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Bringing Balance to the Table: Comprehensive Writing Instruction in the Tutoring Session

by Bethany Bibb

About the Author

Bethany Bibb has been a tutor at Salt Lake Community College since August 2007. She recently received a BA in English from the University of Utah and begins a graduate rhetoric and composition program in the fall. Her conference presentations include the Utah Conference on Undergraduate Research (2011), the Rocky Mountain Peer Tutoring Conference (2011), Undergraduate Research Symposium (2011), and the National Conference on Undergraduate Research (2012).

Because writing centers have long been viewed as fix-it shops, mentioning the word “grammar” can spark a heated debate over the writing center’s role. Stephen North faulted the English department for perpetuating this misconception. Richard Leahy blamed the writing center’s history and “peculiar status” for confusing faculty and students alike (43). Elizabeth Boquet explored tensions caused by shifts between the writing center’s identity as both method and space (465). All are valid points, but there is a greater issue affecting both academic writing and the writing center—grammar itself.

A brief history of the most recent grammar wars begins with researchers in the 1960s who found that “formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing” (qtd. in Kolln and Hancock 15). In 1985, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) called for abandoning traditional, isolated grammar drills and any assessments that promoted their use (18). Writing instruction gradually moved

from product oriented to process oriented as a result (Martinsen 123). These studies, NCTE resolutions, and shifting paradigms ignited decades-long debates between antigrammarians and grammarians. Scholars argued over defining grammar and error types (Hartwell; Murdick), about whether to teach instructors more grammar first (Vavra, “Welcome” 84), about whether to teach rhetorical grammar (Kolln) or have students learn grammar only through writing (Vavra, “On Not Teaching” 32), and, more recently, over adhering to prescriptive usage rules without question (Curzan). Addressing ESL students’ language needs further complicated the discussions (Kolln and Hancock 17). Due to the controversies, some instructors avoided grammar altogether (Nunan 71), the result being, according to Kolln and Hancock, that “several generations of students have had no instruction” in basic grammatical terms or principles (19). If the traditional methods were ineffective, the conflicting new approaches apparently were as well. College instructors from various disciplines found many of their students lacking in basic writing skills (Jablon; Alaka; Quible and Griffin), and some claimed that “Students’ writing skills are no more—and may be less—effective than they were 15 to 20 years ago” (Quible and Griffin 33). While students may not have known grammar perfectly well before, they were now suffering from the lack of a consistent, unified approach.

With college instructors placing more importance on correctness than their high school counterparts (Alaka 348-49), they may be tempted to overcompensate for students’ deficiencies by red-marking their papers or grading grammar and mechanics harshly. However, if educators adopt such practices, they risk teaching students that good grammar equals good writing (Vassallo). In what may be an effort to redirect focus to other writing elements, scholars have offered suggestions ranging from context-based grammar instruction (A. Leahy) to greater emphasis on style (Medzerian).

As part of their influence on writing instruction, the grammar debates have had a trickle-down effect on writing centers as well. If students struggle in their writing classes because of previous instructional methods, if instructors hold to either extreme or struggle to find the best pedagogy, and if, in short, the grammar wars rage on with increasing casualties, writing centers will continue to

see students requesting help with grammar and mechanics.

Current Study: Terminology and Methods

Researching grammar issues for a class paper, I found wide-ranging perspectives on how to teach academic writing more effectively but none that included writing center voices. This realization prompted me to design my own study to examine current views on academic writing instruction by surveying university and community college writing instructors and writing tutors. Whereas other studies focused on specific error pattern changes (Lunsford and Lunsford), I investigated more generally how current instruction incorporates three major components: grammar, stylistics, and content. Though hoping to include several institutions, given the IRB approval window, I was limited to two: Salt Lake Community College (SLCC) and the University of Utah (U).

In this study, I use the words “comprehensive” or “balanced” with academic writing instruction. “Comprehensive” refers to incorporating all three elements in some way. “Balanced” refers to ensuring that no single element dominates at the expense of developing the others; it indicates a mix of elements, not a fifty-fifty split between them.

The project consisted of two sets of questionnaires (one version for instructors and another for writing center tutors) and two sets of a short survey for those who agreed to answer follow-up questions. This was a qualitative study, but I have represented some responses numerically for easier comparison. The responses were hand-counted given the small sample size, the study yielding fewer participants than I had anticipated. All surveys and follow ups were coded to distinguish between institutions, writing instructors, and writing tutors, while carefully preserving participants’ anonymity. Where responses are quoted in this essay, they are not attributed to any individual or institution.

