ESTABLISHING A WRITING CENTER IN THE HIGH SCHOOL

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For over two decades, writing centers have steadily become more common at the college level. Because they have offered increasingly more sophisticated techniques and approaches for dealing with students' writing difficulties, they are now an integral and valued part of writing instruction. Recently, high schools have begun to establish their own writing centers as a supplement to writing instruction. And there is a clear need for them. Students in junior high and high school need individualized instruction just as much, if not more, than college-level students do; their classroom teachers, however, are often unable — due to the numbers of students — to meet with each one in conference on an ongoing basis. The writing center, thus, offers a valuable service to both teachers and students.

But what exactly is a writing center? Although writing centers do not always resemble one another superficially, they share some important characteristics that differentiate them from the typical classroom situation. The major difference is that the writing center offers *individualized* learning, even if the students work together in small groups. The students' individual problems or difficulties with writing are diagnosed and then directly addressed, either through personal instruction by a tutor or through special exercises and writing assignments made with their special difficulties in mind. Also, the student-tutor relationship is different from the typical student-teacher relationship. Ideally, the relationship in the center should, as much as is possible, be one between equals. As students and tutors work together, the tutor's goal is not to tell students what to do; rather, he or she nudges students in the direction of first perceiving, and then solving, their own problems with their written work. While making these discoveries for themselves, students are

actively learning and applying the "rules of good writing" rather than simply having them explained. Thus, students take on a more active role than is usually possible in the classroom situation.

Although many people believe writing centers exist solely for remediation, this need not and often is not the case. Most modern writing centers help students with all kinds of difficulties, from organization to punctuation and style. Another common belief, that writing centers assist primarily English teachers, is also a misconception; writing centers can help students with writing from any class or field of study.

The process of setting up a writing center is largely the same, whether at the high school or college level. Below are the steps necessary to the successful establishment of a high school writing center.

Selling the Idea:

The first step toward establishing a writing center is to gain the support of your faculty and the school's administration, and this demands "selling the idea" of a writing center. Initial opposition to the project, particularly from English faculty, may be strong at first. Often this opposition can be traced to the false idea that centers exist only for remediation and that establishing a center "proves" that English teachers are failing at their jobs. Yet, the existence of a center demonstrates a real concern for writing competency by ensuring that students obtain the individual attention they need to improve their writing. Also, the writing center is *visible,* something tangible to show local governments and taxpayers. Thus, it can and should be presented as one of your school's efforts to counter the "literacy crisis."

Further, the writing center alleviates the frustration that committed writing teachers often feel. With the course load for many teachers of English and the Language Arts set at five classes of twenty-five or more students each, few teachers are able to give each student individual writing instruction. A writing center, however, enables teachers from *all* departments to refer students for personal attention to their writing. By doing so, teachers demonstrate their responsiveness to students' needs.

The most professional method of selling the idea of a writing center is to use a feasibility report. A feasibility report is a formal study of whether a project should or

should not be implemented, and is an effective way to counter most kinds of resistance, both stated and unstated. When writing this report, it is a good idea to include as much factual information as possible. Where, for example, can the center be located? Who will staff the center and how will they be paid? Include alternatives to your suggestions whenever possible. If the center is constructed on paper first, it is easier to convince people that the center will actually work.

Funding:

Funding a writing center, particularly at the start, can be a problem. There are two types of funding: exterior (from outside the school) and interior (from within the school system). Locating funds outside the school may be difficult, but is not impossible. There are several alternatives: the federal government (Title III and Title IV-C in the Department of Education), state governments, local foundations, and industries. Corporations and local foundations will occasionally award grants to educational projects which demonstrate a clear need. For example, the Friends School in Cleveland, a small private high school in which Jane Smith worked from 1973-76, received a grant in 1974 from the Cleveland Foundation to support its educational programs, one of which was a writing center. In some states there are agencies such as the Committee for the Humanities which dispense funds for special educational projects.

Most corporations and foundations base their decisions on a grant proposal, and they are interested in statistics that detail the numbers of students who will be helped and in what ways. Most often, these grants are offered only once, so it is important not to rely on them for continued funding. Usually, however, it is the *establishment* of the center that is expensive rather than its maintenance; the grant will be needed primarily once, for furniture, materials, and perhaps the training of a director. In addition, small donations can be solicited from local businesses, civic groups, and even parental organizations to help maintain the center once it is established and working effectively with students.

More reliable than external sources are funds from within the school itself. Perhaps the best solution to the problem of funding is to procure an initial investment externally, and afterwards to be included in the English or Language Arts budget as an integral part of the program.

Location of the Center:

Writing centers can operate in various settings, from a partitioned area of the school's library to a single room to a suite. If possible, locate the center near the classrooms in which writing is taught or many writing assignments are given. If the center is highly visible, students are more likely to make use of it on their own. Obviously, there may not be a great deal of choice in the selection of the center's location, but a cramped room in a little-frequented part of the building will not encourage students to drop in.

