

Investing Tutors in the Future of Writing Center Theory and Practice

Matthew Schultz

Saint Louis University

mschull@slu.edu

When preparing for tutor training and staff development meetings, administrators and peer-organizers often expect that tutors will have their identities and ideas challenged as new experiences disrupt their previously held beliefs. But as these tutors' ideas are challenged, do administrators and organizers invite them to challenge the communal identity of the Writing Center? In other words, is staff development collaborative? If the aim of Writing Centers is, as Steven North proclaimed in 1984 and we have been following since, "to produce better writers, not better writing" (438), then is it not also true that when providing our tutors with professional development that our aim is to produce better tutors, not better tutoring sessions? The best way to achieve this is to invest tutors in the process of Writing Center development.

For Writing Center administrators, collaboration is key: cultivating relationships with faculty is vital to the success of writing instruction across campus. The ideal writing center would grow large enough to provide specialized writing support to each academic department, and each writer (student, faculty, and staff) within those departments. Any director's job, then, is to network with faculty to gain a clearer and more complete understanding of the types of support instructors need for teaching with writing including course development, creating effective writing assignments, and offering workshops on productive assessment.

For writing tutors and tutees, collaboration is also key: Writing Centers offer writers physical and virtual space to experiment with their ideas in a low-risk setting. Writers working one-on-one or in groups with non-evaluative tutors are given the opportunity to develop effective strategies for improving their individual reading, thinking, and writing processes. To this end, Writing Centers are, and should be, communal sites: spaces where collaboration between tutor and tutee encourages active engagement with a text, invites experimentation and revision without the fear of assessment, and thereby distinguishing the Writing Center from traditional evaluative spaces and relationships. Yet as administrators initiate tutors into this community of collaboration, tutors are trained via a trickle-down methodology. Composition theorists influence writing center theorists, who in turn influence writing center directors, who then produce their writing center's vision, which directly correlates to the means by which that vision is carried out.

I suggest allowing for a more dialectic exchange of ideas. Peter Carino rightly points out that “the practice/theory binary, like most binaries, is largely a false dichotomy. All practice requires some theorizing, even if based on only the trial and error of experience, and all theorizing emerges from reflections on practice” (23); however, Writing Center scholarship is rarely produced by tutors—the everyday practitioners in the Writing Center—who are generally undergraduates working for academic credit, or graduate students working for tuition remission as they progress towards finishing a degree in a literary or composition field. The vast majority of Writing Center scholarship, therefore, is still produced by composition theorists or Writing Center administrators. One way to expand our range of scholarship is to invest our tutors in collaboration at the administrative and research levels, and to provide outlets for collaborative discussion between tutors, administrators, and theorists concerning Writing Center practice.

Such an opening up of dialogue between all the components of the Writing Center hierarchy begins with a more dialectic staff development. Directors must invite their tutors to maintain a more diverse, complex, and nuanced identity in which they are responsible for choosing their own consultation strategies, and reporting their successes and failures both in-house, and nationally. Michele Eodice, in her essay “Breathing Lessons or Collaboration Is...,” writes “when asked, many writing center directors will say that their peer relations, their relationships with their institutions, their identity politics, are anything but collaborative” (115). Many writing center consultants will say the same things. This might be due to the role of the director, who at times acts as his or her tutors’ colleague even as those tutors are conditioned to look to their director as the final arbiter of writing center praxis. The often-discussed problematic relationship between client and tutor finds its parallel in the falsely democratic organization of the Writing Center staff in which consultant and director fill those earlier roles of client/tutor despite the collaborative attempts of even the most optimistic of directors. In this model, tutors are asked to implement theory rather than produce it. From my position as both a Writing Center administrator and writing tutor, I see a need for more effective collaboration and clearer dialogue not just between tutor and tutee, but also among and between tutors and administrators.

All too often, the major obstacle of Writing Center development is a lack of resources. While our main objective is certainly to consult with writers, be it one-on-one in a face-to-face meeting or online, or in a group workshop, under-budgeted and under-staffed centers are forced to focus their attention solely on tutoring rather than on expanding services. Such services include adding satellite offices; inaugurating a workshop series, or creating discipline specific writing handbooks; developing existing services, like adding synchronous components to a mainly asynchronous online writing lab, providing ESL training, or updating documentation handouts; or producing scholarship in the form of conference presentations, journal articles, or discussion board posts. The Writing Center is described in Paul Kameen’s terms as a state of being rather than a state of becoming: this is what we do, and

this is how we do it. If, however, administrators are able to set aside even a small amount of time each week (perhaps 10% of a tutor's weekly scheduled hours) for tutors to engage in some of the above mentioned projects and to reflect on their personal tutoring philosophies as a vital component of the larger Writing Center vision, perhaps tutors may become increasingly invested in the future of Writing Center theory and practice.

After all, tutors work to ensure that writers come away from each tutoring session with a clearer understanding of their own thought processes as derived from and connected to a larger social and critical landscape, and with an eagerness to form habits of self-reflection and revision that make up the foundation of logical argumentation. Tutors, too, should be given the opportunity to engage in this practice of self-reflection and revision. I suggest that tutors, in addition to their daily tutoring reports, write monthly reports in which they can reflect upon their tutoring process. Such a report might include a continually evolving tutoring philosophy and writing center vision that could be presented at staff development meetings for feedback. I think that we would also see an increase in Writing Center scholarship being presented at conferences, submitted to journals, and posted on discussion boards by a decidedly more collaborative and wide-ranging group of faculty, graduate, and undergraduate theorists, administrators, and tutors.

Works Cited

Carino, Peter. "Theorizing the Writing Center: An Uneasy Task." *Dialogue: A Journal for Writing Specialists* 2.1 (1995): 23-37.

Eodice, Michele. "Breathing Lessons, or Collaboration Is...." *The Center Will Hold: Critical Perspectives on Writing Center Scholarship*. Ed. Michael A. Pemberton and Joyce Kinkead. Logan, UT: Utah State UP, 2003.

Kameen, Paul. *Writing/Teaching: Essays Toward a Rhetoric of Pedagogy*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2000.

North, Steven M. "The Idea of a Writing Center." *College English* 46 (1984): 433-46.