

You Say Center, I Say Centre

By Kerri Hill, St. Thomas University

On January 4th 2007, I received a letter congratulating me on my successful application to the Business Education Initiative, a scholarship introduced in Northern Ireland in light of the period of political and civil unrest known locally as “The Troubles.” The program grants scholarships to students at each of the two Northern Ireland Universities to complete a year of study at a university or college in the USA. I received the prestigious award and was subsequently allocated a place at St. Thomas University in Miami.

I arrived in Miami in August of 2007 and was keen on acquiring a job on campus. I was directed towards the University Writing Centre due to my academic ability and interest in the subject of English, even though it is not my major. When I heard the term “University Writing Centre,” I was a little confused as I had never heard of anything like it previously, certainly not at my university at home. Despite my lack of knowledge about the centre I met with the director for an interview. He explained briefly what working there would entail and what the writing centre aimed to achieve, something I had not understood at this point. I thought it was simply a place where students would go to have their papers proofread.

In the beginning the centre wasn’t overly busy, so Dr. Kevin Dvorak, our director, held a number of staff education sessions in place of tutoring. It was Kevin’s first semester at St Thomas as well. He spoke a number of times about the writing centres he worked in prior to taking his current position. At first, I didn’t understand the importance of his discussions, but then Kevin provided a number of handouts that explained different tutorial styles in order to enhance our tutoring abilities. I began to realize the breadth of the “writing centre” concept. The handouts discussed different methods a tutor could use when helping a student. It was only as I began to read this material that I realized that writing centres weren’t just present in universities all over the USA, but that an entire field of study was devoted to the development and improvement of these centres.

I was overwhelmed. I did not realize the magnitude of the position I had taken on. Despite my tentative thoughts towards my role in the centre, I was under no circumstances going to give up. I felt my knowledge would be sufficient to allow for my success as a tutor, and I could not have predicted the problems I would soon encounter.

As I began to work with students, I noticed certain recurring issues during the sessions. It started with small things, like how I would write the date in the format 26/10/08 as opposed to 10/26/08, and how I spelled certain words: behaviour, colour, centre and organisational. This wasn’t really a problem because most of the time I would be working with students using *Microsoft Word*, which automatically corrects spelling differences such as these. I also noticed that a number of students sometimes had difficulty understanding what I was saying, not because of my accent, but because of the different terminology I used. Instead of “period” I said “full stop” and instead of “parenthesis” I would have normally said “brackets.”

Coming to America, I was aware that some words were spelled differently, and that some words meant different things—chips, for example, are called crisps in the UK, and French fries are referred to as chips. I find it interesting that in the USA and UK, and in other countries such as Canada and Australia, we all speak English, but there are many different takes on this one language. I might even go so far as to say I speak English but I am learning “American.”

The language differences I encountered in the writing centre were relatively easy to overcome. However, a topic I found more difficult was the different referencing systems used here in America. I am used to using a one-system-fits-all approach. In Northern Ireland, we use the Harvard Referencing System and this is correct for every paper, regardless of the topic or subject. It is of similar style to those used here in the US; it offers a single approach with elaborate explanations on how to correctly reference any type of source utilized. I discovered that this system is not recognized in America, and that there is not just one but at least three common ways to reference work: MLA, APA and Chicago Style. Since I am a student here, I had to deal with learning these new styles not only when writing my own papers, but during sessions with students. A student would ask me how to cite a book in MLA style, and I would have no idea what to do. I would often have to ask another tutor to help me, passing the student on to him or her as I was not confident in the subject. This made me feel uncomfortable, and it was very difficult to learn all the intricate workings of each system. I quickly learned to adapt by having some of our handouts nearby or by having Purdue’s OWL up on my computer before sessions began. I still find referencing difficult but have discovered that with the right resources I can help students effectively.

