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Writing Centers on the ROPES: Using a Wilderness Lab for Discovery

Sylvia H. Gamboa and Angela W. Williams

Background

Faced with growing staffs of tutors from a variety of majors and little time for tutor training, writing centers often become so embroiled in the complexities of day-to-day work that they sometimes fail to understand their most valuable resource—their people. With this in mind, the staff of The Citadel Writing Center opted, as part of our initial tutor training, for an adventure-based learning program designed to promote effective teamwork and enhance organizational ability. An added advantage of this training was that the outdoor activities, by metaphorically echoing the mental challenges of writing centers, renewed the importance of principles that have always made writing centers effective.

Of course, outdoor learning experiences such as the one The Citadel chose are not available to all writing center staffs. However, our account of what we experienced in the ROPES program may serve to remind others of the importance of team-work, self-confidence, and group problem-solving strategies in writing center instruction.

Introduction

On a sweltering August morning, twenty tutors in shorts and sneakers waited on the shore of the Ashley River near Charleston, South Carolina. Half had never met each other. All appeared a bit nervous to begin the first day of tutor training. Like many other writing centers with a burgeoning staff, The Citadel

Writing Center faced the challenge of quickly molding a diverse group into a cohesive unit. What we discovered was ROPES.

Reality Oriented Physical Experience Services (ROPES) is an outdoor or wilderness lab experience. ROPES is

a series of carefully structured mental and physical challenges in the organizational arena. Success depends on a team's ability to solve problems creatively, allocate diverse resources effectively, and develop powerful support networks. (Long, "Wilderness Lab" 32)

Weeks before we began the ROPES course, writing center administrators met with the ROPES staff to discuss what we hoped to accomplish in our outdoor learning experience. (CEO's from Exxon chose a week in the Colorado Mountains; The Citadel bargained for low fees and a one-day crash course on the grounds of a psychiatric hospital.) We chose the low-ROPES course instead of the high-ROPES course primarily because of its emphasis on group cooperation.

Our group was divided for the day's program into two teams of ten. Two facilitators (with masters' in social work and special ROPES credentials) led each team through a series of physical challenges that grew increasingly difficult. The following represents a sampling of the ROPES challenges we faced:

Blind Man's Bluff—Blindfolded and silent, team members put themselves in line according to foot size. Emphasis: non-verbal communication and problem solving.

The Trust Fall—A person stands on the edge of a high platform and falls backward into the arms of team members. Emphasis: support and trust among teammates.

The Mohawk Walk—Team crosses taut cables strung between poles. With the aid of swing ropes and each other, everyone crosses safely. Emphasis: commitment to group goal, imagination, cooperation.

The Wall—Each member must climb over a 10-foot wall with the aid of teammates. Emphasis: overcoming fear, thinking through a problem, and working together.

After completing each task, we sat on the ground, log, or stump and began "processing," a term used for intensive discussions about our thoughts, feelings, and behavior that occurred during the activities. ROPES facilitators guided this critical processing. Because we quickly realized that ROPES provided psychological as well as physical safeguards, we gradually lost our fears and inhibitions and began to relax and enjoy the ten-hour experience. Just after sunset, the two teams joined for a final processing session and formal evaluation of the course.

Our original goal was simply to do something different in tutor training to encourage camaraderie. But by the end of the course, we knew ROPES was far

more than just a training session. We rediscovered essential principles about communicating, cooperating, solving problems, and taking risks—all principles essential to the success of our writing center since its inception.

The experiences during the ROPES course became metaphors for our work in the writing center and provided the basis for what we learned.

The ROPES Course Emphasized the Necessity of Good Communication for Writing Centers.

In wilderness or outdoor labs, “group cooperation and communication [are] emphasized as a part of each activity”; in order to succeed, teammates must “practice basic communication” (Long, “Comes of Age” 35). In our two teams of ten, each of us had definite ideas about how to tackle every activity of ROPES, and we realized immediately that we couldn’t accomplish any of the tasks without communicating with each other before, during, and after each exercise. In the Timed Tennis task, we realized the value of communication as we tried to figure out how all hands of our team might touch six tennis balls. Sounds easy? Not when the instructor says it must be done in under three seconds. Someone proposed we get in a line. We passed the ball rapidly from one end to the other. Fifteen seconds. We brainstormed time and time again. Eventually, Jim came up with the idea that we form a tight circle. After another five minutes, Beth shyly suggested we put the balls in a cluster on the ground then rapidly pass our hands over them all. Two seconds!