Not having finished reviewing the literature, I approached this study with a three-fold hypothesis largely informed by personal experience. First, I expected college-level writing courses to focus on content and style, based on my knowledge, as a student and tutor, of

the curricula and assignment sheets. Second, based on my tutoring experiences, I expected writing tutors to report student emphasis on grammar and instructor emphasis on other elements. Third, based on my observations of instructor sentiments (e.g., sending students to writing centers for lower-order concerns [LOCs] to reserve more class time for higher-order concerns [HOCs]), I expected writing tutors to favor comprehensive instructional models and instructors to prefer other types.

Findings and Implications

My hypothesis proved mostly correct on some counts and partly wrong on others. First, responses did not show a focus on content and style in writing classes across the board. Second, although students were apparently more concerned about grammar than their instructors, follow-up surveys suggested that instructors may contribute to students’ concerns. Third, both writing tutors and instructors seemed to prefer comprehensive instructional models.

According to SLCC and U writing instructor responses, writing courses focus mainly on content (as I anticipated). However, U instructors indicated style was a close second while SLCC instructors indicated style was almost nonexistent (see Table 1).

SLCC Instructors		U Instructors	
Area	# of Responses	Area	# of Responses
Grammar	1	Grammar	0
Style	1	Style	3
Content	10	Content	4
All Three	0	All Three	0
Other	3	Other	2

Table 1: Reported Focus Area in Writing Classes (n=26 respondents)

The U’s reported writing class focus seems to be more well rounded than SLCC’s where style is concerned, though the SLCC courses might have subsumed style as part of content. More research is necessary to determine if there is a difference of focus between the

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two, and if so, why it exists, whether it is typical of community college versus university writing expectations, and whether SLCC writing courses ought to include more style discussion to prepare students for university-level writing.

As I expected, writing tutors surveyed noted a strong student emphasis on grammar (based on the help they requested) as opposed to a strong instructor emphasis on content (based on assignment sheets and paper comments) (see Figure 1). Even though students often use “grammar” as an all-encompassing term, tutors reported frequently working on actual grammar concerns following a request for “grammar help.”

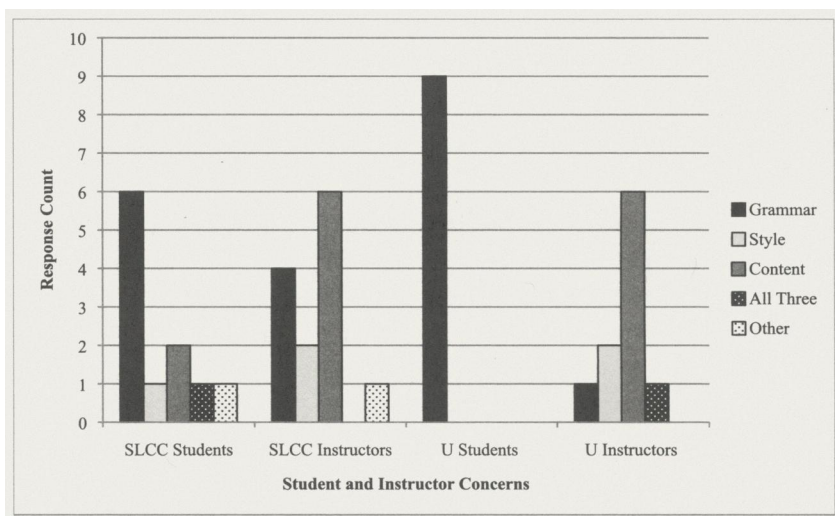


Figure 1: Tutor Report of Student versus Instructor Concerns on Papers (n=18 respondents)

At first glance, there appears to be a disconnect between students' concerns and instructors' focus. Instructors do not focus on grammar in their classes (see Table 1), so why do students feel it is important? Follow-up surveys (conducted, among other reasons, to determine whether instructors made use of writing centers and why) held a possible clue. All participating instructors reported encouraging students to visit a writing center for assistance. When asked what tutoring their students usually required, they ranked grammar as the second highest on the list. These responses suggest that instructors

may somehow influence their students' emphasis on grammar, notwithstanding their own focus on content in the classroom. Further research is necessary to determine whether this is the case and what role grades may play.

