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How Are We Doing? A Review of Assessments within Writing Centers

by Miriam Gofine

About the Author

Miriam Gofine recently graduated from Stern College for Women, where she majored in Psychology. A tutor at Stern College's writing center for two and a half years, Miriam co-presented "Something to Give in Return" at the 2010 National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing. Miriam hopes to pursue graduate work in Clinical Psychology.

Scholarship of assessment within writing centers has a long tradition, first appearing in the early years of the movement and persisting through the end of the last millennium and into this one (Hayward; Lerner, "Counting"; Lerner, "Choosing"; Neuleib, "Research"; Neuleib, "Evaluating"). Today, nearly forty years after writing centers first began to proliferate, it is worthwhile to reflect on the themes that emerge from empirical material surrounding writing center assessments, for reflecting on these themes may help administrators to refine current assessment practices and scholars to redirect their research. The goal of this essay, then, is to review the literature on assessments of writing centers. Specifically, this paper examines the goals and methodologies associated with this assessment that are reported in writing center literature. The ultimate purpose of this review is to offer readers a sense of what is effective in writing center assessments, what is ineffective, and how future research in this area might be shaped. This paper will also review the limitations that have been identified as precluding extensive assessment within writing centers.

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Goals of Assessment

There is much literature on assessment of writing centers but limited consensus on what should motivate these assessments. The most prevalent reason for writing center assessments is also the simplest one: administrators must assess their centers in annual reports to provide evidence that the centers actually help students (e.g., Bell 7-8; Lerner, “Counting” 1; Lerner, “Choosing” 1; Kalikoff 5; Neuleib, “Evaluating” 1; Niiler “The Numbers Speak” 6; Severino 51; Thompson 34, 38; Wingate). This goal reflects Bell’s stance that assessment fundamentally must test North’s assumption that writing centers can actually improve their clients’ writing processes (Bell 8, North 438). Many writing center administrators report that they face pressure to justify to upper-level administrators that funding a writing center is a worthwhile investment for the college or university, and one that benefits students and the institution as a whole (Bell 8; Thompson 38). This issue is particularly salient today, during the worldwide economic recession that is forcing all institutions—particularly academic ones—to reconsider their budgets (Lewin).

Acknowledging the legitimacy of the need for funding, others (e.g., Lerner, “Counting” 1; Kalikoff 5; Severino 51; Thompson 33; Wingate 7) call for research to serve as a more than a defensive measure. For example, Thompson argues for writing centers to “move beyond mere compliance with externally mandated assessments” towards assessments that are self-directed and fulfill a center’s internal needs (33). In “Choosing Beans Wisely,” Lerner calls for assessment within writing centers to be linked to broader, institution-wide strategic plans and mission statements (1). Further, assessment of student outcomes related to writing center tutoring is frequently discussed in the literature. Like Bell (10, 15), Bredtmann, Crede, and Otten (4), Henson and Stephenson (2), Neuleib (“Research” 10, 12; “Evaluating” 2), and Wingate, Lerner calls for assessment of how tutoring affects student performance, as demonstrated by grades, grade point average, and college retention rates (“Choosing” 4).

Alternatively, Bell (12), Grimm (5), Hayward (1), Kalikoff, and Neuleib (“Research” 10) write that assessments within writing centers are not necessarily focused on our desire to understand our impact on student achievement but instead are often motivated

by determining client, tutor, and/or faculty perceptions of sessions. Neuleib writes that tutors should assess which writing skills are strengths and weaknesses for each client, thus helping tutors understand the development of student writing practices and the process of composition research ("Research" 11-12). In a later paper, Neuleib calls for research to examine which types of tutoring work best in various situations ("Evaluating," 3). Grimm draws together these lines of inquiry to argue that assessment within a writing center should focus on all these elements, improving the quality of services that are delivered by articulating *how* writing centers can better affect student performance, *how* tutors can be trained more effectively, and *how* writing centers can better represent themselves to their home institutions and promote their services (5).

In her article "Writing Center Assessment: Why and a Little How," Isabelle Thompson notes that some centers' assessments are mandated by external administrators within an institution (33). Thus, the goal of conducting an assessment is to fulfill the received assignment. However, Thompson identifies major internal benefits that result from accomplishing this goal. Conclusions from assessments may lead others to enrich their perceptions of the writing center within the institution, direct future research by scholars within the writing center community, and provide valuable opportunities for reflection among tutors and the center's administrative staff (34-38).

Methods of Assessment

Given this variety of motivations for assessment within writing centers, it is no surprise that the literature presents a variety of assessment methodologies, since the goal of an assessment typically determines its methodology. Similarly, because many assessments are motivated by multiple goals, some articles report assessments that employ mixed methods.

