1-1-1991

The Faculty Survey: Identifying Bridges Between the Classroom and the Writing Center

Lea Masiello

Malcolm Hayward

The Faculty Survey: Identifying Bridges Between the Classroom and the Writing Center

Lea Masiello and Malcolm Hayward

To help the writing center do its best in developing students' writing abilities, a director must attend to the relationship between her writing center and academic departments. Working "on the fringes of academic communities" and not fully engaging with the departments who send students to us is tempting, but surely counterproductive to our overall mission of helping students (Warnock and Warnock 22). We prefer the support rather than the distrust of the faculty whose students we assist. To gain this support, we want those faculty to see how alternative instruction based on individualized conferencing and peer interaction improves students' individual writing competencies and aids students' social and intellectual development. It is not enough merely to assist; we strive instead to create change, including building bridges across instructional divides so that more students can maneuver through college discourse conventions. To identify ways our writing center could mediate opposing perspectives about priorities and practices in teaching writing, we undertook a survey of faculty attitudes toward the writing center and toward teaching composition.

Building links between the classroom and the tutorial center results in both greater credibility for the center and enhanced learning opportunities for students. We can begin building such connections by creating networks of trust. One way to build trust between the writing center and faculty is to identify and discuss shared pedagogical beliefs about writing instruction. We want faculty to perceive the congruences between what they value in the process of learning to write and what the writing center considers valuable. A second source of trust comes from information. We want faculty to be accurately informed about the content and process of tutorial sessions. We hope that faculty do not believe

1

that we dismiss the concerns of those with different approaches than ours. Despite what some may think, we never tell our tutors, "Don't bother to look for spelling mistakes because spelling is irrelevant in learning to write." Instead of participating in border skirmishes and tactical ambushes designed to undermine pedagogical values that appear to be in conflict, we have used a faculty survey to discover shared values and differences that can be bridged. We have also found that repeating the survey periodically, especially when a writing center has organizational or administrative changes, helps uncover a faculty's beliefs about the process by which students should learn to write. These beliefs are instrumental in designing writing center programs that tap into the needs of faculty and students.

The timing of a survey can take into account administrative and programmatic changes in a writing center. For example, a major reorganization in 1984 complicated the relationship between the writing center at IUP and the English department faculty; we needed a plan for attending to perceptions and assessments. Previous to 1984, the writing center had been "owned" solely by the English department, staffed only by graduate assistants, and supervised by the Director of Freshman English. Simultaneous with the university-wide enhancement of tutorial services in many disciplines, the writing center was reorganized as a service jointly supported by the English department and by the Learning Center, an academic department within Student Affairs. This reorganization resulted in significant changes in writing center operation—pedagogical changes as well as staffing and supervisory changes. For example, the addition of peer tutors to the writing center staff was controversial, as was the plan to provide direction from two faculty co-directors, one each from the English department and the Learning Center. Also, the incorporation of word-processing instruction as part of our mission muddied perceptions of how we defined ourselves as a support service.

In general, the changes toward a collaborative model of learning, revealed both in our staffing and our supervisory arrangement, were threatening. What had earlier been a tutorial center staffed by graduate students, who were valued by the faculty for their professional interest in English and for their sanctioned expertise as writers, changed radically into a collaborative operation staffed largely by undergraduates. Even after four years, when the initial heated debates about "what happened in the writing center" have settled down, our collaborative model still generates controversy. A 1982 survey had revealed salient features of the English department's views toward the writing center (Hayward, 1983). However, these new arrangements, especially the "sharing" of the writing center by a department not even within Academic Affairs, suggested that a second investigation of faculty perceptions would be productive.

The resulting 1987 survey provided some surprises in terms of how the pedagogical camps had been realigned. Although some of the findings are discouraging, all of the findings confirm the usefulness of a survey. In particular,

we now know more about our relationship with the English department and about the place of composition pedagogy within the social and cultural changes that have occurred recently and that have affected departmental politics and students' academic profiles. We can use even the worst news—that there still exists a resistant corps of instructors who wouldn't send their students for any assistance beyond a few band-aids on major wounds—to help us design our publicity materials and disseminate accurate information about what we do.

Among the most interesting changes we found through the survey pertained to instructors' sense of priorities in the areas they wished to see addressed during writing center tutorials. A comparison between the earlier and later surveys shows a movement away from an emphasis on such lower order concerns as spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Although instructors reported this change in their own pedagogy, they still identified the tutor's work in lower order concerns as influential in the way they judge the writing center's effectiveness.

