The Work and Art of Writing Center Tutor Training

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Abstract

This paper, based on the EWCA 2008 pre-conference workshop «The Work and Art of Writing Center Tutor Training», provides insights and strategies for tutor training. Writing Centers have a wide range of models in terms of mission, locations, staff, populations served, and unique aspects; however, they share a common goal to support the development of student and other writers. To accomplish this goal in these varied contexts, training strategies are likewise varied; there are many options to choose from in terms of requirements, methods, and texts and materials used, for both initial training and ongoing professional development. This paper discusses and illustrates these options. The paper also includes a bibliography of tutor training resources.

When members of a Writing Center staff attend a European Writing Centers Association conference for the first time, two aspects are likely to stand out:

a. They are likely to see an infinite number of variations of what a «Writing Center» is—whom it serves, how it is staffed, the context in which it does its work, and its specific mission for that work.

b. In spite of unique characteristics, Writing Centers share a universal common goal to support writers on their journey to write ever more effectively, whether that writing is done in their first language or another, regardless of whether they are novices or experienced writers.

In other words, multiple models but a shared mission characterize the international Writing Center community. Both common elements and variations will be evident throughout the discussion below.

Participants from the nine universities represented at the workshop ranged from those with extensive Writing Center experience to those in the initial planning stages for a Writing Center, with many different characteristics in staff, focus, location and unique aspects, as the chart below illustrates:

Characteristics of centers participating in the workshop:

	Staff	Focus	Location	Unique Aspects
St. Mary Belfast (IRELAND)	Two administrators and undergrad tutors	Teacher-training, access students	Independent – report to «Principal»	American administrators
Abantizzetbaysai (TURKEY)	English Language teachers	English Language learners	In development, School of Languages, report to President	Intensive English – high student motivation
U. of Bielefeld (GERMANY)	Peer tutors (new) – interdisciplinary	Key competencies	Center for Teaching and Learning	Workshops, advise students and faculty
Berlin U. of Technology (GERMANY)	Five persons – peer tutoring (developmental program)	International students, language of disciplines	Foreign Language Department	Language support (and writing)
Sabanci U of Istanbul (TURKEY)	Two persons – peer education context	Inter-disciplinary undergrad and faculty	Language Department	Controversy about teaching of writing
Chalmers U. of Technology (SWEDEN)	Twelve faculty	ESL, technical writing	Courses integrated across campuses, report to head of University (independent budget)	Swedish/English progression, integrated into curriculum
U. of Tilberg (NETHERLANDS)	Three tutors plus two new tutors	Undergrad papers, thesis projects	Language Center, in Library	Link to information specialists
U. of Maine (USA)	Peer tutors, grad students, faculty	Cross-disciplinary academic writing	English Department	Only collaborative situation for academics
Saginaw Valley State U. (USA)	Director + half-time assistant, 20 peer tutors, faculty volunteers	Course-related writing	Independent unit in Academic Affairs; Center located in library	Online Writing Center, high school outreach

Given these multiple contexts, one can expect a wide range of tutor training strategies to be in use in Writing Centers. Since even long-established Writing Centers often find themselves confronting new questions or problems that may call for new directions in tutor training, it's useful to see many options to choose from.

In America, with several decades of Writing Center history and development, we have had an ever-evolving body of research available to guide our work. Our Writing Centers generally share some common elements: most often we are staffed by student peer tutors who interact one-on-one with student writers; we strive to serve writers across all academic levels and in all disciplines; and the majority of our clients are native speakers of English.

However, there are many other options at work in our Centers. Even the notion of «tutoring» may have wide variations. For example, some Centers assign tutors to particular classes, most often freshman composition classes. Some use appointments; others are strictly walk-in. Some try to match a tutor's major and expertise with students in that major; others simply have the first available tutor work with the next

student who comes in. Some have spacious, central locations in which to do their work; some long for more appropriate space. Some provide extensive online tutoring, especially if the university offers many online courses or programs; others limit their tutoring to face-to-face. Some distinguish between tutoring services for graduate and undergraduate students; some do not. Some are staffed entirely by undergraduate tutors; others have some graduate tutors or even a majority of graduate students staffing their centers. Some have a number of paid/professional staff; in others, only a director or coordinator may be professional staff. Some have rigorous application and interview processes; others staff with those who have been «assigned» to the work. Pay rates vary widely. Even the term used to describe those who work in Writing Centers may vary: they may be called consultants, peer consultants, mentors, tutors, etc. Since professional texts most often use the term tutors, that is the term I use here. Thus those seeking to establish an effective Writing Center may need to work through this wide range of options, selecting those that best fit their goals and context, all of which will shape their tutor training.

