

Writing Center Concept

SLATE (SUPPORT FOR THE LEARNING AND TEACHING OF ENGLISH) STATEMENT: THE CONCEPT OF A WRITING CENTER

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THE CONCEPT OF A WRITING CENTER

Writing centers exist in a variety of shapes, sizes, and settings. Typically they are part of a writing program or learning center and serve the entire school, both at the secondary and college levels. Although writing centers may differ in size, specific services, source of staffing, and organizational procedures, they share the following approaches:

TUTORIALS ARE OFFERED IN A ONE-TO-ONE SETTING

Tutors, who may be peers, professionals, graduate students, part-time instructors, or full-time teachers, meet individually with writers in the writing center either briefly (e.g., fifteen to twenty minutes) or for more extended periods of time (typically an hour) to attend to that particular writer's concerns. The writers who attend the center may come in only a few times for specific help or on a regular basis. Some writers seek help on their own; others appear at the recommendation of teachers; and in some cases, writers work in the center as a required part of their coursework.

TUTORS ARE COACHES AND COLLABORATORS, NOT TEACHERS

Tutors do not evaluate their students in any way because the tutor's role is to help students, not to lecture at them or repeat information available from the teacher or textbook. Instead, tutors collaborate with writers in ways that facilitate the process of writers finding their own answers. To accomplish this, tutors may engage writers in discussions of their topics so that writers can develop their ideas and practice the phrasing and vocabulary of the kinds of discourses they will be writing. Tutors may also offer reader feedback on developing drafts of papers, suggest writing strategies, diagnose writing problems, ask questions, review misunderstood or missing information, listen to writers, and help them gain a perspective on their writing.

EACH STUDENT'S INDIVIDUAL NEEDS ARE THE FOCUS OF THE TUTORIAL

No two tutorials are alike because every writer is different. The starting point of every tutorial is to find out what that particular student needs or wants. To set the agenda for the tutorial, tutors assess the student's present situation, class requirements, past writing history, general composing habits and approaches to learning, attitudes, motivation, and whatever else is needed to determine how the tutor and student should proceed. Students are encouraged to participate actively in setting the agenda for how the tutor and student will spend their time together.

EXPERIMENTATION AND PRACTICE ARE ENCOURAGED

Because learning to write involves practice, risktaking, and revising, writing centers are places where students are encouraged to try out and to experiment. Removed from the evaluative setting of a classroom, writers are free to

engage in trial runs of ideas and approaches, to fail and move on to another attempt, and to receive encouragement for their efforts. Names of various facilities, such as writing center, writing lab, writing place, or writing room, are meant to encourage this view of the writing center as an informal, experimental, active place. This trying-out can be either in the form of talk, as writers practice formulating ideas aloud, or in writing.

WRITERS WORK ON WRITING FROM A VARIETY OF COURSES

While writing centers complement writing courses by providing individualized help, writing centers also serve the entire school by working with writers doing business and lab reports, history term papers, job and school applications, resumes, graduate dissertations, word processing, biology papers, writing contests, and any other writing projects with which students are involved. As writers move beyond writing courses and attempt unfamiliar writing tasks, they profit from interaction with tutors. In schools with active writing-across-the-curriculum programs, the writing center is an integral service, providing the primary source of writing assistance for other courses. Writers preparing for writing competency tests also use the writing center as a resource when preparing for these exams and when brushing up on skills after failed attempts at such exams. In addition, some writing centers provide writing assistance to faculty and staff as well, both with their own writing and with structuring writing assignments for classes. Outreach programs for the community may include workshops for local businesses, grammar hotlines, writing contests, training of tutors for other settings, and conferences on writing. Recognizing that their tutors also learn about writing and gain professional experience in tutorial instruction, writing centers also offer credit courses for tutor training and acknowledge their role in the preparation of future teachers.

WRITING CENTERS ARE AVAILABLE FOR STUDENTS AT ALL LEVELS OF WRITING PROFICIENCY

Writing centers generally do not limit themselves to working with writers at a particular level of writing skills. Developmental students often have special programs available for them in writing centers, including credit courses which focus on individualized tutorial assistance, but the majority of students using most writing centers are enrolled in a variety of writing courses or courses in other fields. In addition, students learning English as a second language use writing centers to work on writing, listening, and speaking skills.

