

Connecting the Dots: Writing Center Tutor Training and Student Orientation and Retention

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A difficulty administrators may face is supporting students as they strive to meet the challenges of academic writing. This literature review calls for a more robust focus on how writing center administrators design tutor training for effective orientation, transition, and retention among the student population. Through identifying issues of access, sociolinguistics, and grammar instruction, this paper highlights the ways in which writing center directors and administrators support the transition and retention of entering college students.

Writing tutors play a large part in helping students integrate into the academic life and culture of the campus, from orientation (i.e., aiding students in first-year writing programs) to retention (i.e., supporting students as they strive to meet the demands of academic writing throughout college). Writing center administrators must train tutors to come alongside students in their development as writers. They must also think of ways to promote their services, especially to incoming students. Students who are willing to seek help are more likely to adapt to college writing expectations, leading to success and ultimately retention (Griswold, 2003).

This paper identifies issues facing writing center administrators that impact their ability to serve students effectively. For example, a chief difficulty administrators face is dispelling the perception that writing centers focus on remediation. Other issues involve balancing

expectations for Standard American English in academic writing with the sociolinguistic traditions of an increasingly diverse student body and tensions between helping students develop their ideas or adhering to genre and grammar conventions. Solutions to these challenges center on the training and development of peer writing tutors.

Specifically, this literature review offers writing center professionals strategies for integrating multilingual approaches that may empower diverse writers across campus by looking at issues of access, sociolinguistics, and training content. Writing center administrators should find the discussion useful as they strive to establish services that meet the needs of students. The review also showcases the role of the writing center in orienting students to academic expectations and supporting ongoing retention efforts by tailoring learning experiences to students' varied needs and backgrounds.

Overcoming Student Resistance

Writing centers often advertise that they are open to any student on campus; however, Salem (2016) found that not all students are “equally likely” to take advantage of this resource (p. 160). In this comparative analysis, the author discussed how the “academic, attitudinal, and demographic characteristics” of writing center users and non-users affected their educational choices (p. 153). Personal beliefs and desires are part of this decision-making process, of course, but broader social factors may, in practice, have a larger impact on these educational decisions. Because Salem (2016) found the “choice to use the writing center is raced, classed, gendered,” she proposed that research should focus not only on students who use the writing center but also on those who do not and their reasons for staying away.

Because these smaller, or “micro,” educational decisions, such as whether to seek writing help, may have an impact on student performance and engagement, Salem suggested researchers and administrators need to re-think writing center pedagogy altogether (p. 161). Many centers implement “policy-pedagogy,” meaning tutors are encouraged to take a standard approach to each session. Instead, Salem argued that sessions should revolve around individual writers' needs. Thus, writing center administrators must train tutors to be adaptable.

Proposing a solution to the problem of relying on students to access

the writing center, Spigelman and Grobman (2005) suggested taking writing support to the student through *on-location* or classroom-based writing tutorials (p. 3). Their edited collection explored conventional, theoretical, and practical issues surrounding a return to classroom-based tutoring. They did not shy away from controversial or problematic frameworks and implications of this kind of practice; instead, they relied on myriad voices to examine possible pedagogical complications and authority structures this type of tutoring may face.

Spigelman and Grobman (2005) also argued that on-location tutoring requires collaboration from administrators, professors, tutors, and students to be effective. It is vital that OTR professionals are aware of how writing centers currently serve students and how, with appropriate support and collaboration, writing center staff could implement a variety of strategies to support learners across our campuses.

Expanding Sociolinguistic Training

In his provocative article, “Should Writers Use Their Own English?” Young (2010) argued that we should reevaluate the way we approach writing instruction. His use of vernacular has a powerful effect on how his argument is received. By scrutinizing claims made by Stanley Fish (2009), namely that writing instructors should “clear [their] mind” of the notion that students have a right “to their own patterns and varieties of language,” Young argued that a multilingual perspective in the classroom could benefit all writers. Pulling from communicative strengths and introducing students to their rhetorical effectiveness in the classroom not only gives them access to a broader selection of language choices but also helps fight against prejudice. Writing center administrators need to be aware that personal modes of communication can be effective in academic settings even when they differ from Standard American English (Young, 2010). Promoting this mindset in writing centers can also facilitate transfer to broader applications and provide a more welcoming environment to incoming students from diverse backgrounds.