As part of the follow-up surveys, writing instructors and tutors were asked which of the following instructional models was most beneficial to students:

- Equal-overview model: grammar, style, and content receive equal time and treatment in classroom instruction
- Comprehensive-overview model: grammar, style, and content are all incorporated into classroom instruction but are not covered equally; the most important elements receive the most attention
- Element-focused model: classroom instruction focuses on only one or two elements individually rather than on all three

Both writing instructors and writing tutors showed a strong preference for the comprehensive-overview model (see Figure 2).

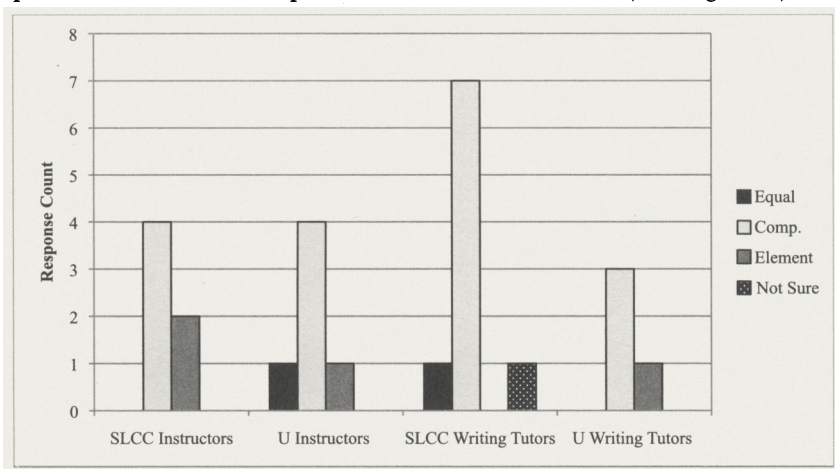


Figure 2: Respondents' Instructional Model Preferences (n=25 respondents)

The sample sizes were smaller than anticipated, which makes it difficult to project if this trend would continue with other instructors and tutors. However, it was encouraging to me to see that the participating instructors and tutors were mostly in agreement

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because it shows there may be a basis for more collaboration and discussion between English/writing departments and writing centers.

According to writing instructors and writing center tutors, comprehensive writing instruction would involve:

- No grammar drills: “It really is more important to work on ideas because drills do not have the same benefits as writing complete papers. . . .”
- Context-based instruction: “if I take a thesis statement that has multiple problems I can discuss not only how to develop the content, but how the grammar changes the complexity of the ideas. When I teach grammar on its own, without the context, I don’t feel it resonates with students.”
- Rhetorical, assignment-based instruction: “I try to cover the three elements as they relate specifically to the project the students are working on. . . .”
- Individualized consultations on specific issues: “what is most important may also vary from student to student. Individually, I may talk with one student more about style and another student more about content.”
- Holistic, rhetorical approaches to writing: “I generally teach writing as a rhetorical activity, emphasizing that ‘good’ writing is writing that responds to audience concerns, context, etc. Grammar and style are part of this, of course, but they aren’t the most important element.”

Rationale for Comprehensive Tutoring

As noted previously, many students come to writing centers needing grammar help. Though HOCs are usually given priority, sometimes they are not the issue. The paper may not have any HOCs, may require working through grammar before the meaning of the sentences is clear, or it may be due so soon as to only allow time for minor corrections. In any case, but especially in these, the comprehensive model that would be beneficial in the classroom would be equally so in the tutoring session. If tutors point out all the grammatical

or mechanical errors and suggest ways to correct them without discussing their effect on meaning or clarity, based on the time they spend on it, they risk reinforcing the idea that grammar is more important and, incidentally, that writing centers are grammar fix-it shops. But if tutors explain the errors and corrections in terms of content, style, or other elements, they are more likely to help students gain a more balanced and holistic understanding of writing which will benefit them over the long term.

Possible Applications

One way to ensure that students receive comprehensive tutoring would be to try proportional tutoring. In centers where tutoring sessions last for thirty minutes or so, proportional tutoring could prevent tutors and writers from spending too much time on LOCs and not enough on HOCs. For example, the majority of the time could be spent discussing content, a little less on structure, stylistics, or citations, and the least on grammar and mechanics. If students insist on working on grammar, the tutor could oblige them, of course, but explain grammar in connection to other elements as much as possible. Proportional tutoring has its limitations, especially if the paper were due that day, and should not be a hard-and-fast rule; there should be flexibility above all in the writing center. However, it would remind tutors not to spend so much time on LOCs at the expense of HOCs.