There are a number of underlying assumptions which guide the writing center's tutorial approach to writing. In the writing center, the uniqueness of each writer is acknowledged as well as the writer's individual needs and the benefits the writer can gain from personal attention. Even when classroom teachers meet with their students in conferences, teachers cannot normally provide opportunities for the extended, on-going collaborative discussion, questioning, and practice which are the tutor's mainstays. When making decisions about how classroom time is spent, teachers must consider the whole class, and they tend to rely on written comments on student papers as a form of responding to students' writing. The function of the tutor, on the other hand, is to provide nonevaluative, immediate oral feedback, to attend only to that student's questions, and to engage with the student in some active planning, drafting, or revising. The tutor's goal in working on a specific paper with a student is to help that student develop general writing skills. Tutors often rely on asking questions that help students find their own answers, thereby keeping the tutorial an interactive situation in which the student is encouraged to do as much or more talking than the tutor. Numerous studies indicate not only that tutorial instruction benefits writers but also that it enhances their motivation and attitudes. Anxieties about writing are reduced by helpful coaching, positive reinforcement, and the friendly listening ear of the tutor.

In the writing center the writer joins a community of writers. At a time when the field of composing is focusing on the socializing nature of writing, there is a growing recognition of the writing center's role in providing writers with first-hand experience in interacting with readers who can help writers learn about the discourse community for which they are writing. In a room full of other writers, writers collaborate with their tutors, who are themselves encouraged during

their training to be actively involved with writing as well. Writers are thus assisted in discarding the antiquated view of the lonely writer secluded from the world as she struggles to communicate with an unknown, unseen audience. Writing centers also reinforce the generally accepted emphasis on writing as a process, for in the center writers actually engage in writing processes with tutors as they learn by doing how to plan, to brainstorm, to ask questions for revision, to rework written text, to add variety to sentence structure, to organize large amounts of material into a research paper, to proofread, and so on. Two cardinal rules for writing centers are that there be easily accessible stacks of scratch paper lying around and that the pen remain in the hand of the writer.

THE STATUS OF WRITING CENTERS

Some writing centers have been in existence for twenty, thirty, or more years, yet the large majority of writing centers at the college level were started in reaction to the "literacy crisis" of the mid- 1970s and the subsequent "back-to-basics" movement. Initially conceived as a means of providing supplementary instruction for inadequately prepared students, writing centers were too often viewed from the outside as little more than remedial services or "fix it" clinics where students memorized comma rules and mended fragments. With no preparation and few notions of what a writing center might be, new directors stepped in and created centers as the students poured in. The process has been likened to building a violin while playing it. There was no doubt about the usefulness of writing centers, but they struggled to achieve a respectable status both within the school and among colleagues who taught writing. Despite inadequate recognition of their efforts, writing centers continued to sprout and expand so that, at present, there are more than a thousand writing centers in American and Canadian postsecondary schools and hundreds at the high school level. Today, the most vigorous growth is in high schools, either in individual schools or in whole school districts (for example, see Behm).

Along with the flourishing number of writing centers has come a recognition of their value as a necessary component of writing programs. Only those truly unacquainted with the functions and benefits of tutorial instruction still view writing centers primarily as dispensers of grammatical rules, havens for inept writers, echo chambers of what has been said already in class, or band- aid shops to patch up bad writing; but such reductionist views do exist and must be contended with. (For one answer to such detractors, see North.) More generally, writing centers have established their academic credentials and are supported by their institutions.

A recognition of their professionalism and an interest in creating a International network helped to establish the International Writing Centers Association, along with regional groups throughout the United States. The International Writing Centers Association, an NCTE assembly, meets twice yearly at the NCTE and CCCC conferences where it sponsors preconvention workshops and special interest sessions, bestows awards and scholarships, and conducts a meeting of the Executive Board, which is constituted primarily of representatives from the regional groups. The two publications of the International Writing Centers Association are the *The Writing Center Journal*, published twice yearly with articles on research and theoretical issues, and the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, published in ten monthly issues (September to June) with practical, immediately useful articles, announcements, and reviews of materials. Regional groups, which meet annually at conferences, continue to be formed. A lengthy Position Statement on the Professional Concerns of Writing Center Directors was published in the *Writing Center Journal* 6 (1985), and the NCTE resolution supporting writing centers appeared in the *Writing Lab Newsletter* 12.6 (1988).

