expectations about the assignment can leave faculty realizing they haven’t thoroughly thought through the purpose of the assignment and their own expectations about the final product or haven’t conveyed these expectations to the students. Many haven’t anticipated this interaction with the writing center, and the discussion results in placing them on the defensive.

Communication. Communication among staff, instructor, and director becomes cumbersome when the director must act as the go-between. The director has to inform the tutors of the arrangements, clarify the assignment, and guide tutors to productive tutoring sessions. We have both

resorted to frequent and lengthy memos to tutors and/or “emergency” meetings with tutors before students arrive. Once tutoring begins, tutors come to the director with additional questions about the assignment, which require another discussion with the professor. If all the tutors need to be informed about this exchange, another memo must be distributed. For example, in Sue’s work with the education students, the tutors and faculty conducted through her a lengthy exchange about whether the students could use first person point of view in their papers. And in Diane’s work with freshmen taking a course entitled *Electrical Circuits*, a three-way dialogue about the degree of detail required in the introduction to lab reports lasted a week, ending long after the first students had had their appointments.

Tutor Qualifications. All tutors can’t tutor all things, even if we recruit from disciplines other than English. As Leone Scanlon points out, “Although certain characteristics of writing are common to all fields, the discourse in each discipline also has its own features” (38). It takes special training to prepare tutors to comment on a series of *Electrical Circuits* labs or case studies in *Business Management*.

Required Visits. Some students don’t understand the purpose of the required visit and so come unprepared or unwilling to be productively engaged in a tutorial. Although studies by Irene Clark and Lex Runciman suggest most students in composition classes find required tutoring sessions helpful (Clark 33-34, Runciman 13-14), the function of such a requirement within a history or an engineering course isn’t always apparent to students. We and our tutors found ourselves repeatedly explaining the purpose of the required tutoring sessions. Even when an engineering instructor designed a handout with a clear explanation of the assignment and the requirement to go to the writing center, many students couldn’t understand what “writing” had to do with their lab grades and resented the time taken from their busy schedules.

Product Rather Than Process. Students who do not understand that the writing center requirement is part of a process, that what is being looked at is a draft, place inappropriate emphasis on getting the best product in the shortest time. More often than drop-in students, they bring a “fix-it” mentality to the session.

Student-centered Learning. When our centers became over-scheduled, we sometimes cut down the length of sessions from one hour to twenty or thirty minutes. This briefer tutorial can change the nature of the dialogue that takes place. When asked to evaluate the usefulness of twenty-minute sessions, a tutor, Tracy Aberman, wrote:

Tutoring for 20 min. at a time was difficult at first, actually it was easier as I went along. I just realized that the "personal-ness" of each session had to be reduced to almost nothing. . . . I felt like it was more of the "I-tell-them-what-to-do and they-nod." I had a few productive sessions but for the most part I didn't feel like I was giving them any real help.

We pride ourselves on providing student-centered learning which encourages the students to participate in identifying problems and working through various solutions. We train our tutors to conduct their sessions one way, then require them to "break the rules" when the schedule leaves no time for dialogue to take place.

Expansibility. The number of faculty that can require students to see a tutor is limited by the number of tutoring slots available. And required visits from one class mean no open slots for drop-in students who need help. While we found that allowing entire classes to come to the writing center was initially beneficial, when we were developing our centers, it has not been practical on a wide scale.

Model Two: Assigning Tutors to Classes

Assigning tutors to a class solves many of the practical problems arising when entire classes make appointments at the writing center. The tutors establish their own schedules and communicate directly with the faculty member. Tutors, who can be recruited from within the discipline, can talk to the class and explain the purpose of the tutoring component. Students relate to one tutor rather than an entire writing center. Finally, this model is more easily expandable, as it is not constrained by the physical limitations of the writing center. However, it too has problems.

Expense. Unless one has a large pool of tutors willing to work for credit, the cost of such a service can be prohibitive. If tutors meet with a class of forty for two sessions, someone has to pay for eighty hours of tutoring plus whatever extra hours the tutors put in preparing for the sessions.

Recruiting Tutors. Whether tutors work for credit or for pay, this method of supporting writing-across-the-curriculum requires large numbers of them. At two year institutions like Champlain, recruiting enough tutors to assign several to several classes is impossible: tutors are available for only one year, most have limited college writing experience, and the number of qualified tutors is small.