Both the location and furnishings should be as attractive as possible. The furniture should be selected carefully to provide several options for comfortable and productive work. Individual tables or desks and large round tables for tutoring are a necessity, as are at least one filing cabinet and a bookcase. One or two old stuffed chairs are an agreeable luxury, and posters and plants add an inexpensive finishing touch. These details are important because students need to perceive that the people who work in the center care about them and their writing.

The Center's Staff:

Someone must be "in charge" of the center and thus be responsible for the essential administrative tasks: training tutors, planning schedules, and maintaining relations with the faculty. It is possible, although somewhat difficult, for several faculty members to run a center jointly by dividing the tasks and responsibilities according to their individual strengths; however, having one strong director is most likely to ensure smooth and consistent operation.

While the director's role is important, it is the tutors who are responsible for the actual work with the students and thus set the tone of the center. There are four alternatives for staffing the center: faculty, students from the school itself, local college students, and volunteers from the community. Faculty tutors are the most obvious option for staffing. One faculty member can operate the center as his or her primary instructional assignment. But another and perhaps preferable option is to assign several faculty members to the center at different times during the day in lieu of one of their courses or extra-curricular duties.

Peer tutors are another staffing option, a way of increasing the numbers of students the center can help. Some

teachers may fear that using students as tutors is a mistake since they might offer bad advice and thus lead writers astray. And certainly this *does* happen occasionally in the classroom when students edit one another's papers. However, there is a significant difference between classroom editing and tutoring in the center itself. In the classroom, students are often reluctant to criticize their friends; further, they are often unsure of what exactly they are supposed to do. Peer tutors, however, unlike students in a classroom situation, can be carefully trained and supervised, often through regular meetings of the writing center staff. But the real advantage to using peer tutors lies in their success with students. With training, peer tutors can sometimes accomplish more than teachers because of their good rapport with students; the traditional teacher-as-dominant and student-as-submissive relationship is avoided. Some students, if given an opportunity, may be more able to take an active role in their learning when with a student tutor because they are both more able to admit their difficulties and to listen to and learn from their peers. There is also a real benefit to the tutors themselves; they learn a great deal about writing while helping others.

Peer tutors can be recruited from among those students who have demonstrated real competence in writing (they could be nominated by their teachers), or from those who have stated their interest in teaching as a career. In recruiting tutors, it is important to remember that their most important characteristic is not a command of the rules of written English, but a receptive and helpful attitude. Tutors whose idea of helping students is to "take over the writing task" will not be effective. Student tutors may actually be paid by the school as part of a "work study" program, but perhaps a more likely possibility is for student tutors to earn credit hours in English for their tutoring.

A third option is to employ students from local colleges or universities. English education majors may wish to gain experience by interning in a writing center *before* they student teach. Such an arrangement would allow student teachers to fulfill, at least partially, their degree requirements by tutoring and may be quite attractive both to future teachers and their potential employers, particularly with the new emphasis on writing instruction in many school systems.

Finally, there may be adults in the community who could work in the center part time. Some schools, for example, employ "graders" to help English teachers; many of these schools are discovering that more can be accomplished by employing some of these people to work a few hours per week in the writing center. And there might even be adults in the area who would volunteer time in the center every week. Besides the challenge and fulfillment of working with students, the position as tutor in a writing center is a valuable addition to one's resume.

Tutor Training:

Writing centers generally approach instruction in one of two ways, and the tutor training should reflect the center's approach. Originally, writing centers were "grammar labs." Tutors who worked in these centers primarily did exercises and were drilled on mechanics; the students had to apply this work to writing on their own. Given this approach, tutor training becomes largely a matter of familiarizing tutors with the materials available to them and making sure they can explain grammar and mechanics. The more contemporary center, however, helps students with their actual papers, either when the students are still working on a draft or after the teacher has suggested a revision. Careful questioning of the student writer is the key to this particular approach. The tutor first identifies something he or she wants to show the student and then uses a system of questions to allow the student to discover the answer for him or herself. Students are more likely to remember material they discover themselves than when they are told the answers. To work effectively in this situation, tutors must have a clear sense of what priorities have been established for good writing in your particular school, and to know how to move from major to minor problems in a student's paper, dealing with the most important first.

Tutors must also be able to deal with student resistance. A few students who have been referred to the center will believe "I've been assigned extra work because I'm dumb!" or, even worse, will view working in the center as punishment. Another problem that can cause resistance is simple misinformation on the student's part. Often students believe — or profess to believe — that a writing center's *job* is to edit their writing, to provide a better organization for their papers, or even to interpret the story they were assigned as a paper

topic. It helps if during training sessions the tutors discuss student attitudes and their effect on tutoring sessions, as well as how to recognize and deal with angry or passive students.

Probably the best option for training peer tutors is to require them to attend a mini-course on composition that includes a great deal of peer editing and revising. If this is impossible, the tutors should be prepared for their job by attending a workshop that clarifies the goals and methods of the center.