Tutor training, of course, is effective only if those to be trained have the necessary characteristics to be successful tutors. As the chart presented earlier indicates, Writing Centers use many different approaches to staff their Centers. Whatever process they use, they generally look for certain essential personal and academic characteristics: ability to read student texts analytically and to provide clear, objective feedback; intellectual curiosity and broad interest in many genres of writing and fields of study; strong writing competence and knowledge; interest in people and individual writing processes, coupled with awareness of the tutor's own writing processes; understanding of student diversity; clear understanding of tutor/student roles; willingness to be a good role model; engaging personality; enthusiasm; good listening and facilitation skills; ability to ask good questions; ability to motivate others; sense of humor; patience; «open» body language and eye contact.

Having hired qualified tutors, tutor-training strategies then generally develop out of a Center's unique contexts and needs. Given the interesting range of models described previously, one can also expect a range of practices in tutor training. It is worth noting that in some universities, tutors must complete a required for-credit course prior to being hired. In others (such as ours), a university tutor training course is available; however, since we strive to recruit a very diverse staff and the course is offered only in the English department, only a few of our tutors are likely to take this course. Thus for many universities, like ours, training must be complete and practical, designed to meet the complex needs of the Center.

The common elements and strategies found in most tutor training programs are readily adaptable for multiple Writing Center contexts, with initial training followed by ongoing training to develop ever-greater proficiency.

Initial training needs to provide sufficient expertise to enable a tutor to work effectively with a wide range of students in a multiplicity of writing situations; such training generally includes some or all of these common elements:

Texts and Materials
- An in-house tutor manual, likely to include elements of tutoring theory, effective tutor practices, operational details such as suggested format or length of tutoring sessions, record-keeping procedures, assessment strategies used, and the like. Manuals often include FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions), tips from current and previous tutors, as well as an introduction to cross-disciplinary work.[1]
- Published texts on WC work. Some texts are highly theoretical (why to); others are more practice-oriented (how to). Several periodicals are also very useful, especially the *Writing Center Journal* and the *Writing Lab Newsletter.* Widely-used texts and publications in the U.S. include those listed in Appendix A.
- Printed tutoring scenarios or online tutor simulations/ training exercises, for application of theories and discussion.
- Online discussion forums/wikis, integrated into the training in multiple ways.
- Tutor handouts available for use. Our Writing Center has about two dozen of these, developed in response to most-asked questions or typical concerns in tutoring sessions. The most frequently used at our Center are the series of handouts on documentation styles—APA (American Psychological

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[1] If anyone would like a copy of our Saginaw Valley State University manual, which is always a work in progress, I would be happy to send it as an email attachment.

Association), MLA (Modern Language Association), and CMS (Chicago Manual of Style). Handouts on many other topics, such as avoiding sentence errors, writing resumes, and the like, are also used at many Centers.
- Subscription to the WCenter listserv (http://writingcenter.tamu.edu/iwca/resources/writing-center-directors/#Mail).

Experiences
- Discussion of academic writing conventions and strategies for working with discipline-specific papers and genres.
- Discussion of writing processes for both native and non-native speakers of a language.
- Activities to help tutors respond appropriately to student diversity.
- Discussion of interpersonal skills, such as body language and strategies to begin a session.
- Practice tutoring sessions/role-playing (these may be videotaped for reflection).
- Sessions of being tutored by an experienced tutor.
- Observations of experienced tutors (job shadowing) and reflections based on the observations.
- Paired tutoring with an experienced tutor or mentoring by an experienced tutor.
- Observations and feedback from an experienced colleague.
- Hands-on experience learning to use the many resources available to a tutor. This can be handled in many ways; for example, Appendix A contains a «treasure hunt» type of activity currently used for tutor training at our University.
- Rapport-building staff activities as well as strategies to build rapport with students who come to the writing center.

Ongoing training likewise takes many forms. Initial on-site training strategies are often continued, in greater depth, in larger contexts. Writing Centers generally use many of the following strategies:

On-site
- Regular staff meetings (monthly, bi-monthly, etc.) that incorporate training strategies.
- Discussion of additional professional readings from texts or from sources such as the *Writing Center Journal* or *Writing Lab Newsletter*. (At our last staff meeting, for instance, our discussion topic was tutoring ESL students, especially Chinese, Saudi Arabian and Korean students, the three largest groups of international students on our campus. We prepared three scenarios, the types of situations that tutors might confront in tutoring writers from each of these cultures. Each tutor had read a different chapter from *Tutoring ESL Writers*. Discussion of the scenarios then included the readings as well as the tutors' own experiences.)
- Personal professional development plans. These may include research projects to develop tutor expertise in a particular area of interest through personal research or reading of Writing Center literature. For example, tutors at our center have researched topics ranging from laptop tutoring to working with Arabic speakers.
- Discussion of hypothetical (or real) tutoring scenarios representing challenging or problem sessions or student issues, such as strategies for tutoring students with learning disabilities.
- Training in online tutoring (if applicable).
- Online discussion forums/wikis.
- Email communication (our Coordinator sends a weekly message highlighting such things as upcoming events and anticipated needs; for instance, our nursing faculty often give us advance notice when a large number of their students are likely to use our services).
- A staff symposium, with brief tutor presentations on practical strategies; e.g., helping students develop a strong thesis statement.
- Role playing in group settings, with discussion following.
- Review of writing center records and statistics (e.g., number and type of assignments of students using the writing center).

