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The High School Writing Center: The Once and Future Services

by James Upton

That I work in a secondary writing/learning center, The Write Place, and that this center is one of several secondary centers to be honored as an NCTE Center of Excellence are important indications of the influence that writing center theory and services have had. The idea of a secondary-level writing/learning center was almost unheard of a decade ago, but the writing center philosophy and services have been effectively extended to the secondary level in many schools throughout the nation. Indeed, I have worked with school districts which are exploring writing/learning centers at the junior high and elementary level. The philosophy of and services provided by centers are obviously valuable at all levels, and the vertical and horizontal expansion of such work should and will continue.

As one who has been involved with writing/learning centers at the secondary level for almost eight years, I would like to share some observations about the philosophy and services I believe the writing center can provide at the secondary level.

Because of a smaller and more inter-related nature and structure, the writing/learning center at the secondary school can and should operate with different goals and offer different services than it does at the college level. Although the goals and services should be different, I do believe that work with students in the conference/tutorial setting on a request or referral basis and other direct student-centered services are still the most important and valuable immediate functions a center should offer, and the benefits of such writing-oriented services more than justify a center's existence. For a variety of well documented reasons, the importance of providing personal remediation, reinforcement, and enrichment in writing/learning activities continues to grow, and the writing center is one of

the few viable means available to achieve this goal. Increasing class size, more academic demands, and a host of other factors make the one-on-one tutorial work in the center of increasing importance and value for high school students, and this individual conference work should continue and expand and should always remain at the heart of center work.

Beyond the one-on-one tutorial services, the high school center can and should also provide other important student-centered services of a more preventive and enriching nature. The high school center staff can provide mini-clinics on essay exam writing, research processes and products, abstract writing, etc., before or after school or during the study halls. These mini-clinics are excellent methods to provide brief lessons to students and also serve to increase student awareness and use of the center and its services. The high school writing center can also be the center for student writing contests, and group work sessions for students interested in entering the same contests can be readily arranged.

The center can also provide study skills information, introduction to word processing, a center for study groups, and even a center for book swaps. Such services are valuable for the students and increase awareness and use of the center's facilities. The writing center can also be a most effective way for students to publish their own works. Center personnel can work with the keyboarding instructors in the school and can arrange for the keyboarding students to type and duplicate submitted materials. The student publication from the writing center should not be a contest of any type; publishing all contributions is most effective in improving student attitudes about writing and reading and in attracting new clients to the center.

These direct student services are most important and are an effective addition to any high school; however, the high school writing center can provide other valuable services and create other benefits for students and for staff. One of the major benefits of a secondary writing/learning center is and should be to those professionals who work in the center. The benefits to student peer tutors have been described by many, but the benefits to professional staff who work in the center are also important. Most high school writing centers are not staffed by a single individual all day; most of the professionals who work in the center do so as part of their professional assignment. Just as work in the center helps student tutors to become more effective in their own work in a writing/learning process, so too work in the center helps make professionals more effective in the work in their own classes. For many important academic and political reasons, I believe that the professionals who staff the high school center need not and should not all be from the language arts department; instructors from all disciplines who are interested in writing/learning should be encouraged to work in the center. Many non-language arts instructors who are interested in center work will need some writing and conferencing background

and training, but such instructors can be most effective in the center, can benefit from their experiences, and can provide valuable models for students and other instructors. For language arts instructors, working in the writing center will help them become more effective responders to student works and more effective in conferences within their own classes. Work in the center will also help all instructors appreciate the quality and creativity of many instructors and students, gain empathy with student learners, and thus help the instructors in designing more effective writing/learning assignments for their own students and in providing more effective assistance.

Beyond the direct benefits to students and staff which result from work within the center, I believe a most valuable function of a high school writing center is the work which center personnel can do with instructors in all areas; I would argue that increasing the entire staff's awareness and use of effective writing-to-show/share-learning and of writing-to-learn theories and strategies may well be the most important long-range service of high school writing centers. Such increased awareness occurs by having a wide variety of staff members work in the center, but having all staff work in the center is not possible. However, the center staff can and should make a concerted effort to work with all interested staff in the area of writing-to-show/share-learning and writing-to-learn. I realize that many high school centers, especially early in their existence, struggle to be recognized and to survive as a resource for students in their writing efforts, and this goal is one of the first which must be met, but I truly believe that the high school writing center can and should be one of the most important influences and resources in revolutionizing the use of writing-to-communicate and writing-to-learn.

