



Amber Jensen

Review: *Create Your School Library Writing Center Grades K–6* by Timothy Horan

Throughout my experience working alongside K–12 writing center practitioners and researchers over the past decade, I have always been curious about how educators assume their roles as writing center directors and how they design and implement their programs. Whether housed in teachers' classrooms, libraries, cafeterias, or career centers, K–12 writing centers embody core principles the greater writing center community has always valorized and protected: that everyone can write (Elbow, 2000), that writing processes are social and flexible (Bruffee, 1984; Flower & Hayes, 1981), that authentic audiences and purposes create meaning (Devitt, 2004), and that writers build confidence as they work alongside their peers (Childers, Fels, & Jordan, 2004; Hughes, Gillespie, & Kail, 2010), to name a few.

I looked forward to reading Timothy Horan's (2017) book, *Create Your School Library Writing Center: Grades K–6*, hoping it would contribute to writing center studies by elucidating how elementary-school writing centers could likewise enhance the writing experiences and identities of the very youngest writers. I expected the book to draw upon and reframe theories and research from writing center studies to extend the reach of peer writing tutoring in elementary-school contexts, as other books



written for prospective and current secondary-school writing center directors have (e.g., Farrell, 1989; Fels & Wells, 2011; Kent, 2017; Brown & Waldrup, 2018).

Instead, I discovered that Horan's proposed "writing center" is based on the problematic premise that "kids can't write" (p. xxi), that it is facilitated primarily as adult-based writing instruction, and that it is structured through a series of fill-in-the-blank worksheets based on the narrow and limiting frameworks of writing instruction defined by the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Horan's approach lacks understanding, perspective, and vision about the transformative power of writing center spaces for *all* writers. It's a lost opportunity to extend the conversation in writing center studies to consider and include those at the very beginning of their school-based writing lives. As a resource for the wider writing center community or even K–6 teachers or librarians interested in developing a writing center, the book is not useful; indeed, I argue it is potentially harmful and backward-looking, particularly for those reading it as a beginner's guide to effective writing instruction in elementary schools. What it might offer the wider writing center community is an invitation to re-envision writing center partnerships with libraries at all academic levels or a call for innovative approaches for writing center implementation in K–12 schools.

What this book describes, however, is not a writing center. Nowhere in the book does Horan define what a writing center is or what its objectives might be, aside from describing the materials and artifacts a librarian could use to designate a section of the library as a writing space (e.g., a sign that labels it "Writing Center," organizational materials, folders for student writing). In the introduction, he addresses his main argument for the reason elementary schools need writing centers, defining students' writing as "a mix of unintelligible static and plagiarism" and suggesting that the model he proposes is a more "proper" and "purposeful" approach to teaching writing, his version of the antidote to the so-called bad writing instruction he perceives happens in schools (p. xxi).

Horan's claims about the transformative power of his writing center model, however, ring hollow, as the rest of the introduction—and the remainder of the book—offers an approach to library-based writing instruction guided exclusively by worksheets that can be copied and distributed to students, carefully mapped to each grade level's designated writing-based CCSS. Horan claims he created the worksheets "to assist with specific writing assignments and to nurture and foster writing" (p. xvi). Each chapter—one for each grade level, kindergarten through sixth—describes each of the writing-based CCSS and then explains how the worksheets provided at the end of the chapter guide students,

individually, through particular writing activities to meet those standards. These writing tasks include variations of book reports, personal narratives, biographies, imaginative stories, and responses to nonfiction articles. With each grade level, the worksheets scale up, with kindergarteners beginning with drawing exercises, third graders filling in sentence starters, and sixth graders researching from primary sources and writing on computers. Worksheets, which may seem helpful to a school librarian who needs quick, replicable writing lessons, misrepresent the individualized approach to writing instruction and writers' experience most writing center directors and tutors try to foster.

Another problematic aspect of Horan's proposed writing center model is the way he conceptualizes peer feedback. In Horan's writing center, there are no tutors: neither peers nor adults. While he does include opportunities for students to give each other feedback through a writer's-workshop model—what he refers to as “the magic circle”—he also emphasizes that younger students are not ready to give each other feedback, as they are “dependent on adult figures” for “guidance and instruction,” “reinforcement, leadership, and acceptance” (p. xiii). The deficit mindset that frames his perceptions about what younger children are capable of contradicts the confidence-building and peer-led ethos of writing center theory and practice. It also contradicts what teachers and researchers have written about and practice with regard to peer learning and peer feedback in elementary-school writing instruction (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001; Sanders & Damron, 2017). Horan's model assumes young writers are incapable of engaging with each other's writing in meaningful ways. His approach draws upon a backward-facing rather than a forward-looking set of beliefs about how young writers interact and learn.