Having come of age, writing centers still find themselves growing and changing directions to fit a diversity of interests. Their flexibility in meeting new needs and their willingness to respond to new challenges cause writing centers to reach out and continually try new programs. Writing centers rarely stay the same from year to year. Their services typically include many of the following: tutoring, workshops, resource libraries of books and handouts, word processing, self-instruction in computer-assisted-instruction (CAI), and a variety of other media, writing assessment, grammar hotlines, conversation groups for English-as-a-second-language students, writing contests, tutor training

practicums, and credit courses. While most writing centers work only with writing skills, some also offer help with reading, study, and/or oral communication skills. Most writing centers exist within English departments, but others are part of larger learning skills centers or academic support services.

ISSUES AND CONCERNS

As relative newcomers on the scene of writing instruction, and because of the variety of challenges they face, writing centers confront a variety of issues:

Writing center directors frequently find that those outside the center—administrators, teachers, and students do not have a very clear understanding of the function of tutorial instruction and tend to think of the center as a place limited to remediation. How can the director educate everyone outside the center's walls? At issue here is the need for clarification and explanation of a nontraditional form of education to those steeped only in traditional formats. Reports to administrators, workshops for teachers, publicity, and invitations to students to visit the center all help but do not always solve the problem completely or finally. Each entering class of students needs such introductions, and teaching staffs with large turnovers require yearly orientations for newcomers.

A related issue is that of the status of the writing center. When there is a lack of understanding, outsiders tend to view the center as less important, capable of operating with limited funds and/or facilities, and able to cope with minimal assistance. In times of budget cuts, writing centers are more likely to be viewed as expendable because they are unlike traditional credit-bearing courses. Thus, the tenuous nature of some facilities and their reduced levels of support can demoralize the staff and weaken the writing center's ability to do its work. Where there is a clearer understanding of what the writing center contributes, however, support is strong, and writing centers are likely to be given increased responsibilities. This, in turn, has the potential for creating difficulties in that other faculty may view the growth of the writing center as a threat to their own programs.

Writing centers, because of their variations from institution to institution, do not have a single model to follow or a mold by which to shape themselves. As a result, there are no clearcut guidelines for matters such as administrative structure. Should the center be a part of the English department, should it exist as a separate entity elsewhere in the school structure, or should it be a part of a larger learning skills center? Close ties with an English department ensure coordination with the writing program and keep the teachers and students within easy reach. On the other hand, there are those who see the need for combined facilities to work with all the students' needs—that is, a single center where students come for assistance with reading, writing, and study skills, plus tutoring in other subjects. The tendency toward being swallowed up and losing the writing center's identity causes many writing center directors to argue strongly for a separate existence from any learning center.

The status of the writing center director is not always clear. Should that person be a faculty member or one who holds a staff position? The International Writing Centers Association statement strongly advocates that the director have faculty or administrative status. Appropriate preparation, adequate compensation for administrative duties, and clearly articulated standards for evaluation of the director's performance must be worked out so that the director has a frame of reference for the job.

Although the writing center is normally available to writers in the whole school, there is a need to consider where the emphasis will lie. Will many or most of the students using the center be from writing courses? In a writing-across-the-curriculum program, will the center primarily serve students in writing-intensive courses? To what degree is the center responsible for inadequately prepared or remedial students? The specific responsibilities of the writing center should be defined.

To what degree can or should writers and tutors collaborate? In most writing centers, writers are encouraged to come prepared with working drafts or to spend planning time with tutors. However, where specific honor codes exist that stipulate that no student may help another, the function of collaborative learning must be considered to see if and how it impinges upon this stipulation. Most writing centers do not have this problem; instead, they must deal with teachers' hostility to the concept of collaborative learning because they see it as detracting from honest grades. How much of their students' papers are written by the tutors? Clear guidelines and public discussion are needed. Tutors must also consider the ever-present student request to help with proofreading. To what degree is this a learning experience for the student, or how can it become one? Tutors need to define for themselves the degree of intervention that is appropriate in a student's work.