Furthermore, the burdens of which the director has been relieved now fall on the tutors:

Scheduling. When Sue assigned two of her best tutors—Bill Christmas and Steve Alexander—to an introductory history class, they had to deal with the panic at the end of the class when only half the students had received tutoring. They also had to decide what to do when only two of the six students showed up the first morning that sessions were scheduled.

Communication. Bill and Steve had to communicate with each other, the students, the professor, and the writing center director. Bill wrote in his journal, “In some ways we were the ‘go-between’ as we would discuss ideas with both the professor and director. What this does, however, is create a great deal of added work for the tutors; trying to work things out in the best possible way for the students, professor, director, and themselves.”

Tutor Exploitation. If the exact nature of their responsibilities has not been clearly laid out, the tutors’ lack of experience can lead to exploitation. While in the original arrangements Bill, Steve, and a graduate assistant were all going to respond to drafts, the graduate assistant dropped out, leaving Bill and Steve to work with all 80 students. They each scheduled several three-hour-long blocks, seeing students every 15 minutes. Bill describes his first experience: “The schedule, which in its making seemed so ‘plausible’—sometimes having 3 hour blocks, even six hours in one day—now looms like some haunted villa I never want to re-enter.” And he notes the personal cost: “After some marathon night sessions, I returned home unable to perform any of my own academic tasks—too drained. We found that our balance was disrupted enough in such a concentrated space of time as to make us immobile.”

Model Three: Peer Group Critiques

After several years of working with entire classes, we both felt the resources of our writing centers (and of ourselves) being strained to the limit. So we turned to the idea of group critiques as a more manageable and economic model for supporting writing-across-the-curriculum. With some in-class training, students in the class, rather than tutors, respond to drafts. Group critiques can take place right in the classroom, eliminating all scheduling problems. And if students read one another’s papers ahead of time, all of the drafts can be responded to in one class period.

What is the writing center’s role in this model? Students often need to be taught how to work effectively in groups and how to critique one another’s papers. The director can provide this training. For Diane, this process begins with a class visit by the director in which students discuss the benefits of peer review and guidelines for group work and then develop a series of questions to focus discussion of their drafts. After a very brief practice session in the last ten minutes of class, their assignment is to come to the

next class with revised drafts to be critiqued by the group. The director now becomes facilitator and consultant—making sure groups work toward the goals of the assignment and helping to answer questions that the entire group encounters on a draft. Some professors eventually feel comfortable taking on some or all of these roles themselves.

If this service expands, writing center tutors can become facilitators/consultants for the group critiques. Indeed, because tutors are peers, they can model peer critiquing more effectively than teachers or directors. In “Using Small Groups Effectively in the Lab: Strategies for Improving Student Self-Confidence,” Larry Harred and Thomas Russo report how their use of tutors as peer group members/leaders, modelling and encouraging effective peer group interactions, improved “the ability and attitude of freshmen composition students toward writing tasks” (8).

Group critiques provide some advantages beyond the practical. Students benefit from hearing three or four readers respond to the draft, rather than just one. And students in the same course are in some ways better readers than writing center tutors: they know the entire context of the assignment and the course material. After a recent peer session, a student commented, “I trust my classmate, because she is working on the same kind of project so she knows what I’m trying to do better than anyone.” In an education class Diane found that students could discuss a paper’s reference to Piaget better than she or the tutor could. Furthermore, because the group has the common context of the course, they can easily shift into discussions of the course material. At Champlain, one group found such value in the group critiques that they continued to meet outside of class as a study group.

Another significant advantage is the continued opportunity to work with faculty. After Diane visited a social work course, the professor wrote, “Our preparation ahead of time was most useful . . . in helping me develop a readable, practical, workable writing assignment for my course.” Through the questions raised in group sessions, he also learned how student perceived his assignment.

Our goal, then, is to form the best possible partnership between writing-across-the-curriculum and writing centers. We want our writing centers to help professors respond to multiple drafts and to help large numbers of students learn the value of discussing ideas and drafts with others. But we found earlier models in which tutors work one-on-one with entire classes of students impractical, given our resources. By shifting some of our resources to group work, we have been able to provide these services. This expansion in no way detracts from the one-on-one tutoring that has traditionally been the model at our centers. Many of the students who still have questions after group critiques come to the center for additional help. Indeed, as students

learn the value of discussing ideas with peers, they may start coming to the writing center when these opportunities are not provided in a course.

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