The group especially understood the value of communicating when we processed our thoughts and feelings about this activity. Beth was reluctant to share her suggestion for the Timed Tennis game, she revealed, because (1) she was new to the group; (2) she’d “never played tennis before” and hated anything athletic; (3) she didn’t want to embarrass herself “if it turned out to be a dumb idea”; and (4) she said, “Games are for young folks, and I’m middle-aged.” ROPES encouraged us to communicate suggestions as well as anxieties about participation in activities. Part of the success of the wilderness lab “is the speed with which participants open up, self-disclose, and confront interpersonal issues,” as Beth did (“Comes of Age” 31).

In those process sessions, we learned much about ourselves and others. ROPES helped us understand group dynamics and individual personalities and how to use this knowledge to communicate effectively among our staff and between tutors and students. Introverts need periodic prods: “How do you feel about the teacher’s comment here, Jamie?” Extroverts may need to be reined in a bit: “I can understand your anger, Tom. Now let’s see what specifically in your essay made Professor Todd say it was ‘full of cliches.’” We learned to communicate respect for the reluctance of the sensitive, for the thoughts of the thinker,

for the exasperation of the confused as we talked about the feelings of the writer as well as the words of the writer.

After ROPES, our staff used the process method of communication to evaluate everything from training sessions to workshops. (When the staff was small, this processing probably was accomplished with long talks over lunch.) Now, we don't have to wonder whether using a learning-styles inventory benefits tutors or students; we process, sharing thoughts and feelings about its worth. Process sessions told us that George resented being a go-fer, that Greg feared computers, and that Jim hated record-keeping. Processing has become one of the most valued tools for staff communication in our writing center, both in weekly staff meetings and in daily discussion among tutors.

Open communication has become a natural part of tutoring sessions since ROPES. Those of us in writing centers agree that the crux of the writing conference lies in the techniques of nondirective questioning and supportive comments which result in building confidence and a cooperative spirit between tutor and student. Kenneth Bruffee (641), Lisa Ede (10), and other researchers convincingly assert that writing is a social activity involving many forms of communicating. Since ROPES, we are more conscious of engaging students in meaningful conversation about their writings and readings. In *Teaching One-to-One*, Muriel Harris stresses the value of communication in writing conferences. In these conversations the tutor "talks with the students and . . . students can see that writing is primarily an act of communication" (5). We have conducted training sessions on practicing listening skills and using the Socratic method of questioning during tutorials to remind ourselves of what we know in our bones—we all want someone to ask us questions and someone to listen to our working toward some answers, some meaning. In his recent article "Ethical Issues in Peer Tutoring: A Defense of Collaborative Learning," Richard Behm stresses the value of collaboration as a form of communication in effective writing centers where "the tutor and the learner are truly collaborators, peers involved in a give and take, a communal struggle to make meaning, to clarify, to communicate" (6). This kind of communication goes far beyond fixing comma splices. It is one writer communing with another about the heart of writing, the making and sharing of meaning.

An interesting result occurred after the ROPES course when we decided to stimulate dialogue among members of our enlarging group by resurrecting the defunct staff journal. Since the day we returned, journal writing has proliferated. The communication through the journal provides continuity between day and evening staff who sometimes do not see each other for several days. In addition, entries have become more personal, more humorous, and more creative than before because there's an exchange of thoughts, ideas, and feelings going on. Tutors ask for advice on a student's problem, share a poem about a "no show," or lament a lost love. We read it each morning to hear what happened

during evening tutoring sessions as well as to catch up on personal lives. Since ROPES, communication flourishes on many fronts.

After the course, we decided to build individualized tutor mailboxes for more efficient staff communication. We clarified and streamlined the chain of command. We initiated a buddy system between peer and professional tutors for troubleshooting to reduce new tutor anxiety and reinforce the spirit of cooperative learning. ROPES also helped us revitalize our professional relationships with departmental professors: tutors confer regularly with instructors about their students and send written progress reports to keep communication flowing between instructors and writing center personnel.

In addition, the director, who before ROPES met with the undergraduate dean mainly to put out fires, began to initiate frequent communication with upper-level administrators: an informal lunch to say “thanks for your support,” a quick phone call to verify a budget item, a short memo attached to a pertinent article from *The Writing Center Journal*, a brief monthly meeting to give an update on activities, and longer conferences to hand-deliver and discuss mid-year and annual reports. The Dean himself recently requested a three-year grant to fund our center’s reading/study skills project. From the smallest one-on-one tutoring session to the largest \$50,000 grant, communication continues to be vital to the success of writing centers.

