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Stephen D. Fields

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Review

Pamela B. Farrell, ed.

The High School Writing Center: Establishing and Maintaining One

(Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1989)

Stephen D. Fields

When those of us who run high school writing centers got started, we learned quickly to make it up as we went along. We used scotch tape and band-aids until something better appeared. Few rules existed. The references available to people establishing writing centers contained some good concepts, but none presented the whole picture. In *The High School Writing Center* Pamela Farrell gives us a guide book that shows ways to put together places where “a community of writers” might gather (ix).

Finally, we can see how others have solved problems common to most writing centers. This compilation of articles by writing center directors offers solutions whether the writing center is only in the planning stages or is fully operational. Farrell has arranged her book into convenient sections—

- * getting started
- * functioning
- * using computers and other equipment
- * wider horizons.

I. Getting Started

Initial discussions of establishing a writing center often need to include questions about staffing, funding, goals and philosophy, and available space. Farrell has included ample coverage of these issues in the first section. For example, Amy Levin uses her experience as an English teacher and writing center director at Scarsdale (New York) High School

to offer practical advice ranging from the weight of reality and its impact on philosophy to “the continual struggle for [a writing center’s] very existence” (23).

Levin first makes clear that philosophies for most writing centers grow out of conditions present—in the building, the budget, the administration, teaching schedules, and other necessities. “Nevertheless,” she points out, “the very existence and growth in number of high school writing centers at the national level indicate that a certain philosophy is at work” (23). That is,

... a good writing center will have as its philosophy living up to its name. It will aim at making writing central in the school and in students’ lives by involving students and adults in a collaborative approach to writing. A writing center will foster a positive attitude toward writing and encourage students to feel more confident about engaging in the essentially human act of communication. (28)

She further suggests that this philosophy holds whether the center is staffed by students or teachers (23). Whichever staffing choice a school makes has advantages. For example, “. . . writing centers that employ peer tutors can model certain relationships among students that administrators might well wish to foster” (25). Students may well be less threatened by a peer tutor than by an adult. Students can share ideas in a manner advantageous to both client and tutor; thus, tutors receive help with their own writing. Some schools offer an additional incentive to peer tutors by giving a credit for staffing writing centers—usually one period a day.

II. Functioning

One school that uses peer tutors in this way is described in the second section of the book. In Chapter 8, “Training Peer Tutors for the Writing Center,” Elizabeth Ackley describes how they staff their writing center at Indian Hill (Cincinnati, Ohio) High School. Their peer tutors not only receive credit for “Advanced Methods of Composition,” but an automatic “A” in the course as well. The tutors record their observations in journals and keep record sheets in the tutees’ writing center folders. Training the 40 tutors in the writing process and tutorial strategies takes place over 20 hours before school starts at “English Camp” (65). Choosing this method of staffing also has obvious budgetary advantages.

This is not to say that there aren’t success stories in which writing centers are staffed by trained professionals. Indeed, teachers helping student writers at various stages of the writing process promotes “. . . informal relationships between adolescents and adults” in a low-risk environment (23). The availability of resources may well dictate which type of staffing a school or district might choose. Given the advantages that both types of staffing

provide, districts that use a combination of peer tutors and teachers may be even more effective.

Another question when considering how effectively a writing center fits into “institutional goals” (23) is the breadth of the population to be served. While most writing centers have an obvious connection to the English department, many districts have broader goals for their total school writing program(s). Anne Wright describes how they targeted a specific population at Hazelwood West (Missouri) High School, but soon found “. . . that it was hard to tell an ‘enrichment’ student from a ‘developmental’ student” (74). Wright, who has authored two of the chapters in this book, details how her staff had envisioned a referral system where classroom teachers would specify to the writing center staff what the students needed to work on. What they got, after the referral system settled in, were mostly “self-referrals”—students who came to the writing center on their own (74).

Wright also describes how her staff decided to be more than just a tutoring service. She sees the writing center as providing leadership for the total writing program of the school. Their center serves as a clearing house for student writing activities, such as writing contests, and as a resource for teachers by maintaining a professional library of resources about the teaching of writing.

