

1-1-2007

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Recommended Citation

Oriani, Catherine (2007) "Review: A Guide to Creating a Student-Staffed Writing Center: Grades 6-12," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 27 : Iss. 1, Article 7.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1616>

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Review: A Guide to Creating a Student-Staffed Writing Center: Grades 6-12

by Catherine Oriani

Richard Kent short-changes himself by naming his latest book *A Guide to Creating a Student-Staffed Writing Center: Grades 6-12*, for he offers would-be as well as veteran writing center directors far more than the title suggests. Considering the paucity of publications on the market addressing secondary writing centers, as well as the scope of Kent's work, he would have been more than justified in calling his book *A Guide to Creating a Writing Center: 6-12*. Indeed, Kent's work is the most comprehensive guide to secondary writing centers since the 1989 publication of *The High School Writing Center: Establishing and Maintaining One*, edited by Pamela Farrell.

Primarily, Kent has drawn on his personal experience as a high school writing center director but has also gathered the insights of other perceptive and dedicated writing center directors and personnel. In addition, his current roles as Assistant Professor of Literacy and Director of the Maine Writing Project at the University of Maine provide valuable vantage points from which to observe the efforts and functioning of secondary writing centers.

I appreciate Kent's relaxed, conversational style as he introduces the reader to his motivation for establishing a student-staffed writing center: "I carried stacks of papers home to 'correct,' just as my own high school English teachers had. For hour upon hour, I penciled marginal notations and comma corrections. [...] We English teachers know the drill" (2). Kent soon questioned the value of his efforts and recognized how little his techniques mirrored the productive relationship between his editor and himself as they discussed "draft after draft." But in contemplating a model that mimicked his personal experiences, he quickly realized, "I could not be

About the Author

Catherine Oriani has initiated and directed three high school writing centers and is presently coordinating the writing center at Garden City High School on Long Island. She is a former president of the Northeastern Writing Centers Association and at-large representative to the National Writing Centers Association, now known as the International Writing Centers Association.

the primary editor for my many student writers if I wanted them to produce a good deal of revised writing during the course of the school year” (3). The National Writing Project has suggested “Learning to write requires frequent, supportive practice” (NWP). Student-staffed centers are viable options in meeting this goal. By staffing his writing center with as many as 55 students, the Mountain Valley High School Writing Center was able to conduct over 1300 writing conferences in a single quarter.

Although Kent’s particular situation prompted him to create a student-staffed writing center, he acknowledges the necessity of establishing a writing center that responds to the specific make-up of a given institution, and therefore, he provides an overview of the types of writing centers one might emulate. “Looking at the variety of writing centers should encourage you to develop the kind that fits best for your school, district, and community. Do not feel limited” (16).

Indeed Kent not only implores the reader not to feel limited, but also presents wide-ranging and even inspiring materials that will prove helpful to would-be, novice, and veteran writing center directors alike. In other words, Kent gives the reader abundant ideas, examples and resources for either establishing a writing center or improving one. There’s no reason to feel limited.

In “Planning and Organizing,” Kent guides the reader through the political minefield that accompanies writing center efforts because a writing center represents “a radical change on many fronts” on the secondary level. As a consequence, “this change can cause challenges” (19), he warns. Kent displays political astuteness as well as humor when he says, “Remember: You can have as many assistant or associate writing center directors as there are English teachers in your school!” (24). He emphasizes the need to make the establishment of a writing center a process-oriented project that is as inclusive as possible. He directs the reader to valuable resources that validate writing center pedagogy and suggests compiling these materials into packets for the perusal of the principal, other administrators and colleagues. Lastly, he reminds the reader of other potential sources of support such as business partners, university affiliations, and the media.

The following chapter, “Staffing and Training” addresses specifically student-staffed writing centers more so than most chapters in this book, but once again, much of the material is applicable across the board. The personal touch that is the hallmark of writing center work is demonstrated through Kent’s use of letters while training his student “editors.” Kent states, “Letter writing helped me come to know my student writers and helped them come to know me as a teacher” (35). I can imagine that letter writing over the summer also strengthens habits of thinking and

writing among his editors-in-training and helps to build the kind of rapport that engenders trust and understanding. For an in-depth examination of the course through which Kent trained student editors, he directs us to two of his earlier publications, *Room 109: The Promise of a Portfolio Classroom* and *Beyond Room 109: Developing Independent Study Projects*. Also Kent suggests many resources from books to journals to websites that may prove helpful.

I was personally inspired by the next three chapters, “Operating a Writing Center,” “Working Drafts: Writing Centers in Action,” and “Resources and Activities” for the sheer abundance of possibilities offered through the lists, case studies, suggested resources and examples of actual materials created and used by a variety of centers. For instance, a list of quotations for use on promotional items includes, “I love revision. Where else can spilled milk turn into ice cream?” (Katherine Patterson, qtd. on 71), and “I’m writing a book. I’ve got the page numbers done” (Steven Wright, qtd. on 72). I found myself marking item after item in these chapters because they promised outlets for publication, ideas for handling scheduling, exercises for understanding, and so much more.

While the scope of *A Guide to Creating Student-Staffed Writing Centers: Grades 6-12* goes well-beyond what the title implies, I was somewhat disappointed on two counts. I wish Kent would have provided more discussion on the virtues of student-staffing and more research to support its effectiveness. At the very least, I wish he had directed my attention to resources that could supply such discussion or research. Also, while he makes numerous references to readings that apply to writing center work in post-secondary as well as secondary institutions, I wish he had made more of an effort to highlight publications that address secondary writing centers directly. Unfortunately, although these works exist, they remain largely unknown.

I thank Richard Kent for writing a book that has re-energized me in my role as a writing center director. I’m certain other veteran directors will welcome this comprehensive assemblage of ideas. By the way, it will also serve as a fabulous guide for those seeking to establish a student-staffed writing center.

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