Another useful area for a survey to address is how writing center tutors feel about their work. In the earlier survey, a discrepancy was noted between what faculty expected from a writing center tutorial and what tutors felt their jobs to be (Hayward 4). Faculty members felt problems with grammar and punctuation were the primary reasons for referring a student to the writing center, while organization was of less concern, even though organization was the highest goal for their courses. In this same study, tutors identified organization as the chief priority for a tutorial, while grammar and punctuation were much less important. In the later 1987 survey, however, the priorities of faculty members for a writing center tutorial had changed to match those identified by writing center tutors five years earlier. Or, as Hayward explained during a presentation of these findings at the East Central Writing Association Conference at IUP in May, 1988, "If you want to know what the faculty's going to be thinking about five years from now, ask the tutors what they think *now*."

Although we are reluctant to place instructors into two groups—those with us and those against us—the 1987 survey did decidedly reveal two groups, one clearly more sympathetic to our existence and approach than the other. The truly supportive instructors revealed through our survey that they spend more time in their own classes on the same elements of the writing process that we stress in the writing center: prewriting, revision, peer tutoring, and early drafting in class.

This majority group, those who support the writing center's work with their students, are generally more recently hired faculty or faculty familiar with composition research. Such instructors encourage their students to visit the writing center for a response to their writing, for peer encouragement and support, and for additional conferencing beyond what instructors are able to provide. In general, these supporters endorse the Learning Center's conviction that peer tutoring provides more than just academic assistance: it provides

enthusiasm, encouragement, and positive role modeling, which is especially important for underprepared students. Such instructors are likely to be familiar with and to appreciate Kenneth Bruffee's identification of one of the crucial benefits of peer tutoring: the chance to participate in academic discourse with knowledgeable peers in a natural social context (Bruffee 7).

Discovering an actual group within the department that openly acknowledges distrust of the writing center is discouraging and grabs our attention. This group seriously disagrees with writing center pedagogy, distrusts much of our work with underprepared students, yet, we believe we can bring these instructors closer to understanding how the writing center can benefit both them and their students without compromising their basic pedagogy. We found that it helped to survey and analyze instructors' responses to questions about goals for their courses. By taking into account their responses to the question, "What are the goals for your course?" we can become more sensitive to writing pedagogies that differ either moderately or radically from those which we espouse in the writing center.

In comparison with those who support the writing center, the instructors who distrust our work and who are therefore less likely to encourage students to visit indicated that grammar, punctuation, spelling, and vocabulary are more important in their courses. Factors such as imagination, enjoyment, and confidence are less important. It's clear that we need to increase instructors' awareness of tutors' competence and willingness to address these "lower order" concerns, while recognizing that we agree on some priorities, such as organization and conferencing. Because both groups of instructors identified organization and conferencing as central elements in their curricula, we can design materials to stress this common ground. At the same time that we profile these areas of commonality, we can encourage faculty to recognize the value of working on other areas and techniques. These include using peer interaction between tutors and the more seriously underprepared students, whose writing apprehension can be reduced through whole-discourse writing activities rather than belittled through excessive attention to errors in the early and middle stages of the writing process.

The 1987 survey also reveals how instructors who differ from each other in their basic principles for teaching writing share certain beliefs. Such shared concerns can become important links between the writing center and this less sympathetic group. All instructors identified as important course goals these elements: syntax, organization, cognitive development, and language awareness.

The writing center needs to consider how to affect faculty's perceptions that these elements are regularly considered during tutorials. It makes sense, therefore, that we concentrate our efforts on demonstrating to the faculty how we do address these elements, elements that are congruent with writing center pedagogy and course goals for both groups of instructors.

Responses to other questions also reveal this useful "middle" ground that identifies points of congruence that we can utilize in advertising writing center services and in developing new programs. In response to the question, "Why do you refer students to the writing center?" all instructors identified the following elements as carrying equal weight when assessing students' needs for tutorials: grammar, punctuation, and vocabulary.

