

1-1-1991

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Recommended Citation

Kiedaisch, Jean and Dinitz, Sue (1991) "Learning More from the Students," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 1, Article 9.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1258>

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Learning More from the Students

Jean Kiedaisch and Sue Dinitz

Like other writing centers, after seeing students for several years we wanted to do some evaluation, both to demonstrate that our tutoring sessions were effective and to identify ways to improve them. A common method of evaluating sessions is to distribute questionnaires asking clients and tutors to **rate them** (Lamb 71-77; Neuleib 3; North 26). But we could find no report that anyone had done more with the questionnaire: no one had looked at whether certain groups were more satisfied than others or whether certain tutors were more successful than others. In other words, no one had asked not only whether clients were satisfied but also what factors affected the degree of their satisfaction. Did clients prefer tutors of the opposite sex? Were ESL students or students with learning disabilities less satisfied than others? If we could answer such questions, we could not only demonstrate our effectiveness but also identify which students we work with best and areas in which our tutors need more training.

To answer such questions, we had students and tutors both rate their sessions and answer demographic questions (see Appendix A). At the end of the year, after long hours of entering the information from 376 sessions into a data base, we had a statistician look for significant relationships between the client and tutor information at the top of the surveys and the client's rating of the session. He found several such relationships. (For a summary of all the results, see Appendix B.)

The Writing Center Journal, Volume 12, Number 1, Fall 1991

Of any group, the group that gave the highest ratings were first-year students. Of the total possible twenty points (the sum of the ratings on four questions, each rated on a scale from one to five), the mean rating for this group was 18.42. Additionally, when the statistician compared this mean rating with the mean rating of non-first-year students, he found these higher ratings could be attributed to chance less than 1 percent of the time. (Any difference that can be attributed to chance 5 percent of the time or less is considered statistically significant.) These two results confirmed our belief that the writing lab is especially suited to the needs of first-year students: tutors are close to the intended readers for papers for introductory courses, and first-year students are often more needy and grateful for help than upperclass students, as was illustrated in their end comments. It was the first-year students who tended to use exclamation points in their comments and to thank their tutors. One student wrote, "Things went great. I'm heading in the right direction!" while another said, "I thought it was a wonderful session. I left w/ tons of ideas that I knew would work and fit no matter where I put [them]. I'm really psyched about my paper now. Thanks, Melissa!" We will therefore continue to emphasize reaching first-year students through our advertising.

On the other hand, the group that gave the lowest ratings were students who identified themselves as learning disabled. (When compared with students not identified as learning disabled, the difference in ratings was not statistically significant, but our study was limited by having only twenty-five sessions where the students identified themselves as having learning disabilities.) Perhaps these students just needed more time than the typical one-hour session; in their end comments, six of the students with learning disabilities requested more time. But perhaps the tutors also needed more training in identifying and working with these students. At our university, tutors are often unaware of their clients' special needs because students are free to decide whether to inform tutors and professors about learning disabilities. In looking more closely at the end comments, we noticed a pattern: when tutors were unaware they were tutoring students with learning disabilities, the tutor's comments often expressed frustration, while the client's comments asked for more specific kinds of help.

Question: What would have made the session more helpful?

- | | |
|------------|---|
| (1) Tutor: | A more cooperative tutee—she was very unresponsive. |
| Client: | Pointing out more specifically the structure changes needed within my larger area's and |

- points making my three bodies more organized within the body.
- (2) Tutor: We just didn't seem to click—we seemed to be at odds—it was quite frustrating to try and help her and feel satisfied.
- Client: If my tutor had read the book I wrote about.
- (3) Tutor: Student had a hard time comprehending what was going on.
- Client: More time!

Perhaps tutors might not have felt so frustrated and could have provided the specific help being requested if they had had more training. Currently, we have a panel of students with learning disabilities come to our tutoring class, which makes tutors more sensitive in sessions with such students but doesn't provide much specific guidance. To accomplish this latter goal, we plan to collaborate with the director of the Office of Specialized Student Services to develop training materials which would help tutors identify and work with students with learning disabilities.

Like students with learning disabilities, students who speak English as a second language were less satisfied than non-ESL students with the writing center, and this difference was statistically significant. (The lower ratings given by ESL students could be attributed to chance only 4.5 percent of the time.) For ESL sessions, both tutors and clients mentioned a need for more time. End comments suggested that tutors might have had a harder time reading ESL clients: "I didn't really feel that he was understanding fully what I was saying to him or if he did he didn't agree. I don't know what I could have done differently." Also, ESL students might have been more uncomfortable than other students with both writing and being tutored. One client said that what would have made the session more helpful would have been "If I can calm myself down." And perhaps the sessions were less successful because ESL students came into our lab with so many problems in areas unfamiliar to tutors. The only training the tutors had was a brief class session with Nancy Martenis, the ESL coordinator at our university. Several of the tutors' comments expressed their feelings of inadequacy in diagnosing and setting goals for ESL students. One tutor simply said, "ESL student. Hard to know what to do." Another tutor seemed to be asking for more training: "Hard b/c student was ESL—more helpful if I knew more about dealing w/ her specific problems."