III. Computers & Other Gear

In addition, Hazelwood West has computers for word processing and CAI activities (74). Use of computers in this context corresponds to Editor Farrell’s survey of high school writing centers, which indicates that the use of computers has spread to the majority of facilities (101). Farrell, who has contributed Chapter 16 herself, champions the role of computers as a device

. . . that encourages collaboration, provides immediate feedback and ease in revision, invites more writing, opens a dialogue between writer and tutor, acts as a learning device, and allows writers to take pride in their work. (107)

When student writers and tutors collaborate, the computer monitor becomes a third person—“neutral ground.” Differences in ethnic or social background tend to “vanish and a new relationship develops” (107). Student writers tend to feel that it’s not their work that’s being challenged and changed (108). A writing conference takes place while the writing is still on the screen.

Of the other advantages computers offer to the writing process, ease of revision stands out as a time saver. A writer not only can make revisions easily and quickly but is also apt to write more in the long run. Then, after

the desired revisions are completed, advanced placement students and basic skills students alike walk away with a printed, neat, legible copy of their papers. The writers develop pride in their efforts, thus providing for Farrell's writing center staff "some of [their] brightest days. . ." (110). "If the computer does, in fact, interact with writer and tutor in these ways," Farrell ponders, "what more could we as writing center directors want?" (107).

IV. Wider Horizons

An answer to that question comes from Farrell's long-time collaborator Henry A. Luce in Chapter 19, "High School-College Collaboration." Luce suggests that such a concept demonstrates how writing centers help overcome the chasm of expectations that has grown between high school writing programs and the assumptions many college instructors hold about the preparation of incoming freshman. He cites collaborations that are already underway: between Yale and New Haven (128); Akron College and Kenmore High School (130-131); and his own with Monmouth (New Jersey) College and Pamela Farrell at Red Bank Regional High School to name a few (132-135).

On one level collaborations serve to bring high school and college writing teachers together. To seek common ground at such gatherings can clarify the expectations of college instructors for high school teachers; likewise, teachers of college freshmen might see how realistic are the notions they hold about high school preparation (129). At another level such a collaboration provides an opportunity for writing teachers to improve their own instruction (130). Still a third activity to come of these efforts is to allow student writers at both institutions to interact during the writing process. Joyce Kinkead even has a computer modem hook-up from her writing center at Utah State University to Pat Stoddart's "Writing Room" at Logan (Utah) High School. The college students function as pen pals with the high school writers to share questions about writing.

Certainly writing across the curriculum is a kind of collaboration. At Pattonville (Maryland Heights, Missouri) High School the writing center is staffed by English teachers as "writing coaches" (137). In Chapter 20, Barbara Brooks describes how the Pattonville writing center assists teachers from all departments with lesson design and presentation of available writing services to classes and ultimately helps the students meet the requirements of the assignment (138). For example, students from economics class got help in the writing center with prewriting before beginning research about problem solving. Social studies students received similar suggestions on a philosophy paper. The home economics department sent its students to write a nonfiction book report. Likewise the science depart-

ment referred students to work on a saturation paper that the students wrote after a field trip to the zoo (139-140).

Each chapter Pamela Farrell has selected for *The High School Writing Center* reaffirms the notion that successful writing centers are run by “can do” people. She has chosen a logical arrangement of the chapters, including the ones she has written herself. Writing center directors and others consulting this work will find additional chapters that deal with related issues such as designing a center, scheduling, calling in a consultant, utilizing public relations, keeping records, using computer software to aid revision, and developing community connections. The book includes appendices that list recommended reading and a national directory of high school writing centers; however, the highlight of this last section is Appendix A “True Confessions of High School Writing Center Directors.” Indeed, *The High School Writing Center: Establishing and Maintaining One* is an important reference for writing center directors and their staffs.

Stephen D. Fields teaches English and directs a writing center named “Write Here” at Hempstead Senior High School in Dubuque, Iowa, where he has been for fifteen years. Previously, he taught at Shattuck School/St. Mary’s Hall, a college prep boarding school in Faribault, Minnesota—his home state.