The dissatisfied group feels, however, that the writing center is not much help in these areas, nor are their students getting adequate assistance in spelling. In other areas, such as style, organization, and paragraphing, the amount of help is rated as barely adequate. Again, we need to demonstrate to this group of instructors that we are indeed providing help in these areas and that the help is accurate. In the past, we have relied on report forms to instructors following a tutorial session to inform them of the material covered during individual tutorial sessions. We see now that the report forms aren't always adequate communication avenues between the writing center and instructors. Instructors don't always believe that the tutors have covered a particular writing concern, especially if the student doesn't follow through and produce changes in this area, or if lower order concerns are persistent in final drafts. Peter Carino, at Indiana State, Terre Haute, has described a "meet the tutors" panel presentation that effectively enhances communication between tutors and faculty and showcases tutors' professionalism. Such a forum for communication as Carino describes enables people to work together in identifying common areas of concern. When faculty and tutors collaborate comfortably, they gain confidence in one another's different contributions to the student's learning process.

Conclusion

Three years since this most recent survey, we have just begun to realize the usefulness of the survey in planning our advertising, communicating with faculty, and training our tutors. It's apparent that we need to repeat the survey again as the writing center continues to change its programming, services, and staff. For example, we have experienced an upswing in interest in offering word-processing workshops. Many instructors schedule their classes for a full-hour workshop in the writing center. These students receive a very positive introduction to the writing center and to wordprocessing, and they return to use the center to compose, review, revise, and edit their essays. Most instructors and students are very satisfied with this service, as our regular evaluations demonstrate. But we do not know at this time how these workshops have affected instructors' overall view of the writing center. It is likely that a new emphasis on integrating word processing into composition courses and into the writing center's approach to tutoring has affected our credibility and has altered priorities in the teaching and learning of writing. We might guess that those who work with us like our services because they keep coming back, but we won't

really know about attitudes, perceptions, and misconceptions until we survey the tutors and the faculty once more and include questions pertaining to the use of word processing.

In general, the results of the 1987 survey give us some new ways to think about building bridges between the writing center's view of what is important to discuss during tutorials, instructors' views of what is important, and instructors' perceptions of what the writing center is actually doing during tutorials. Although the distrustful group of instructors was really very small in 1987, and we don't want to concentrate our efforts and energies on this group alone, we should discover the sources of their dissatisfaction and address their misconceptions about writing center policies and practices. In general, though, we are satisfying most instructors' expectations, and our approach to teaching writing is congruent with that of most English department faculty. This fact alone is worth noting publicly to dispel a free-floating sense that the writing center operates in isolation from writing courses. Because we are part of the still controversial "movement in composition teaching away from the red-inked essay and toward the writer as a person" (North 50), we must commit ourselves to ongoing faculty development programs as well as programs for students. And, as our student population continues to include higher percentages of those "underprepared" for college writing classes, the challenge intensifies to support faculty in their instructional efforts rather than scorn their attitudes. We're not interested in being continually "at war" with some instructors; we would rather be mediators in the larger social changes that result in a greater need for tutorial services. At the same time, we can take encouragement from those who continue to support flexible learning environments and endorse our growth and influence.

Works Cited

Bruffee, Ken. "Peer Tutoring and the Conversation of Mankind." *Writing Centers: Theory and Administration.* Ed. Gary A. Olson. Urbana: NCTE, 1984. 3-15.

Carino, Peter, Lori Floyd, and Marcia Lightle. "Empowering a Writing Center: The Faculty Meets the Tutors." *Voices of Empowerment: Proceedings of the Eleventh Annual East Central Writing Centers Association Conference.* 1989. Ed. Lea Masiello. Indiana, PA: Halldin, 1990.

Harris, Muriel, ed. *Tutoring Writing: A Sourcebook for Writing Labs.* Glenview: Scott Foresman, 1982.

Hawkins, Thom. "Intimacy and Audience: The Relationship Between Revision and the Social Dimension of Peer Tutoring." *College English* 42 (1980): 64-8.

Hayward, Malcolm. "Assessing Attitudes Towards the Writing Center." *The Writing Center Journal* 3:2 (1983): 1-10.

Hayward, Malcom and Lea Masiello, paper presented to the East Central Writing Association Conference at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, May 1988.

North, Stephen. "Writing Center Diagnosis: The Composing Profile." Harris: 42-52.

Warnock, John and Tily Warnock. "Liberatory Writing Centers: Restoring Authority to Writers." Olson: 16-23.

Malcolm Hayward, Professor in the Department of English, has directed the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Freshman English Program and the Writing Center. He presently teaches in the graduate program and conducts research in composition and literary theory.

Lea Masiello, Professor in the Learning Center, co-directs the Writing Center and teaches in the English department.