Several resources exist for providing such training. Many agencies have developed guidelines to help volunteers working with refugees and other ESL

populations, guidelines which might be applied to writing tutors helping ESL students. In a 1985 article in *Writing Lab Newsletter*, Jay Jacoby discusses how to train writing center personnel to work with international students and includes a bibliography.

We chose to take advantage of local resources for our tutor training, seeking the help of the ESL coordinator at UVM. We worked with her to design a class and handouts specifically on techniques for tutoring ESL students. Another local resource was our own ESL students. We arranged for a panel of ESL students to come talk with the tutors. And we recruited an ESL student to be a writing tutor; Charles has been able not only to work with ESL students himself but also to offer the other tutors his unique insights into what it's like, when English is your second language, to be a student at UVM and to receive tutoring from American students.

In the future, we would like to look more closely at ESL sessions. Do cultural and individual differences affect such sessions? How? As a group, do ESL students communicate their goals for tutoring sessions as clearly as other students? Are tutors as effective in establishing a hierarchy of goals for such sessions? Do tutors have to work harder in these sessions to establish trust?

When we looked at the relationship between client satisfaction and the course the paper was written for, the results were not what we expected. We suspected sessions over English literature papers would get lower ratings because both writer and reader are expected to know the disciplinary conventions. Nine of our nineteen tutors were non-English majors. But in our study, sessions over these papers were actually rated higher than other sessions, though not significantly so. However, the tutors' and clients' comments did suggest some connection between a tutor's knowledge of conventions and student satisfaction. Many of the tutors expressed feelings of inadequacy in working on papers outside of their major.

Question: What would have made the session more helpful?

- (1) "If I knew more about art analysis" (a business major tutoring an art student).
- (2) "If I'd known a little more about religion" (a business major tutoring a religion student).
- (3) "Not really comfortable with poetry analysis" (an environmental studies major tutoring an American lit student).

And many of the clients said that the session would have been better if the tutor had been more knowledgeable about the subject matter.

- (1) "Maybe I should see somebody who is an econ major."
- (2) "If tutor knew more about subject I was writing about."
- (3) "Perhaps more insight into the paper I am writing—knowledge of specific questions and construction."

Indeed, several times when clients wanted more global comments on literature papers, tutors resorted to working on grammar, perhaps because they couldn't address the more global concerns without more knowledge of the conventions.

Question: What would have made the session more helpful?

- (1) Client: If the tutor knew the characters I was writing about.
Tutor: Her paper was already well written we just worked on grammar.
- (2) Client: I would have preferred a harsher criticism on the whole, realizing, of course, how difficult that is. Nevertheless, my grammar was greatly improved as was the chronology.

As writing center directors and writing teachers, we have many questions about the role played by knowledge of conventions in both the tutoring and writing process. Are clients working on papers for literature courses just as satisfied working with tutors who are non-English majors as with tutors who are English majors? Would an English teacher agree that the help provided by the non-English majors was as good? Do we need to assure that tutors understand the conventions of various disciplines, or does this knowledge have no relationship to client satisfaction or to the quality of the session?

To begin to answer these questions we looked at the relationship between client satisfaction and the major of the tutor. We suspected that English majors would be better at tutoring students with English lit. papers than non-English majors. Unfortunately, these statistics got too complicated to give us any results. But what we did find (to our surprise) was that, overall, English major tutors got significantly higher ratings than non-English majors; these higher ratings could be attributed to chance only 1.5 percent of the time. Since we are firm believers in recruiting tutors from across the disciplines, our first thought was that there must be some explanation for these results. Perhaps the higher ratings could be attributed to our method of recruitment: we have a much larger pool of English majors recommended to be tutors. On the other hand, perhaps English majors' training makes them more sensitive

to language and more able to discern the conventions of various genres. Perhaps English majors do have special skills that could be identified and taught to other tutors.

Our most surprising result had to do with the influence of gender on client satisfaction. When female clients were being tutored by females, the ratings were higher than ratings given mixed gender or male/male sessions, and this result was significant, with only a .5 percent possibility that the higher ratings could be attributed to chance. Overall, female tutors got significantly higher ratings than males.