Because tutorial interaction is at the core of writing center instruction, the addition of computers to writing centers can create difficulties in that hardware becomes the dominant force in the center. Moreover, some writing center directors, while acknowledging the usefulness of providing word processing and computer-assisted instruction, find that administrators mistakenly assume that providing funding for hardware solves the personnel problem; hence, they do not provide accompanying funds for a tutorial staff. However, offering word processing facilities does encourage writers to use the writing center and also counters the image of the center as a place for writers in trouble.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR STARTING A WRITING CENTER

When a writing center is about to be started, the planners must decide a variety of matters:

What will be the writing center's goals?

When a writing center is being planned, it should have some sense of the specific needs it is expected to meet. What initially prompted the creation of the writing center? Who is it supposed to serve? What role is it to play? What need is being met by its existence, and who defined that need? These are typical questions that will help to shape the center's structure and services. Once started, the writing center will grow and change as its role becomes clearer and as new challenges become evident; but initially, the writing center needs some guidelines that will help to determine what equipment is necessary, what materials (if any) should be on hand, and what services should be offered. Typical goals may be to provide more individualized, collaborative assistance with writing, to accompany writing-across-the-curriculum programs, to prepare students for competency testing, and/or to supplement instruction in writing courses.

How can the writing center attract students?

The writing center must set its hours and structure its services so that it is available and convenient for students to use. In a high school or college with large numbers of students who commute, when are the most convenient and practical hours to be open? Will students be able to plan ahead and make appointments, or will they need to have a center available on a drop-in basis? Will students profit from occasional workshops on popular topics, or is the need primarily for one-to-one help? Should there be materials for checkout? Do the students need help in learning to use the library for research? Should tutors be stationed at the library at particular times? Are there student groups that would appreciate workshops on resumes and job applications? Publicity is needed to help students learn about the writing center and its services as well as to learn why it is useful to writers and how to use it. Will students primarily come on a volunteer basis, or will they be referred (or required) by teachers to attend?

Where will the writing center be located?

Should it be near the students' classrooms, in the library, or in the dorms? Writing centers located in the basement of an out-the-way building will have an uphill battle to get students to come in, so the location must be chosen carefully.

Who will fund and support the writing center?

Typically, English departments fund writing centers because they are part of a writing program, but some writing centers receive their funding either from student services or through the office of the dean. Some initial funds may come from grants, and some centers supplement their budget with government funds available for tutoring some of their students. Donations from local businesses or alumni are other sources of extra operating funds.

Who will direct the center and what qualifications should that person have?

The director must be someone willing to assume administrative responsibilities, capable of training tutors, and interested in individualized instruction in writing. Many directors start with little or no experience, but a center will be started more effectively by someone with a background in the teaching of writing, a strong preference and rationale for individualized instruction, and some experience in a tutorial center. Writing center directors are called on to handle a variety of tasks that they may have had no prior experience with, but they need to be or become adept at publicity, public relations, accounting, evaluation, administration, training, and often, grant writing. If their centers will include word processing, they need some familiarity with computers, and they may be called on to judge the effectiveness of having other media available in the center, from videotape equipment for tutor training to tape recorders for self-instruction tape cassettes. Writing center directors need to be flexible, willing to plunge in and accept new challenges, and creative in scavenging for furniture and other equipment.

Who will staff the center, and how will they be compensated?

The tutors may be students, grad students, part-time instructors, professionals, or faculty. Student tutors may qualify for work/study funds, be paid on an hourly basis, or receive course credit. Teachers-in-training may also be compensated with credit for practicum hours, and graduate students and faculty tutor as part of their teaching responsibilities. Some schools rely on peer tutors who volunteer their time, though such students are less likely to keep their commitments to tutoring hours when their workloads become particularly heavy. However, volunteer tutors, particularly those drawn from honor societies, recognize the value of such service on their resumes, in addition to the personal rewards of tutoring. Volunteers from the community and retired teachers have been other successful sources of staffing.

