

Effect of Writing Centers and Targeted Pairings on Students Repeating First-year Composition

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Abstract

This study suggests that students repeating a first-year composition course benefit from working with specific tutors in the writing center. The article focuses on students who did not pass first-year composition and took a tutorial version of the course. A chi-square analysis shows that students working with a specific tutor had a higher pass rate at a significant level than those who did not. Further study should be done with a larger sample size.

Proving that learning centers and the entities housed within them, such as writing centers, help students achieve learning outcomes and goals in their courses has long been an assessment challenge (Lerner, 1997). There are a variety of ways to assess writing centers. As far back as 1982, Muriel Harris provides data collection forms as part of *Tutoring Writing: A Sourcebook for Writing Labs* as a means to facilitate assessment. Even more recently, quantitative and blended methods for assessing writing center effectiveness have been called for, modeled, and shared (Johanek, 2000; Lerner, 2001; Kalikoff, 2001), as opposed to more narrative accounts. These studies and many others attest to the importance of quantitative assessment as an on-going issue for learning centers. Moreover, the release of the U.S. Department of Education's report *A Test of Leadership*, more commonly called the Spellings' report, in 2006 renewed the focus in higher education on transparency, accountability, and assessment. Institutions of higher education and the learning centers within them will continue to deal with the "a" word: assessment. Directors of learning centers, writing centers, and tutoring groups have been and will continue to be asked to quantify an enterprise that at times seems more qualitative than quantitative, that of helping others to achieve learning outcomes in courses. Not only that, but as

centers adopt new strategies for working with students, these methods, too, must be assessed and placed into context with other assessment efforts.

This study responds to the on-going need to answer the question “how do writing centers help students” by measuring the pass rate of students who repeated a first-year composition course in a tutorial format while it also advocates targeted pairings of students and tutors. Primarily, we asked “Does targeted pairing of a writing center tutor with a student improve the pass rate for repeating students?” Secondly, we asked, “Does working with any available writing center tutor improve the pass rate for repeating students?” We hypothesized that having these repeating students work with a writing center tutor would result in a pass rate higher than that of students in the course not working with a tutor. Furthermore, we hypothesized that students who were deliberately and specifically paired with a writing center tutor would pass the course at a higher rate than the other two groups of students. Our findings suggest a connection between writing centers, and by extension learning centers, and student success in achieving learning outcomes. This article also offers a preliminary indication that methods such as targeted pairing of students and tutors can further enhance such achievement.

Background

Numerous articles connect writing center usage with measurable markers of success in the composition classroom. Many do so by discussing the efficacy of the collaborative learning model upheld by writing centers, proclaiming the value of the collaborative conversation and the empowerment of students to write on their own aided by the support and coaching of peers (Bruffee, 1984; Ede and Lunsford, 1983; Harris, 1992). Although many writing centers adhere to the concept discussed by Stephen North in “The Idea of a Writing Center” (1984) that using the center can lead to better writers, not necessarily a better grade, as North himself acknowledges in his “Revisiting ‘The Idea of a Writing Center,’” students are motivated to visit the writing center in order to attain good grades (1994). This study reflects the assumption that collaborative learning endeavors can assist students’ development as writers using students’ attainment of a better grade as an indicator of the benefit of this collaboration.

Assessment of writing centers as well as writing courses, similar to the one used in this study, is an on-going issue in the rhetoric and composition and writing center fields. As Haswell and Wyche-Smith, among others, have noted, not only are there diverse responses to composition assessment measures, be they adopted by composition faculty or forced upon them, there are also numerous assessment measures, including portfolio assessment, available to writing programs (1994). Entire journals (such as *Assessing Writing*) and book length studies (for example: *Portfolios: Process and Product* (Belanoff and Dickson, 1991) and *(Re)articulating Writing Assessment for Teaching and Learning* (Huot, 2002)) address the issue of writing assessment and the strengths of assessment methods like portfolios. By focusing on a population that has already experienced portfolio review within a writing program, we agree with those who argue that portfolio assessment can measure students’ achievement of established learning outcomes and that passing portfolio review, as well as earning a passing grade in the course, can be an indicator

of student success. Thus, this article's focus is informed by the on-going enterprise of writing assessment, but more particularly it examines how writing centers can enhance the help given to writing students and begin to assess that help.