Obviously, something complex relating to the interaction of the genders was going on here—and some possible explanations immediately occurred to us. If females are more attuned to non-verbal communication than males and are less likely to dominate a session, perhaps they make more perceptive and effective tutors. And if females are more willing to ask for help and more receptive to criticism than males, perhaps they make better clients. We realize that there's a vast amount of research that could be applied here, so we prefer to leave the explanations of these results to those more knowledgeable in this field. Writing center directors might add to this knowledge by doing case studies looking closely at how gender affects sessions. What happens when females are tutoring other females and males are tutoring other males? Are females better tutors? In case studies of two female and two male tutors, Joyce Kinkead found that while the two females were "effective questioners" and consistently focused on global aspects, the two males "'told' students what to do and spent more time on the traditional talk of teaching—outlines, paragraphs, punctuation" (Kinkead 4).

Our survey did demonstrate that students were quite satisfied with our services—it was a striking addition to our annual report. But we learned much in addition that helped us understand and improve our center. We learned that our advertising was targeting the appropriate audience—first-year students. We identified areas in which our tutors need more training. So far we have focused on improving our ESL training but we also hope to improve our training in working with students with learning disabilities and perhaps in helping students identify disciplinary conventions. And we formulated some questions related to gender, tutor major, and knowledge of conventions—questions that could lead to further research. But though our survey taught us much about our own center, we wonder how typical it is. Would other centers find these same relationships? If more centers do such studies, perhaps as a community we can establish some generalizations about the factors which influence client satisfaction with tutoring sessions.

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Appendix A

STUDENT WRITER

Date _____ Time Session Began _____
 Location: Living/Learning ___ Blundell ___ Hamilton ___
 Course _____
 Male ___ Female ___
 First-year ___ Sophomore ___ Junior ___ Senior ___
 Non-traditional ___
 Is English your second language? yes ___ no ___
 Are you learning disabled? yes ___ no ___

1. Did you leave your appointment motivated to continue work on your piece?

not motivated					highly motivated
1	2	3	4	5	

if not applicable explain

2. As a result of your appointment, do you know what to work on next?

no idea					clear idea
1	2	3	4	5	

if not applicable explain

3. Were your goals for the session met?

not at all
met

fully
met

1

2

3

4

5

if not applicable explain

4. How helpful was your session overall?

not
helpful

very
helpful

1

2

3

4

5

if not applicable explain

5. What would have made it more helpful?

Appendix B

Our findings are recorded in Table 1 below. Because there were four questions on a scale of one to five, the highest possible rating was twenty. The mean ratings are therefore out of a possible twenty. To check for significant relationships between the students' ratings (the dependent variable) and the various factors (the independent variables), we had a statistician, James Fong, use a Statistical Analysis Software (SAS) program to calculate the statistical significance of the difference in the means of the ratings for each factor. (For example, was the mean rating given by ESL students significantly higher or lower than the mean rating given by all other students?) He used the Wilcoxon 2-sample test, which is a hypothesis test based on non-parametric or discrete data. We established significance at 5 percent or $p = .05$ (meaning that the null hypothesis could be rejected with 95 percent confidence).

Table 1—Factors That Affect Client Satisfaction

Factor	# of Sessions (n =)	Mean Rating	Significance
Year In College			
First-Year Students	165	18.42	$p = .0004$ **
Non-First-Year	211	17.56	
Special Needs			
LD Students	25	17.04	$p = .0851$
Non-LD Students	334	18.07	
ESL Students	41	17.38	$p = .0454$ *
Non-ESL Students	329	18.01	
Course For Which Paper Was Written			
Introductory Comp	125	18.23	$p = .1824$
All Other Courses	251	17.79	
English Literature	118	18.05	$p = .8657$

Table 1 cont.

Factor	# of Sessions (n =)	Mean Rating	Significance
All Other Courses	258	17.89	
Intro English Lit. All Other Courses	96 280	18.14 17.87	p = .5158
Advanced English lit All Other Courses	22 354	17.66 17.96	p = .3834
Gender			
Male Tutors	116	17.59	p = .0472 *
Female Tutors	260	18.10	
Male Clients	175	17.71	p = .0903
Female Clients	201	18.14	
Males Tutoring Males All Others	54 322	17.39 18.03	p = .2372
Females Tutoring Females All Others	139 237	18.31 17.72	p = .0053 **
All Mixed Sex Sessions All Others	183 193	17.82 18.05	p = .0622
Tutor's Major			
English Major Tutors Non-English Major Tutors	215 161	18.16 17.65	p = .0151 *

* = statistically significant at .05 level of confidence

** = statistically significant at .01 level of confidence

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