Qualitative Investigations

Many scholars use qualitative methodology, specifically focus groups and surveys, in their assessments. Kalikoff reports the use of post-

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session evaluation forms for clients in her writing center, a tool that is frequently used by writing centers to assess the quality of tutoring sessions (Kalikoff 5-6; Bell 9; Bredtmann, Crede, and Otten 5-6; Grimm 5; Neuleib, “Research” 10; Thompson 44). However, Kalikoff finds that evaluation forms have limited validity for a variety of reasons, including that the clients, who were college students, commonly rushed away from the writing center to their next class or engagement without investing time in completing the surveys in detail (5). Those who did complete the forms were so appreciative that the surveys were more like thank-you notes, a phenomenon also described by Bell (9), Bredtmann, Crede, and Otten (20), and Thompson (44). Bredtmann, Crede, and Otten reported that clients rated their sessions as overwhelmingly positive on post-session qualitative assessment forms; 92 percent of respondents rated their session as excellent or good on a five-point Likert scale (6). Although the center’s staff appreciated the gratitude that they received, the feedback from the surveys was not conducive to the greater goal of improving services or detecting variation in client experiences of the writing center. The surveys’ inability to detect variation in client experiences of the writing center is a limitation of survey-based assessment methodology (Bell 9; Kalikoff 5; Thompson 45).

Because of such limitations to survey-based assessment, Kalikoff uses a mixed methods approach, what she titles a “mosaic approach” (5). She organized a faculty focus group, a survey of the tutors who worked in the writing center she directed, and a survey that was randomly distributed to clients. Kalikoff reported that these methods were successful in helping her assess faculty, tutor, and client perceptions of the writing center (6). She gained information about her target audiences’ perceptions that she would not have otherwise acquired, such as the faculty’s desire to learn about writing center effectiveness and tutors’ requests to develop the center’s mission statement. Kalikoff views a mixed methods approach as highly desirable for a variety of reasons. Having a plurality of conclusions that reflect each other due to multiple approaches supports the validity of the entire assessment. Further, many conclusions provide “richer and more textured” data and the opportunity for different populations, such as tutors, clients, and faculty, to participate in

the assessment. Finally, multi-layered data provide “colleagues and administrators with a fresh look at our pedagogies” (5-7). Thompson writes that using mixed methods within a single assessment is beneficial because this approach broadens the assessment’s scope (41; 49-50).

Bredtmann, Crede, and Otten also used a mixed methods approach of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to assess the effectiveness of the writing center introduced at their university. The qualitative data they gathered came from client feedback surveys, delivered and collected after each client’s session with a tutor (5-6).

Quantitative Investigations

In contrast to the prevalence of qualitative methodology within assessments of writing centers, quantitative methods other than basic descriptive statistics and correlational studies have been mostly absent from the literature since the mid-1980’s (Henson and Stephenson 2; Jones 10; Lerner, “Choosing” 1; Lerner, “Counting” 1). The simplest quantifications in writing center assessments are descriptive statistics, commonly used by administrators in annual reports to convey, for example, how many students were helped each semester, the number of tutoring hours per semester, or clients’ majors (Bell 9; Henson and Stephenson 1; Kalikoff 5; Neuleib, “Evaluating” 1; Thompson 43). Bredtmann, Crede, and Otten were the only investigators who used advanced statistical analyses in their assessments (10-20). Bell (9), Kalikoff (6), and Thompson (43) argue that relying solely on basic statistics in assessments is limited because statistics do not indicate the quality of services that are delivered in a writing center. Thus, Kalikoff and Thompson both suggest that descriptive statistics should be accompanied by information gathered through qualitative methods described above.

Others (Lerner, “Counting” 2-3; Thompson 45-46; Wingate 9, 15-19) use correlational analyses to assess writing centers. They do so by identifying positive correlations between the number of tutorials and course or assignment grades, grade point averages, or a college’s retention rate. However, in “Choosing Beans Wisely,”

Lerner describes the limitations of using correlational methods to assess writing centers as he had done four years previously in “Counting Beans and Making Beans Count.” In the later piece, Lerner argues that grades and grade point averages have limited validity in indicating a student’s true writing ability because, in addition to conveying a student’s actual skills, such data also indicate a student’s diligence in class participation and ability to complete assignments on time and the professors’ rigor in marking student assignments. Acknowledging these limitations, Thompson still argues that using statistics to compare academic performance of writing center clients and students who did not use the writing center can yield valuable information when executed correctly (45-46).

Further, Jones and Lerner both observe that writing center tutorials emphasize improving the process of a student’s writing more than his or her product. Thus, examining a client’s “final product” or the grade received on a paper does not assess the writing center’s effect on the client’s writing process. Jones further argues that the intangible nature of a writer’s aptitude makes measuring such skills very difficult. In response to this limitation, some investigators examine the development of a client’s writing by quantifying the quality of the writing before and after writing center tutoring and then using statistics to analyze the data (see Jones 9-10; Henson and Stephenson; Niiler “The Numbers Speak”; Niiler “The Numbers Speak’ Again”; Thompson 47-49). Despite the advantage of the method, very few articles in the literature seem to employ it; Jones, writing in 2001, could not identify any articles written in the late 1980s or 1990s that used this design (10). Thus, Niiler (writing in 2005) and Henson and Stephenson (writing in 2009) are the only surveyed scholars throughout a twenty-year period who use what Thompson calls pre- and post-test design (47).