In the case of The University of Findlay, one of the assessment measures used in the writing program is a portfolio review, so the tutoring given to these students at the writing center focuses, in part, on the learning outcomes of the course as measured by the portfolio. When writing programs use a portfolio review, writing centers respond in a number of ways. The writing center may make administrative changes in the way appointments are structured to deal with pre-portfolio rush (Clark, 1993). Some writing centers have offered portfolio workshops such as the one at Lansing Community College (Montague-Bauer, 2005). When helping repeating students, who may have chosen to revise a previously submitted portfolio paper and are not only "hyper-aware" of the learning outcomes but also anxious to earn a passing grade and pass the portfolio, writing centers face additional challenges. One of the responses undertaken at The University of Findlay for three semesters was to pair repeating first-year composition students in an English 107 class with tutors at the writing center.

Methodology

Participants

Our population consisted of 199 students enrolled in English 107: College Writing II – Tutorial over a five year period, or ten semesters, from academic year 2003-2004 to academic year 2007-2008. We targeted this population in response to an on-going complication in applying scientific inquiry to composition classrooms and, by extension, to writing centers. As Lerner notes, isolating variables that could account for student grades is difficult when we cannot be certain that students are starting from the same point (Lerner, 2001). All English 107 students start from the same point: they have earned the grade of NC or "no-credit" in English 106: College Writing II, or in a few cases, in English 107 itself. Thus, for all students in English 107 the last grade they earned in a first-year composition course was the NC, and they all took their previous first-year composition course at The University of Findlay.

English 106, or its tutorial equivalent English 107, is a competency course required for graduation, meaning that students must pass the course with a C or higher. Because of the graduation requirement, a grade lower than C, other than F, is rarely assigned. Students demonstrate that they have met the learning outcomes of English 106 (or English 107) by earning a C or higher in the course and by passing a portfolio review process. Students must assemble a portfolio of at least four major papers, at least three of which must be thesis-driven and argument-based, and pass a review of this portfolio conducted by at least one English 106/107 instructor. The portfolio is judged against a set of criteria and standards established and defined by the English department, particularly English 106/107 instructors. There are four general criteria: thesis and development, documentation, organization and style, and grammar and mechanics. A portfolio that fails this review has not sufficiently met one or more criteria as evaluated by as many as four

instructors. The teacher of record retains final authority when assigning a grade. By common agreement, however, instructors only assign the two grades that are options when a portfolio fails: an F or an NC. It should be noted that students can receive an NC or “no-credit” grade independent of portfolio review at the discretion of the instructor. It also should be noted that in rare circumstances when a student has earned an NC but needs to receive credit hours for the course for scholarship purposes, a D may be given instead of the NC.

In any given year, the final pass rate for the portfolio review in English 106/107 is typically about 78-80%; of those not passing portfolio review, approximately 10% receive an NC. Students earning the NC are those who have given every effort to developing their writing skills. These students attend class, turn in all assignments, and meet all other course requirements, but their writing is still not at the level necessary to pass this required class, which signals competence to write for other classes in the university setting. The NC, then, is meant to acknowledge progress and to recognize that some students require more time than others to develop the needed level of skill and proficiency. Students earning the NC are not apathetic students, but rather inexperienced writers.

Until Spring 2003, students receiving the NC retook English 106, sitting in class with new students approaching the materials for the first time. This repetition was often discouraging for repeaters, so in Spring 2003, the English department offered English 107, a tutorial version of the course. English 107 has the same learning objectives and outcomes as English 106 but is capped at twenty students rather than twenty-four to allow for more individualized attention from the instructor inside and outside of class. Thus, students in the course share a common background: they are hard-working students needing more time to develop their writing skills in order to demonstrate that they have met the learning outcomes with their grades and their portfolios. All students enter the course having earned the NC in their previous first-year composition course and having already assembled a portfolio of works from that previous course. Although different instructors have taught English 107, every semester the course has been offered students have had the option of revising at least one portfolio paper and have been encouraged to work with a tutor at the writing center. Students and tutors have given implied consent to the study and all reported data is grouped so as to preserve anonymity.