The ROPES Course Demonstrated the Effectiveness of a Cooperative Spirit in Writing Centers.

During ROPES we needed to take communication a step further to create a cooperative spirit that led to accomplishing specific activities. The course starts with the premise that “as a group of strangers we need to shed the fronts . . . in order to begin becoming a team” (Galagan 42). And it did not take long to realize success required cooperation from everyone when the group wrestled with one of its first challenges, the Mohawk Walk. A mother of twins and first-time tutor provided the key suggestion for the group’s completing the walk across a tight, suspended cable—impossible without the human chain which extended to meet each person half way. This particular activity required cooperation and attitude adjustments, especially for some who envisioned ROPES activities as a chance to show their individual prowess. No one could finish the walk alone. We depended on each other, and when everyone finally covered the treacherous ground, the whole group applauded. Team spirit began to build.

This cooperative spirit spilled into the daily activity of the writing center. For instance, one evening three tutoring groups stopped their individual sessions to brainstorm one student’s wordy diction dilemma. (It was fun hearing the staff’s enthusiasm about it the next morning.) Watching tutors engage in this kind of

spirited interchange encourages cooperative learning among students themselves. Behm talks of peer tutoring and other kinds of collaborative learning as gathering “power in proportion to the degree of cooperative involvement in the endeavor” (6). He further asserts that writing is not the lone act many, especially English teachers, envision it to be. Swapping ideas, discussing nuances, asking questions—such collaboration among staff and students becomes the norm when cooperation is fostered.

Attitudes toward staff meetings have improved; attendance is up; discussion has increased and become more productive. Who knows when others’ suggestions might be needed to solve the quandary of whether to answer the Grammar HOTLINE during tutoring. We come to a consensus when deciding such issues as “How much help is too much?” What Karl Rohnke said about the ROPES course proves true in writing center activities as well

Experiencing many things together, sharing the experiences in a discussion format, and having the benefit of an adept facilitator . . . can result in extraordinary group dynamics—changes in attitudes and reactions that are immeasurable and remarkable. (6)

We have benefitted in countless ways from our renewed emphasis on group cooperation that ROPES generated.

Group cooperation also has encouraged us to delegate responsibilities. Now, tutors often conduct regular in-service training sessions which previously had been led only by full-time staff. In an effort to promote cooperation, we have devised new committees for special projects like the popular *Memory and Retention* workshop and our first newsletter, *The Write Track*. The ROPES course has encouraged us to share as well as delegate responsibilities. Expanding staffs can capitalize on this camaraderie to enhance writing center services. As for us, the powerful new spirit of group cooperation that ROPES engendered gave us a fresh vitality that we treasure.

Ropes Training Underscored the Need for Setting Goals and Establishing Strategies to Solve Problems.

No matter how effective our communication or how enthusiastic our team spirit, the writing center staff relearned during ROPES that we could not accomplish tasks without first identifying problems, setting goals, and establishing specific strategies to solve the problems. In ROPES, participants must choose appropriate goals; study information on the resources, risks, and returns and consciously commit to the goals; evaluate their progress; and “be willing and prepared to go beyond or drop back” (Long 36). For instance, fitting ten people on a “raft” the size of a small desk top seemed impossible—especially since we had to *swing on a rope* to reach the raft. We did a great deal of “dropping back”

in the Raft Ride before managing to cling precariously to each other without falling off. After the swing-and-miss method found us continually in the imaginary drink, we devised a plan to accomplish this feat. We finally met our objective. ROPES encouraged participants to “summarize what they [had] learned and devise a preliminary plan outlining how they hoped to achieve their goals and objectives,” as we did for each task in the outdoors (Gall 56).

Working with a learning disabled student on a problem like paragraph organization is reminiscent of our struggle with the Raft Ride. Together we try to solve the puzzle of how to write coherent paragraphs: we read samples of good paragraphs; we look at the student’s paragraph; we talk about organization; we highlight main ideas and supporting data in two colors; we draw creative pictures of paragraph structure; we cut out sentences; we rearrange them on the floor; we add, delete, and move ideas on the word processor. As Fred Barbaro (603) and other LD experts agree, appropriate goals and specific strategies must be developed to meet the needs of all students. Together tutors and students solve problems: by trial-and-error, by consulting experienced tutors and teachers, and by reading such works as Linda Flower’s *Problem Solving Strategies for Writers*. That’s what writing centers are all about—solving problems.