Furthermore, Childs (2018) explored how linguists can work with writing instructors to “bring linguistic awareness and discussion to the writing classroom” and increase retention by promoting “a sense of belonging and inclusiveness for first year students as they enter the academic discourse community” (p. 187). I agree that this connection

cannot be overlooked or ignored. Childs described how sociolinguistic training could help first-year students feel included, leading to academic success. She also discussed materials that help bring this awareness to tutor training sessions at university writing centers (p. 187). Childs frequently addressed issues of isolation and how first-year students are much more likely to seek help in writing instruction if “their forms of writing and speaking” are met with acceptance (p. 193). The job of writing tutors is not to increase students’ apprehension about being included in the academic discourse community but to help them integrate their valued voices.

The edited collection, *How We Teach Writing Tutors* (Johnson & Roggenbuck, 2019), includes ideas on theory and pedagogy as well as “links to videos, graphics, teaching materials, or artifacts used in their centers” (“Digital Collaboration,” para. 2). Several of the selections address the concerns about creating an accessible and inclusive writing center. For example, Aikens (2019) offered invaluable resources for writing center administrators to consider when developing antiracism training for their tutors. Through her investigation, Aikens (2019) found that writing center tutors “learned a great deal from the readings about bias and racism and found the readings and activities to be crucial to the understanding of their roles as writing tutors” (“Recommendations and Conclusions,” para. 1). Developing cultural sensitivity and open-mindedness among tutors will make them more approachable and more successful in reaching a larger proportion of a given student body. These strategies are beneficial for developing community and a sense of place within academic discourses, all of which contribute to the important goals of orientation, transition, and retention.

Addressing Content and Grammar Concerns

In terms of the content of tutoring sessions, Eckstein (2016) discussed the intersection of writing tutor training, students’ expectations, and what takes place during tutoring sessions. His study L1, Gen 1.5, and L2 users¹ of the writing center found that students in each group expected some kind of grammar support in sessions. The key is finding a balance between writing center philosophy and an approach tailored to the individual needs of diverse students.² As such, Eckstein did not advocate for scrapping higher-order concerns (e.g., content, structure,

¹ L1 refers to a learner’s first, or native, language. L2 refers to an individual’s second acquired language, or non-native language. Gen 1.5 refers to multilingual writers who are not native English speakers, yet not true international students. They may use English as a concurrent language.

² Many writing centers have policies that prevent tutors from overt grammar intervention, as this goes against the philosophy of a non-directive tutoring approach.

organization); instead, he argued for a more “nuanced” approach to grammar support in tutoring sessions, especially for multilingual writers (p. 376). Tutors need to be trained in detecting the language needs of their clients. Direct grammar instruction has a place in writing center tutoring, but it is the job of the directors to decide how the current center philosophies are being practically implemented by tutors in consultations.

Another concern among writing center users is a tutor’s expertise in content or subject matter. Kohn (2014) argued that humanities-trained writing tutors do not need to have expertise in science content to work effectively with science students, but they do need to understand rhetorical strategies for science writing. She suggested seeking input from local science faculty to bolster existing training materials for tutors. Engaging science faculty in the creation, or supplementation, of training materials can both strengthen consultation sessions and serve as the foundation for stronger writing initiatives (e.g., writing across the curriculum, writing in the disciplines) across campus.

Conclusion

In her 2013 interview with Andrew Hibel at Higher Ed Jobs, Dr. Cynthia Hernandez noted, “As with any programming, there is not ‘a one-size-fits-all orientation’ model.” This rings true for writing center tutoring sessions, as well. Writing center scholarship and practice is shifting away from prescriptive policy-pedagogy toward a flexible, empathetic approach to orienting students to the academic culture of their respective institutions and supporting their ongoing efforts to meet the demands of academic writing. Collaboration between traditional OTR professionals and writing center administrators and tutors can reinforce the idea of orientation and retention as an ongoing process, supporting students’ persistence and dedication to integrating into academic discourse communities.

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