Procedure

Like most learning and writing centers, the writing center at The University of Findlay keeps records of student visits to the writing center by name of student, by course for which the student is using the writing center, and by name of the tutor who worked with the student. As a result, we were able to track which students from English 107 in general used the writing center as well as which paired English 107 students met with their tutors.

Sometimes English 107 instructors informally conferred with the writing center director regarding tutors who could best help a particular student with a writing issue. For three semesters, however, this consultation was more systematic. The instructor of the English 107 course interviewed her students regarding their perceived strengths and weaknesses in their own

writing, as well as their schedule of availability for using the center. The writing center director paired these students with writing center tutors based on her knowledge of those tutors' strengths and weaknesses as both writers and tutors. For example, tutors who were stronger with thesis and development were paired with students who self-identified as weak in this area, a weakness that could be confirmed by reviewing their English 106/107 portfolio evaluations. Students who wanted help with documentation or emphasized grammar as a concern were paired with tutors who were confident in these areas. The tutors' work schedule was checked against that of the students to ensure that student and tutor could work together. A common excuse for not using the writing center from repeating and non-repeating students alike is that it isn't open when they could visit. By consulting students' schedules and pairing them with a tutor working during their available hours, the writing center director circumvented this excuse. Therefore, if the paired English 107 students did not use this resource, it was for reasons other than schedule conflict.

Finally, informal observations of both students' and tutors' personalities were also used in the pairing process. Many of the tutors, as revealed by the unofficial Myer-Briggs Indicator taken in the tutor-training class, are introverts. Thus, we were able to pair these tutors with quieter, more reticent students, whom a more exuberant tutor might overwhelm, further compounding any negative writing experiences the repeating students may have had. If the English 107 students had used the writing center when enrolled in their previous writing course and found it unhelpful, they often attributed the problem to a "poor match-up" with the tutor. Looking to ameliorate the negative associations these repeaters had with writing, we wanted to match up more compatible personalities as well as complementary writing skills. Both the students and the tutors were made aware of the purpose of the pairing.

Because we wanted to determine whether the pass rate of English 107 students is dependent on tutor usage at the writing center, we chose the chi-square test of independence (or association). The chi-square test of independence is used to analyze the relationship between two variables. The interdependence of observed events involving nominal data is difficult to assess; this test provides an appropriate method by which to analyze the data in this study. When using the chi-square test of independence, the null hypothesis always states that the variables are not related, or independent; the alternative hypothesis states the opposite. Three separate tests were conducted to determine whether any relationship or association exists between the variables. First, we tested whether any relationship or association exists between the variables of *tutor usage in the writing center* and *pass rate*. Then we further tested our primary hypothesis addressing the relationship between variables of *targeted and not targeted pairings of tutor* and *pass rate*. Finally, we tested our secondary hypothesis, which seeks a relationship between working with any available *writing tutor* and *pass rate*. An alpha level of .05 was used for all statistical tests.

Results

The null hypothesis for our first test is that the two methods of classification are independent; consequently, the null hypothesis always states the *status quo* when trying to test if the alternative, in this case that there is dependence, is true. If the two variables are dependent, this would imply that how, or if, the students used the writing center makes a difference as to whether the students pass or fail the course.

H_0 : There is not an association between tutor usage in the writing center and pass rate.

H_a : There is an association between tutor usage in the writing center and pass rate.

The data were tallied and are displayed in the following contingency table.

Table 1

Tutor Usage in the Writing Center and Pass Rate

	Tutor Usage in Writing Center			Total
	Targeted	Not Targeted	No Writing Center	
Success	35	13	111	159
Fail	2	5	33	40
Total	37	18	144	199

For significance at the .05 level with 2 degrees of freedom, a χ^2 value of 5.99 or greater is required. We obtain a χ^2 value of 6.346 for these data, which is greater than 5.99. This shows that there is some evidence of an association between the tutor usage in the writing center and success in English 107. To further explore the data, we will more specifically consider our aforementioned primary and secondary hypotheses.

Our primary hypothesis seeks to determine whether targeted pairing of a writing center tutor with a student increases the pass rate for repeating students; that is, the variables *targeted pairing with a writing center tutor* and *pass rate* are related or dependent.

H_0 : There is not an association between targeted pairing with a writing center tutor with a student and pass rate.