After ROPES, we intentionally employed a number of problem-solving techniques to reach specific goals as our staff wrestled with a number of significant problems that we and other centers face. Recently, we’ve been concerned about how to help basic writers experience success when they’re “getting slammed” with D’s and F’s on papers. How can we turn negative attitudes about marks on papers into positive feelings about writing for improvement? Our staff identified the goal and brainstormed specific ways to solve the problem (no perceived progress, negative feelings). For example, we designed a pink progress chart for students to document writing improvements in content, organization, and mechanics. Students may choose to record their progress on either computer or paper charts. We continually revise the smaller categories within each section (such as transitions, spelling, strong verbs, diction) listed on the chart. Even if the grade does not improve significantly, a student sees the smiley face beside “use of details” and “idea well-developed”; and the student sees the number of fragments, for instance, drop. Tutors also back up verbal praise by recording positive teacher and tutor comments in the extra space designated specifically for plaudits. A surprising offshoot of this and other experiments to help student writers experience success is that we accumulate invaluable data for assessment.

And that’s yet another problem most centers must contend with: assessment. As the writing profession (happily) gets increasingly recognized, and as evaluations and assessment (unhappily) become increasingly demanding and complex, writing centers must keep abreast of current developments in teaching writing and related subjects such as assessment. Facing assessment may be

painful for writing centers, but noted psychologist Scott Peck reminds us that it is “in the process of meeting and solving problems that life has its meaning It is through the pain of confronting and resolving problems that we learn” (Peck 121). Writing centers must welcome problems, even painful ones, in order to meet specific, individualized goals for the students and for the centers themselves.

The ROPES Course Illustrated the Value of Diversity Among Writing Center Staff.

During ROPES we were reminded of the skills and talents each of us brings to a group. On the ROPES course, each task called for different approaches. As our staff grew, it became increasingly eclectic: a radio announcer, the school newspaper editor, a pre-law student, the head of a rock band, an experienced English teacher, a probation officer, a concert violinist, and a reading specialist, to name a few. There were plungers and ponderers, the powerful and the petite. It was no surprise that we had varied views on how to accomplish each of the ROPES activities. ROPES reminded us that writing centers that function effectively value the unique gifts and competencies of each staff member.

Early in the course, ROPES personnel attempted to identify individual leadership styles within our group. During Blind Man’s Bluff, a firm leader emerged from ten blindfolded, mute people. It took approximately ten seconds. We were asked simply to line up according to foot size. Initially no one budged. Then, someone took charge by pushing and pulling us in order. *Voila!* Processing this and other activities encouraged and validated a variety of leadership styles.

Like all centers, ours employs an array of leaders with special talents. Margaret supervises the tutors and is an expert troubleshooter and organizer; she supplies the quiet tone, the right advice, the lost file. Honor student Ron, a natural leader who plans to be a teacher, initiates his own workshops. Mary enjoys analyzing essays and poetry and knows all the intricacies of MLA and APA styles; she often tutors upper-level students and runs workshops on writing research papers. Each person finds a niche where he or she can shine.

Deborah artistically designs workshop fliers and bulletin boards. Our computer whiz teaches us *PageMaker*. Chris, the counselor, deals gently with depressed Don. Deb is great with ESL students; she even cooks ethnic meals for Thai students on the weekends. We would have no cassette library were it not for Ernie, our retired Renaissance man, who tapes Shakespeare’s plays for the students. And just yesterday Tricia asked if she could make overheads for a workshop she’s creating—another new talent discovered.

Because of the staff’s diversity, we’re also able to match tutors and students well. We thought Ann (a black graduate assistant with a quick wit and expertise as a counselor) might help Will (a “redneck” of the lowest order) widen his

horizons. We could write a hilarious story about the day those two heatedly discussed Othello's color:

"There's no way he could be black! Desdemona was a white girl."

"*What do you think a Moor is, freshman?*"

Ann taught Will more than he realized during those Othello sessions, both of them laughing all the way.

Appreciating individual talents led us to face some of our own prejudices about students' abilities. We took a hard look at the "dumb athlete" syndrome. We reminded ourselves that athletes have a greater ability to follow instructions, to make suggested changes, and to respond to constructive criticism than many other students. We are acquiring a fresh appreciation for the coachable athlete, the detail-oriented engineer, the shy musician. The Myers-Briggs Personality Inventory, which we took just after the ROPES course, drove home to all of us the value of different abilities that ROPES suggested. We have come to accept the differences, the special abilities, and quirks of students. Our center welcomes them all because we too have particular characteristics that make us different.