With the help of my new strategies I had no problem helping students spot mistakes and teaching them the correct usages when they came to me for help with grammar and punctuation; however, the majority of the students coming to the centre in the first semester were 100-level English students who needed more help than with just grammar and punctuation. They were being taught the fundamentals of writing, structure, and organization. When Kevin mentioned that a lot of these students would be coming in, as it was mandatory in their classes, I did not expect to encounter any problems. I believe I know how to write a good paper, but my knowledge did not suffice in my tutoring sessions. When students came asking for more specific help with the structure of their paper, I was met with further problems.

One particular student came in with a paragraph written on the topic of doctors and their importance in our society. She had been asked to draft an introductory paragraph and thesis statement. I knew how to construct an introduction but had never heard of the term “thesis statement.” At this point, I felt uncomfortable. I asked another tutor what a thesis statement was and ended up passing the student on to that tutor; then Kevin explained to me what a thesis statement was and how to use it. I felt inadequate as a tutor, as I was supposed to be helping students with their academic problems. I myself was in need of teaching. I was afraid students would look upon me as insufficient, as I wasn’t fully educated in what I was helping them with.

Language issues also became a problem as I continued to tutor. Living in such a diverse, cultural city such as Miami, encountering many people whose primary language is not English is inevitable. In fact, the most common language spoken at home in Miami-Dade County is Spanish. As a result, there are many bilingual and English as a Second Language (ESL) students

here at St. Thomas University. This was strange for me as at home in Northern Ireland the majority of people speak English – UK English; in fact, I would rarely encounter someone for whom English was a second language. As almost everything here at St Thomas is conducted in English, it is imperative that a student be fluent in the language. It is also understandable that those who have had to learn English in order to come to college struggle to write a good paper in a language they do not fully understand or know, and that these ESL students are very common in the writing centre. I found working with these students challenging depending on their level of English language education.

One student in particular came to me with an essay her teacher instructed her to re-write. It was clear from her writing, and even her speech, that her English was not very advanced. I asked her to read her paper aloud hoping she would pick up on mistakes, but to her it all sounded correct. She would say something in her English and I would repeat it in my English to make sure I understood her; she began to write down exactly what I was saying. When I suggested a sentence, hoping to give her an idea of what she could write, again she wrote down what I said word-for-word. Essentially I was just re-writing her paper for her, and she was not learning anything. Since I had never handled this type of situation before, I was unsure of what to do. I tried to encourage her to re-phrase certain things, but she began to get frustrated, as did I. The session ended pleasantly, but I felt she hadn't learned anything. Making sure the student leaves with a better understanding is the aim of the centre. I discussed the session with Kevin and have since been able to improve my technique in dealing with these kinds of situations. Now I try to recognize the difference between someone who needs help with his or her writing skills and someone who needs help with his or her basic language skills, and adapt my approach accordingly.

Fast forward to today and I feel things have changed for the better. This is my second, and unfortunately my last, semester working at the writing centre. I feel I have come a long way in my capabilities as a tutor. I spent a great deal of time during the fall semester learning the different methodologies I encountered. Now I feel a lot more confident when I am working with a student. I have embraced the differences, rather than allowing them make me feel inadequate. I am happy to explain to students that I am from Northern Ireland and that some of the concepts are newer to me than to them! I also tell them that just because a concept is new to me, that doesn't mean that I cannot help them, especially since I have been eager to learn how to use the resources around me, like Purdue's OWL and our own handouts. I find this helps students learn how to use them, too, which is one goal of the centre.

I often wonder if there is a place for a writing centre at home in Northern Ireland. To my knowledge, we have no such facilities available to students at university. I believe it has a lot to do with the attitude of universities at home; there is a belief that when students come to university they should already be able to write a good essay. We don't have general education classes past high school, so when you get to university you take classes focusing solely on your degree. Therefore, as there is no further English education at university, a student should have sufficient English skills upon entry. I think, however, that the idea of a writing centre should not be wholly dismissed. Not all students can write well when they finish high school, and they should not be denied entry to university because of this. They should not struggle and receive a lower grade without some form of help being offered. Writing centres can benefit good writers,

too. After all, some students who use our centre are already good writers who realize how much better we can make them. I would suggest the idea of a writing centre to my university if the opportunity arose. Seeing as I am only one voice in around 70,000 students, I hope I will be able to make an impact!