In terms of the proposed writing instruction he outlines, Horan claims students will find themselves as writers through the worksheet-based writing projects. In fact, the instruction he describes is, in many ways, anti-theoretical to the writing approach most writing center professionals believe to be effective and meaningful. His proposed models are prescriptive; they are not the solution to the so-called bad writing epidemic he claims exists. Particularly for young writers, who may be the most creative and unrestrained in their ideas and approaches to writing, the thought of directing them to five-paragraph formulas and sentence starters as inspired writing doesn't resonate with what others have imagined of K–6 writing center spaces (Sanders & Damron, 2017; Wilcox, Anstead, & Black, 1997). Lack of choice, lack of variety, and a single definition of what kind of writing matters in school spaces do not lead to empowering writers, which is one of the central tenets of writing center pedagogy and practice.

What left me most unconvinced about the usefulness of Horan's model of school librarian as writing center director is the implication that elementary-school librarians should be tasked with direct writing instruction. He says explicitly, "As the director of the writing center, you will be its main instructor" (p. xiv). Aside from the problematic conflation of "director" and "instructor," I was concerned by the way Horan centers himself as the so-called director of the writing center without describing what this director role entails. Though he does accurately recognize that every school has different contexts that frame the specific implementation of learning programs, Horan's proposed writing center does not reflect a programmatic approach. He does not explain, for example, how the library-based writing program interacts with, collaborates with, or extends classroom-based learning. While he does mention that classroom teachers may be present during library writing time and may contribute to feedback on student writing, he does not map a web of relationships with stakeholders or situate the center within the school's larger instructional learning goals. Though these aspects of writing center leadership are at the core of texts that nudge instructional professionals to consider how their roles change as they begin to direct programs rather than facilitate classroom-based instruction, such as Nicole Caswell, Jackie Grutsch McK-inney, & Rebecca Jackson (2016) and Amber Jensen (2018), they remain unacknowledged in his book.

Horan is not entirely ignorant of many of the widely accepted principles of meaningful and effective writing instruction, however. Throughout his book, he cites writers' portfolios, digital collaboration, publication of student writing, and reflection as essential components of students' writing development. His proposed curriculum scaffolds writing instruction in ways that reflect how writers grow and develop, though it is limited by the kinds of genres and processes set forth and valued by CCSS. His principles are easy to replicate and simple to understand, which may be appealing to the audience for whom he writes. For a school librarian with little to no instructional background or expertise in writing pedagogy, for example, exposure to these resources would likely be welcome as they initiate their thinking about how to include writing within the broader scope of the library curriculum.

It is clear this book is not written for an audience of writing center practitioners or scholars: Horan states in the introduction that the book is "designed primarily for the school librarian," noting that K–6 classroom teachers might also find it useful (p. xiii). It was published by Libraries Unlimited, a publishing house that prints professional-development resources written "by librarians for librarians." It is important for the field to be aware of books that claim to be part of the writing center discourse, and

especially so for writing centers that may be emerging in places we do not normally look (K–12 schools, libraries, workplaces, etc.). Even (and maybe especially) with this audience of librarians in mind, his claim that what he is proposing is a writing center is problematic and misleading. Had Horan’s book grounded itself in the literature and scholarship related to writing center theory and practice, or even of writing pedagogy, peer review, writing workshops, or early literacies, some of the book’s weaknesses may have been easier to overlook in my review. I find it problematic that the book’s bibliography consists only of URLs to the grade-by-grade CCSS and other web resources mentioned in the book’s assignment descriptions, as well as ten articles written by the author himself. Horan’s disregard for historical and ongoing conversations in the field, particularly those surrounding creating centers in contexts such as elementary and secondary schools, calls into question the validity and meaning of his claim that he is “the inventor of the school library writing center” (p. 167).

The promise of K–6 writing centers remains an exciting prospect, one elementary-school teachers and their university partners are creating and writing about in constructive and enlightening ways; see, for example, Jennifer Sanders and Rebecca Damron’s (2017) *“They’re All Writers”*: *Teaching Peer Tutoring in the Elementary Writing Center*. I hope to see more models that reflect the principles and theories central to writing center work, models that prioritize peer-centered writing and feedback, models that extend and enhance our conversations around collaboration with other instructional stakeholders, and models that draw upon research to propose new innovations across a variety of contexts. Fostering student writers’ voices and agency from the beginning of their school experiences is a promising outcome of the K–6 writing center, one the field is ripe to learn more about from future books.

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