Larger context
- Attendance and presentations at state, regional and national/international conferences. Such participation is an important step toward «professionalizing» staff members.

Effective tutors, of course, do more than tutor students. They become advocates for effective academic writing within their university. If they are students, they often become role models in their classes and across campus (within our student tutoring staff, for

example, we have numerous writers for the student newspaper; the editor of a creative writing publication; the coordinator of a high school writing center; and recipients of numerous awards and grants.) If tutors are professional staff, they often serve as consultants to their peers, advocates for new curriculum initiatives, and valuable sources of information across the campus community. We have seen the value of this in our Center, where we invite several faculty members each semester to be «Teachers in the Center,» tutoring alongside our student staff. Almost without exception, this experience provides an opportunity for them to see their work within a larger university context and thus to develop better assignments and coach student writers more effectively.

That effective tutor training work is critical to the success of a Writing Center goes without saying. The art of such training, however, is where minds are stretched, skills are honed, and transformations take place, not only in those students a Writing Center serves, but in the tutors themselves. Effective tutor training truly makes the critical difference.

Bibliography of Popular Tutor Training Texts and Materials

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See also the International Writing Centers Association *Bibliography of Resources* at http://writingcenter.tamu.edu/iwca/resources/starting-a-writing-center/bibliography/

Appendix A

Initial Tutor Training Activity

This worksheet is not a test. Really. It is an exercise designed to make you familiar with the Writing Center's numerous resources and prepare you for the different kinds of writing situations you may encounter. Most of these questions have multiple «correct» answers. Return this completed worksheet to me by Friday, Oct. 2. Enjoy!

1. Name two «veteran» tutors, and tell a little about each.
2. Give two pieces of advice you have received from a veteran mentor.
3. What are two basic ideas covered in the freshman composition presentations? You should get a chance to sit in on a presentation during your shift, but if not, simply ask to see the PowerPoint and go through the presentation yourself. How many of these presentations will the tutors give this fall? Why are these presentations important?
4. A student needs help with APA documentation. Name four resources that you could use to help her. (Note: provide the titles of some handouts, a couple books on our shelf, or online resources.) Of all these resources, which one do our tutors find most useful?
5. A student has to write a personal statement for admission to the teacher education program, but has no idea what a personal statement is. Where is an example you can show to the student?
6. The student aide at the front desk tells you the Writing Center login computer is not working.

Writing Center supervisors gone. Who on campus do you call for help, and what is the phone number?

7. A student walks into the WC and wants to email a paper for online feedback, but doesn't know how. Describe the steps you would use to show this student how to submit her paper online using VSpace.

8. A student wants to include a map of Africa she accessed from the *National Geographic* website in her Geography paper. She is using MLA format/documentation. How would she cite this source, both in her paper and on her Works Cited page?

9. An ESL student is looking for help with verb tenses. Where can you find a summary chart of verb tenses?

10. A student comes in and wants to know how to write an annotated bibliography. You're not quite sure how to do it. Where could you direct the student?

11. A student is writing a literary analysis, and wants to use a quotation by Mark Twain found in a book by James Loewen in 1995 called *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong,* published in New York by Simon and Schuster. Show how he would reference this quote in the paper, and how he would write the reference for the Works Cited page using MLA documentation guidelines.

12. A student has a series of statistics in her sociology paper from a web page titled «Indian Gaming Facts», from the National Indian Gaming Association (NIGA) website. After looking up this website on the Internet, indicate how you would reference these statistics in the paper, and write the reference for the References page, using APA documentation.

13. A Nursing student comes in with two of her classmates. The three of them are working on a collaborative paper for a nursing professor. After you finish working with these three students, do you fill out a Session Record for one, two, or three of these students? Why? What is the purpose of Session Records in the WC?

14. Take a research paper that you have written in MLA format which uses at least four outside sources, and rewrite this paper using APA format and documentation. (Using one of the papers you submitted with your WC application might be a good idea). Attach the revised essay to this worksheet.

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