Bredtmann, Crede, and Otten’s quantitative data (the grades that students received on assignments that were discussed during writing center tutorials) indicated that tutorials had no effect on student outcomes (18-21). However, the findings from these data contradict their findings from the qualitative data, which indicated strong student satisfaction with writing center tutorials. The authors explained their results by suggesting that student self-reports were

not valid, and that the writing center clients were a self-selected group who were already high academic achievers. However, these explanations are limited by the fact that Bredtmann, Crede, and Otten did not report data on design, reliability, or validity of the student evaluation form that they used.

Limitations in the Literature

The literature indicates that writing center administrators have been challenged with creating valid and reliable assessments nearly since the movement's early years. Many issues preclude administrators from executing assessments that have strong methodologies. For one, designing an experiment to assess how writing center tutorials affect a given group, such as clients or tutors, is challenged by ethical considerations. Although researchers might want to randomly assign students to groups that would visit or not visit a writing center over a given time period in an effort to remove the self-selection limitation that Bredtmann, Crede, and Otten (20) and Henson and Stephenson (4) describe, it would be unethical to prevent students who seek academic assistance from doing so.

The assessments described in the literature are further limited by their minimal use of quantitative methodology, despite the wide acknowledgement that quantitative assessments are necessary (Johanek 202-04; Lerner, "Counting" 1) and that mixed methods enhance an assessment's conclusions (Kalikoff 6-7; Mack et al. 2; Niiler, "The Numbers Speak' Again" 15; Thompson 50). Quantitative assessments are particularly complicated because writing center administrators, who typically come from a composition studies background, are sometimes unfamiliar with this type of research methodology (Johanek 199; Lerner, "Counting" 3; Niiler, "The Numbers Speak' Again" 13; Thompson 50). Many authors reported assistance from an outside statistician to help them analyze their statistical data (e.g., Henson and Stephenson 4; Niiler 13; Thompson 46). Similarly, Bredtmann, Crede, and Otten—whose backgrounds uniquely lie in economics, not composition studies—used complicated statistical analyses to analyze their data (10-20).

Bell's demands for "sophisticated evaluations" (7) indicate

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another problem within the reviewed quantitative and qualitative assessments: those methods that are utilized most often within writing centers—specifically, surveys and descriptive statistics—are very simplistic. We must consider why, thirty years after scholars first addressed the issue of assessments within writing centers, Henson and Stephenson’s “rudimentary” (5) quantitative design (as the study’s authors admit) is among the most sophisticated quantitative scholarly works addressing assessment of writing centers in the literature. Further, since the article’s publication in May 2009, other scholars (excluding Bredtmann, Crede, and Otten, whose 2011 paper did not respond to Henson and Stephenson’s conclusions) do not seem to have fulfilled the authors’ request for others to build on this research. Future research should further investigate the use of experimental design and quantitative methods in writing center assessments.

In addition to acknowledging minimal graduate training in quantitative methods as a hindrance to this work, multiple writing center scholars attribute shortcomings in assessment to limited time and money (Bell 14; Kalikoff 5; North 444). Further, because writing center research can be politically and ideologically charged (Grimm), many researchers may not want to focus research on this area.

Aside from issues in assessment methodology, the lack of organization in the literature is a systemic problem. The limited consensus of assessment goals and methodologies indicates this lack of an organized agenda (Lerner, “Choosing” 3) in the research about assessment. Unlike in other fields, scholars of assessments within writing centers seemingly have not built their research on findings from previous studies, seeking to fine-tune conclusions or test hypotheses that are built on the previous conclusion. This creates a very scattered, disorganized approach within the literature.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Two issues emerge from the literature reviewed in this paper. First, the assessment literature demands more cohesion: while investigators currently develop isolated lines of research, a more effective approach might be for researchers to collectively focus on a

small number of issues that are of common concern to the majority of writing centers. Second, most assessments employed by writing center administrators—such as surveys and usage statistics—are of limited validity. The collective focus of scholars might address this problem by concentrating on developing assessments of high validity.

Investigators might draw on this literature review to direct the focus of their research. Analysis of the papers identified here indicates that writing centers commonly focus their assessments on generating data for a writing center's annual reports, examining how tutorials affect development of clients' writing skills, and surveying client perceptions after each tutorial. Investigators might work together to create strong, standardized assessments with high reliability and validity that address these three issues. Although it might be suggested that standardization of assessments would be ineffectual because all writing centers operate differently and have unique goals (e.g., Harris; Jones 6), the literature indicates that these issues are of concern to the majority of writing centers. Further, these assessments would ideally be flexible enough to accommodate individual adaptations to suit unique needs. Use of mixed methods for these assessments might respond to scholars' calls for increased use of quantitative methods within this field.

These standardized assessments would provide many benefits to writing center clients, tutors, and administrators. Administrators' efficiency would be improved because they would be able to spend their valuable time analyzing and implementing assessments' conclusions instead of designing the assessments. Identifying a center's strengths and weaknesses would allow clients to be better served and even improve tutor training. Finally, presenting stronger data in annual reports potentially could improve university administrators' perceptions of the center and their consequent allocation of funds. Strong assessments positively affect writing centers and the staff, tutors, and clients they serve.

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