ROPES encouraged us to appreciate diverse personalities and abilities, and we've learned that our writing center provides an ideal forum for using these inherent talents and acquired skills. We now embrace the beauty of diversity that ROPES revealed.

ROPES Confirmed the Importance of Risk-taking and Innovation in Writing Centers.

Finally, the ROPES course taught us that achievement often includes risk-taking. For acrophobic Lynn to climb a ten-foot pole and fall backwards into the woven arms of the group took courage. Afterwards, she felt "euphoric." ROPES experts explain that true physical risk-taking is not the goal, but "*perceived physical risk is what makes the progress exciting*" (Gall 55). Lynn accomplished a difficult task by overcoming her fear and had fun in the process.

Some of our students fear writing just as much as Lynn fears heights. It is our mission to help them identify their fears, take some risks, dare to do the difficult, and enjoy the process—even when it's painful or scary. What Galagan says about ROPES also applies to risk-taking activities in writing centers, "The exercises are mainly about giving and getting support to take the risk and about turning fear into productive energy" (43). In "Freud in the Writing Center: The Psychoanalytics of Tutoring," Christina Murphy says that the students who ask for help with writing "make themselves vulnerable in opening themselves up to understanding or misunderstanding, judgment or acceptance, approval or disapproval" (15). After ROPES, we restructured our Initial Interview form to

identify writing anxieties that need to be dealt with before help can be effective. One staff member conducting a study skills workshop took considerable effort with a student who was reluctant to highlight information in a Wordsworth poem or his history text. (His high school prohibited marking in books.) Deborah urged him to try this “new” technique to analyze and remember key ideas in a story, poem, or chapter. He resisted still. We asked him to read Mortimer Adler’s “How to Mark a Book” which asserts that “marking up a book is not an act of mutilation, but of love” (11). He finally relented. Risk-taking comes in various forms—for students and staff.

Administering the Myers-Briggs Personality Inventory during tutor training was a gamble that paid high dividends. Inviting a humorist to a staff meeting was also a risk—and a flop! Deciding to take the ROPES course posed another big risk, especially since we told the Dean *after* we had solicited for funds and sent in our registration. Though set in an ultra-traditional environment, The Citadel Writing Center strives to be on the cutting edge of writing center development. Sometimes it involves a few skirmishes, but we’re convinced the wounds are worth it. The importance of risk-taking in education was confirmed in a recent study for the National Association of Secondary School Principals. It showed that “risk was directly related to positive growth” (Pellicer 36) and that risk-taking principals who refused to let bureaucracy strangle innovation were the most effective in shaping an environment conducive to learning (37-38). We in the writing center encourage students and staff to take risks we might never have considered before our ROPES experience. As Long comments, “While the outcomes of a wilderness lab [or a writing lab] are serious-line business, the process is fun” (Long 38). In fact, ROPES showed the necessity of humor. Since ROPES, tutors make an effort to inject humor in sessions when appropriate. We’ve brought out Charlie Brown posters for bulletin boards that we had earlier considered childish. A recent notice on the board gently admonishes: It is absolutely, positively, unquestionably, without a doubt, unnecessary (and tacky) to be redundant in your writing.

Conclusion

In her 1982 article “The Winds of Change: Thomas Kuhn and the Revolution in the Teaching of Writing,” Maxine Hairston argued that among the first responses of schools to meet the crisis of ineffective teaching of writing were

the writing labs which sprang up about ten years ago to give first aid to students who seemed unable to function within the traditional paradigm. Those labs are still with us, but they’re still giving only first aid and treating symptoms. (82)

Maxine Hairston’s assessment of writing centers is dead wrong, and ROPES reminded us just how wrong. The outcome of ROPES for The Citadel Writing

Center was “serious-line business” and certainly proved that we offer more than band-aids. Successful completion of the course necessitated identifying goals and problems, communicating and cooperating to find solutions, taking advantage of special talents and abilities, giving and receiving feedback and support, managing conflict resourcefully, and renewing team commitment and energy through celebration and humor. The analogies to our work in writing centers are clear and profound.

American education has changed dramatically in the last twenty years. Writing centers have changed too. Everything is so much more complicated these days. To keep writing centers living and growing, we must hold fast to those early principles that proved effective, but we must inject them with new life, look at them with a fresh eye, explore new ways to accomplish the old values, be creative and innovative—take a risk or two and have fun. Imagine what we might discover in the process.

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