How and when will the staff be trained?

Tutor training varies considerably in the amount of time that can be spent on training. In some programs with shoestring budgets, or with students who have little free time, there is often only a day or so before the start of the semester for orientation. Further training goes on at weekly meetings during the semester. In other cases, schools can have students spend several days to a week of intensive training before starting, or there can be a semester training course for credit before tutoring begins. Training typically includes building awareness of how collaborative learning works, what composing skills are, how writing needs can be diagnosed, and what strategies tutors can use. Training also includes reviews of grammar and help with learning to keep records and to communicate with classroom teachers.

Which materials are needed?

The heart of the writing center is the interaction of tutor and writer, and little is needed for this except facilities for the two people to sit together, plenty of scratch paper, and references writers need¹ such as a dictionary, a thesaurus, style manuals, and some grammar handbooks. Additional materials that may be beneficial are self-instruction workbooks, rhetorics, texts and references for ESL students, and other books for writers. Because the focus of the writing

center is on the individual, the center should also provide materials that appeal to a variety of learning modes, such as computer programs, cassette tapes, books, and videotapes.

How will records be kept?

When students are referred by teachers, records need to be kept of every visit if the teachers find these useful. Records are also needed to indicate how many students use the center, how often they visit, what services they use, and what evaluation is done. Typically, these statistics are compiled in yearly reports sent to department heads and other administrators. In addition to informing administrators of the writing center's work, such reports also help administrators understand more fully what writing centers do and why they are needed.

How will the staff and services be evaluated?

Evaluation can be made by comparing the grades, motivation, and attitudes of students who attend the writing center with those of students who do not attend; or students using the center, and their teachers, can fill out Likert-type scale evaluation sheets at the end of the semester. Some writing centers ask students to fill out evaluation sheets each time they leave the center. Retention statistics can reveal the center's role in helping high-risk students stay in school, faculty evaluations can indicate how the center is assisting the faculty, and tests for attitudes and writing anxiety can measure gains in these areas.

What types of publicity will be used?

The type and extent of the publicity in large measure determine the success of the writing center, thus calling for creative publicity. Writing centers use ads and articles in the school newspaper and/or radio station, signs around the school and in dorms, brochures distributed around campus and in classes, announcements by teachers, table tents in cafeterias, visits to classes, tee-shirts, open houses, tours, testimonials of previous students, souvenirs (e.g. pencils, visors, balloons, or bookmarks with relevant information about the center), and writing contests.

Which items and personnel should be included in the budget?

To ensure that the writing center is an informal, friendly place, the room benefits from plants, a coffee pot, tables where students can sit side-by-side, and dictionaries and other reference books to use while writing. The center needs a receptionist who can greet incoming students, answer phones, keep records, maintain files of materials, and attend to the upkeep of equipment. Having such a clerical person may seem extravagant, but tutorial instruction suffers greatly when tutors must interrupt their work to tend to such matters. A phone is a necessity when students are likely to call for appointments or use the grammar hotline, as well as for faculty who often have questions and requests. In addition to salaries, the budget must include money for duplicating consumables—such as handouts and exercises—for publicity, journal subscriptions, and writing supplies.

NCTE RESOLUTION ON WRITING CENTERS

At the NCTE Annual Business Meeting in Los Angeles, November 22, 1987, members called for increased support and improved status for writing centers in schools and colleges. Background and text for the 1987 resolution is as follows:

BACKGROUND: Recognizing the important contribution writing centers make to the success of many students at all grade levels, the proposers of this resolution endorsed the principle that establishment of writing centers should involve a long-term institutional commitment.

While the International Writing Centers Association has worked to achieve such support for writing centers through the dissemination of professional standards, the Association maintains that “many writing centers still operate without adequate budgeting, administrative support, or academic recognition.”

RESOLVED, that the International Council of Teachers of English endorse the principle that the establishment of a writing center should be a long-term commitment on the part of an institution, including stable budgeting and full academic status; and that NCTE widely publish this resolution to its affiliates and other professional organizations and refer institutions to the full text of the “Position Statement on Professional Concerns of Writing Center Directors” published in the Writing Center Journal.

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