One of the easiest and most effective ways to expand staff and student consciousness and use of writing for a variety of reasons is for the center personnel to become involved in classroom writing/learning activities. Many content area instructors are more than willing to allow center personnel to make in-class presentations about study skills, essay exam writing, research processes and products, and other traditional uses of writing, and the center personnel can also return to the class and/or meet with students in the center to provide additional assistance when needed. This in-class work is often a most effective first step to increase and improve use of traditional writing in high schools, and such activities also open the door for later work with all staff on writing-to-learn theories and strategies if the school/center personnel move in this direction. Gaining the respect and trust of other staff through traditional uses of writing is an essential first step in moving toward these writing-to-learn activities, and the high school writing center is a most effective means to help accomplish this.

To aid in this work with staff, the center should be as accessible and attractive for staff as it is for students. Open houses, coffee breaks, etc., should be held to attract all staff to the center. Center personnel can also be most valuable and can

generate much support by working with staff on their own writing-for-college classes, publication, etc., and the center can and should sponsor a regular publication of articles written by staff members. The publication should include summaries of activities used in classes, reviews of professional materials, creative works, etc.; anything which increases the use of writing by staff should be encouraged and included.

The high school writing center should also become a coordination center for assignments. For example, a social science teacher who requires a major research paper and a writing teacher who share students may allow them to work on the same assignment for both classes to improve the quality of work in each class and may choose to involve the center personnel as additional resources in the process and product. The center and its publications are also an excellent method to keep all staff informed of major writing projects in the school and to help make these projects efficient and effective for both staff and students.

In addition to the coordination of writing assignments within the building, the center can and should be the center and storehouse for the collection and sharing of both effective writing-to-share/show-learning and writing-to-learn activities. The center should contain files of writing activities and evaluations of such activities which are available to all staff members who may be interested in exploring the uses of writing in their own classes. Our center has developed a form for the development, evaluation, and sharing of such activities, and while a standard form is not necessary, the use of the center as a ready resource of practical ideas for increasing writing in all areas is a most valuable service. Such activities will increase staff and student use of the center, will help all staff members become more effective in their work with students, and will ultimately benefit students through improved content learning and improved thinking skills.

The expanded services of the high school writing center should not be limited to staff and students; sponsoring evening sessions open to students and parents can also be part of the center's services. For example, the center can offer evening "Study Skills Nights" for parents and students and can provide mini-clinics on study skills, writing strategies, suggestions for parents to help their students with language arts work, and presentations by content area instructors on methods of study skills and note-taking for specific areas. The center can also offer evening sessions on college application and scholarship writing for seniors and their parents, and these evening sessions can be one of the most popular and successful of the center's "extra" activities. Such activities provide important practical services to students and parents and are excellent methods to improve the public's awareness of and support for the center's operation.

Not all of those interested in developing a secondary writing center and not all of those who work in an existing secondary writing center will be interested

or able to expand the services of their center to include those I have discussed above; however, a secondary center which serves to supplement traditional writing classes and uses of writing is a most valuable addition to any high school. The expanded services of a high school center require time, effort, talent, and funding, but such expanded services make the center an important component of the high school, improve the quality of education in the high school, and generate support for the center.

Finally, however, I want to acknowledge all of those involved with the National Writing Centers Association and all of those college level writing center personnel who have so graciously shared their ideas, their time, and their attitudes with those of us at the secondary level. When we began our efforts, we had few models or colleagues except those at the college level, and while the published works of the college writing center personnel have been valuable in furnishing the theoretical foundation for our efforts, it has been the personal involvement with those who work in college writing centers which has provided the skills and attitudes needed to inspire and sustain our efforts at the secondary level. There are now growing numbers of successful secondary writing center operations and personnel which provide excellent ideas and models for others at this level, but the college level professionals' unselfish willingness to share their academic and pedagogical expertise and their commitment to students in the writing center setting constitute a debt which we will never be able to repay. Thank you.

James Upton received his B.A. and M.A. degrees from Western Illinois University and has also studied at the University of Iowa, Iowa State University, Drake University, and Michigan State University. He has taught at Burlington Community High School and Southeastern Community College for twenty-one years and has been involved in the Iowa Writing Project for ten years. He helped to develop the Burlington Community High School writing center ("The Write Place") and has worked in this program since 1983. His publications have appeared in the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, *English Journal*, *Notes Plus*, *Iowa English Bulletin*, and the *Oklahoma English Journal*. He also contributed a chapter to *The High School Writing Center: Establishing and Maintaining One* (Pamela Farrell, ed.).