

## Finding My Way Back to North

By Jesse Knifley, Western Kentucky University

I applied for a graduate assistantship at Western Kentucky University on a whim, figuring, “I might as well see if I can get some money for this school thing.” After my acceptance, I faced the very real problem of figuring out how to teach. I had never given much thought to myself behind a podium, and I felt that I might be marginally delusional if I thought I could pull off such a feat of pedagogical witchery. Luckily, Western provides its GAs with an extensive preparation program before they enter the classroom, starting with two semesters as a tutor in the writing center.

Stephen M. North’s “The Idea of a Writing Center” became the starting point for the other GAs and I. Beyond the dreaded writing center no-no of proofreading friends’ papers, we had never tutored before. North’s article provided us a much-needed foothold in the world of writing centers and tutoring. In conversation we would use “better writers, not better writing” (38) as an incantation to ward against the long days of helping students untangle unmanageable sentences.

Now, a full semester in the writing center completed, I have a level of confidence that buoys my thoughts when teaching my first section of English 100 comes to mind. That being said, the 2500-odd pages of reading I did for classes pretty much obliterated any memory I have of what exactly it was in North’s writing that I took such a shine to in my first days in the writing center. With that question in mind, I sat down again to reread “The Idea of a Writing Center” to see how it holds up against my experiences as a tutor.

Unfortunately, North’s statement that the writing center is treated as “the grammar and drill center, the fix-it shop, the first aid station” (37) still rings true. I have said, or overheard other tutors say, “we don’t proofread here, but we *can*...” dozens of times. Often, students are seeking tutoring for the first time and simply do not know how to ask for help, and “proofread” or “I need, like, grammar help” is the first thing they think of to say. Unfortunately, professors often help to perpetuate the writing center’s reputation as a fix-it shop due to a lack of understanding regarding the goals of tutoring and collaborative learning.

During midterms, I had several students come in seeking help on History 120 papers. While often the sessions would begin and proceed less than remarkably, afterward they would want me to sign off on a massive checklist provided by the professor. The list included everything from “student has a clear thesis statement” to “student capitalizes proper nouns and has exactly three supporting points within each paragraph.” While there is nothing wrong with trying to help students accommodate professors’ demands for drafting or revision, a tutor can only do so much in the space of a single session. What would often help the student grow as a writer (such as working through a nasty case of comma splice-itis) is overshadowed by the student’s demands of “I *have* to have this checklist signed or I won’t get full credit.”

North recognizes such occurrences as being caused by misconceptions on the faculty’s part. Older incarnations of writing centers often found their place in the academic community by picking up the slack of teachers willing to forgo writing instruction in their classes (North 37).

Even with the strides made by writing centers across the country, the old view of the “fix-it” shop still remains.

Not that things are all bad: the giant Checklist of Doom was an isolated incident. North’s idea that writing centers are “here to talk to writers” (40) holds true. Throughout the semester I talked to a lot of young writers, and I was able to chart a level of growth in the students I tutored regularly. Every writer wishes, at some point, that there was a magic spell that could instantly make he or she a better writer. We all find out this isn’t the case, and that only hard work produces better writing. It is a slow and often difficult process, but the writing center is there to help.

I know I’ll be back there next semester.

#### Works Cited

North, Stephen M. “The Idea of a Writing Center.” *The St. Martin’s Sourcebook for Writing Tutors*. Ed. Christina Murphy and Steve Sherwood. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2008. 32-46. Print.