While proportional tutoring ensures that students get help with more than one element, there are other ways to free up more time for HOCs in the session, including one that might seem a bit radical: outsourcing the grammar shop. Simply put, this places the student in the driver's seat of the active learning car and makes the tutor a secondary not a primary resource. Many writing centers have ways of outsourcing the grammar shop, though they most likely do not use this term. These include providing materials that students can learn from outside the writing center as well as inside. For example, handouts on individual subjects such as verb tense or MLA format can be helpful. When students struggle with a certain area, the tutor can point out examples in the paper, explain how to correct them,

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and provide a handout the students can use to learn more, giving them the opportunity to identify and correct errors on their own either in the center or before their next appointment. Many centers have such resources of their own available online or use others' such as the Purdue OWL, but it is important to have copies on hand to refer to in the session. The idea is to provide students with resources beyond the tutor so that they can take a more active role in their learning process. As always, the tutor is there to teach, guide, and support students in their understanding of the materials, but the tutor would no longer be the sole source of information.

In addition to providing handouts, writing centers might also experiment with "assigning" (using that term loosely) tasks that encourage students to apply what they learn from handouts to their papers before their next visit. Giving them something to do may encourage reluctant, dependent, or struggling students to take more responsibility for their work and potentially allow tutors to move beyond the trouble spot to cover other things in a session. For example, one of the students I tutor was struggling with articles in spite of our weekly discussions about them. Because my writing center did not have handouts of its own, I printed off some from the Purdue OWL and gave them to the student so she could have something more concrete than my ongoing verbal explanations. I encouraged her to read through them and use them to work on her paper before bringing it in. The next time we met, instead of having fifteen to twenty article errors in her paper, she had five or so, and she was elated about her progress.

For the most part, these suggestions could take place in the writing center as much as out of it. The next step would be to provide additional resources outside the center such as periodic workshops. Tutors could recommend students take a short workshop or series of workshops on the topics they find most challenging. While some might argue that students hardly have time to visit tutors much less attend extra "classes," the rise of online tutoring options has provided flexible hours. Workshops could be streamed live or recorded and uploaded onto the center's website as podcasts or online tutorials. Again, the idea is not to replace the tutoring session or to preclude grammar tutoring in the session but instead to provide students

with as many resources as possible to support their learning and allow more time at the table for balanced, comprehensive tutoring conversations.

Another option is offering classes to supplement and support student learning in current writing courses. Some writing centers have expanded their workshops into half- or full-term, for-credit classes or modules. Of course, in order to benefit students as much as possible, these must allow them to practice with their own papers, rather than filling in handbook exercises and not knowing how to apply the principles to their writing afterward. A supplemental class would be most useful if attached to a pre-existing writing course as a lab or workshop component to build upon ongoing instruction and give students full advantage of the comprehensive-overview model. Two English faculty members at SLCC, both instructor-consultants in the writing center and one a former peer tutor, are designing this very thing. In an excellent example of the collaboration between instructors and writing centers which scholars have promoted (Hoye and Lyons; R. Leahy), they plan to have a writing tutor facilitate a class section. Like a tutoring session, this lab will be student driven in that it will address the majority's concerns instead of the entire range of foundational concepts.

Conclusion: The Means to Further Discussion

This study has many more possible applications beyond the scope of this essay. It is not meant to be the end-all but rather a starting point for further research. Like most studies, it has its limitations such as sample size and geographic location. Further research is necessary to get a fuller picture of instructional trends across the nation, determine how comprehensive current instruction is and how effective tutoring methods are, and gauge the effectiveness of the suggestions offered here. Keeping limitations and need for further research in mind, this study and its potential applications may still have immediate value as a small contribution to the body of writing center research. The writing center has come a long way since its inception and, with increasing scholarly research, has been the testing ground for new theory, praxis, and media innovations. At

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the heart of each is the desire to serve students better.

As wonderful as our centers are, there is always room to make them better, and we may sometimes need to re-evaluate existing practices and consider whether or how we could improve them. The writing center has too much vitality and versatility to be complacent with the status quo. When considering new approaches, it is good to consider the long-term benefit to student writers rather than the immediate effect on their papers. By exploring new ways to work with students, we can continue to provide optimal support for our developing student writers. If nothing else, this study is meant to achieve what we do in the writing center—provide an open space and opportunity to share and discuss ideas.

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