You should carefully consider the content of the training sessions; too much emphasis on how to explain punctuation, for example, may convince tutors that this is, in fact, their job. Also, tutors should be warned about making certain kinds of comments when tutoring; for example, they should never publicly disagree with the grade on a paper or comment on the student's teacher or methods of teaching. Such actions can cripple a center by creating tension between the tutors in the center and the teachers. And finally, tutors should not consider themselves "mini-teachers" and overwhelm students with criticism, no matter how accurate. Instead, they should focus on one or two problems at a time, making sure students grasp the most important of these rather than overloading them with too much information. A good way for student tutors to practice these techniques during the workshop is to "talk over" several student papers with the director before beginning work in the center; the director can then make suggestions about the tutors' handling of each paper's difficulties and offer alternative approaches. The director can supplement this initial instruction with weekly or semi-monthly meetings designed to improve the tutors' knowledge and methods.

Scheduling and Daily Operation:

Students generally arrive at the center in one of two ways: their teacher refers them, or they attend voluntarily. An appointment system is probably the most efficient way to handle scheduling, because it imposes some discipline and allows both referrals and "walk-ins" to receive help. The center can offer appointments of fifteen, twenty, or thirty minutes; it is likely, however, that students will need a full thirty-minute visit, at least initially. Also, students should work, if possible, with the same tutor during each visit, as this allows for continuity of instruction and saves time that would otherwise be spent in "getting to know" each other.

The hours the center will be open for operation must be chosen carefully; obviously, a great deal depends on the "tutoring faculty's" scheduling. But there seem to be two basic options. The center can be open primarily during class times, or the center can be open primarily during lunch periods, designated "study hall periods," and before or after school.

No matter what hours are chosen, however, communication, organization, and mutual co-operation between referring teachers and the center are all necessary. We have had the experience, for example, of an entire class suddenly appearing in the doorway of the center requesting help. A systematic approach to referrals enables the director to estimate the number of students arriving each day and thus to ensure that all students receive adequate attention.

Forms and Data Collection:

Few teachers want or need more paperwork, but the writing center must maintain records in order to ascertain that students are making progress, to keep teachers informed of their students' work, and to justify the center's existence at the year's end. Too many forms, however, can be frustrating for the tutors and expensive for the center; it's a good idea to determine exactly what is needed before typing up several ditto-sheets. Perhaps the most important form is the *information/work sheet,* which records the student's name, year, teacher, and class at the top quarter of the page. The remaining space is divided into four "slots" for notes. As soon as possible after each meeting, the tutor should summarize in one of the slots of the worksheet what the student worked on and for how long. This one form is the "backbone" of the student's file and is essential to data collection.

If you plan to use a referral system in your center, you will need a *referral form;* the student's teacher can then inform you of each student's particular problems and suggest either a certain number of appointments or even regular weekly attendance. An *absence notice* is then used to notify the teacher if the student misses an appointment. Almost as important as the *information/worksheet* is the *weekly* or *monthly report,* which informs each teacher of which students worked in the center and for how long, and briefly summarizes the work accomplished in that time.

Even when the writing center is established and work-ing, the director still has the responsibility of ensuring its continued existence. A report at the end of each term can justify the writing center by demonstrating its effectiveness. The principal evidence for this report is data collected from all the students' information/worksheets; the number of hours in operation and how many students attended can be used to judge the center's success. Obviously, the report is also important evidence to support a request for a larger budget or more staff. Five kinds of data are useful in writing reports of this kind:

- the number of students who attended during the term
- the overall number of student conferences
- the total number of hours spent in conference
- the average amount of time per conference
- the number of hours the tutors spent in the center

If the report is intended to justify expansion of the cen-ter, you might wish to provide more data. In addition, you may survey the students who use the center and their teachers in order to demonstrate their satisfaction with the center's efforts and to learn of possible improvements.

Advertising:

Advertising can be useful to the writing center. It in-forms students that the center exists to help them, and it re-minds faculty of a useful option available to them. The easiest way to advertise is through posters displayed throughout the school. A simple logo, such as a cup full of pens and pencils, can attract students' attention. Students can also learn about the center through advertisements in the school newspaper or by having tutors visit during the homeroom period to answer questions about the center. A monthly memo to the faculty can keep teachers informed of operating hours, but more importantly, can suggest ways in which they might use the center to benefit their students. No matter what form is used, however, advertising literature should stress that the center is not a proofreading and correction service. It never pays to raise false hopes!

Certainly, a high school writing center can be an effec-tive method of supplementing writing instruction, though it does take commitment. You must find money, location,

staff, then do paperwork and write yet another end-of-the-term report. So, why would teachers commit themselves to the establishment of a writing center? There are two major reasons. First, students clearly benefit from their work in the writing center and graduate from high school competent in English composition. Second, it is a strong challenge for both the tutors and teachers involved. It fosters a relationship between teachers and students only rarely experienced in the classroom — that of two people working closely together on writing.

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