H_a : There is an association between targeted pairing with a writing center tutor with a student and pass rate.

Table 2

Target vs. Not Target Pairing of Writing Center Tutors with Students

Success	Tutor Usage in Writing Center		Total
	Targeted	Not Targeted	
Pass	35	13	48
Fail	2	5	7
Total	37	18	55

The results for these data are $\chi^2=5.484$. For this to be significant at the .05 level, with 1 degree of freedom, χ^2 must be 3.842 or greater. Since our test statistic is at a greater level, we can conclude that there is evidence of a relationship. However, because the chi-square test assesses only the significance of the association, the percentages per columns are also essential to understanding the data in Table 2. The success of the students that were paired with a tutor is 95% (35/37) compared to a 72% (13/18) success rate when using any available tutor. Thus, these percentages help to interpret the association as one that implies that students paired with a targeted tutor are more likely to be successful than those not paired with a targeted tutor in English 107.

Our secondary hypothesis seeks a relationship between *working with any available writing tutor* and *pass rate*.

H_0 : There is not an association between working with any available writing tutor and pass rate.

H_a : There is an association between working with any available writing tutor and pass rate.

The table was compiled by combining the first two columns of data (targeted and not targeted) from Table 1 into one column then keeping the third column the same to allow us to compare the appropriate variables. The new arrangement of data is displayed in Table 3.

Table 3

Using vs. Not Using the Writing Center

Success	Usage of Writing Center		Total
	Any Tutor in Writing Center	Did not Visit Writing Center	
Pass	48	111	159
Fail	7	33	40
Total	55	144	199

The value of this test statistic is $\chi^2=2.578$. We have 1 degree of freedom, and if we employ a 5% significance level, the rejection region is 3.842 or greater. Because our computed value is lower, we cannot conclude that there is association between these two variables. There is insufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis of independence.

Discussion

The first test examining targeted pairings, non-targeted pairings, and not visiting the writing center shows some evidence of an association between the tutor usage in the writing center and success in English 107. Further testing was deemed necessary on the data, as represented in Table 2 and Table 3.

The results of the test conducted on the data in Table 3 suggest that the pass/fail rate for English 107 students working with any available tutor at the writing center is not significantly different than the pass/fail rate for students not using the writing center. Although these results may be surprising to those of us who believe in the value of individualized peer tutoring in a writing center, they are somewhat expected given the individualized tutoring that the professors provide for this course. English 107 students who did not use the writing center at all may have taken advantage of conferences with the professor instead. Moreover, the results do not suggest that using the writing center is of no help to these students *at all*; rather, the results indicate that use of the writing center did not help these students *more than* ones who did not use the writing center.

In contrast, the results of the test conducted on the data in Table 2 give significant evidence suggesting the benefit of targeted pairings of tutors with students, particularly those with previous and self-described negative experiences with writing, as demonstrated by their taking a tutorial version of the required writing competency course. We realize that the numbers are small, but because the pass rate for paired tutoring is higher than those of students working with any available tutor, it can be implied that the method of pairing tutors with students by accounting for strengths, weaknesses, schedules, and even personalities can enhance students' success in meeting course learning outcomes. The pass rate for students in English 107 is 80%,

which is virtually the same as the general pass rate for the English 106/107 population as a whole, which shows improvement given the fact that these students were unsuccessful during their previous attempts to pass the course. However, those English 107 students who worked with a specific tutor passed at a rate of 95% whereas those that worked with any given tutor had a 72% success rate.

Implications

Several implications can be generalized for both writing centers and other tutoring services. First, this study suggests continued assessment measures of a more quantitative nature be tried when responding to administrators' and others' question of "how do you know the writing center (or learning center) is helping students?" The writing center at The University Findlay can use this study as a starting point to demonstrate, particularly to faculty that prefer quantitative assessment to more qualitative tools, that we are engaging in these methods and attempting to quantify our success with students. As noted elsewhere, the limited sample size available at smaller institutions will be a challenge, but this is a beginning.

Second, because this study provides evidence to the benefit of targeted pairings of tutors with students, we propose that this may be a method for other writing and learning centers to consider. Instructors of courses, be they writing, chemistry, math, or Spanish, can interview their students on their perceived strengths and weaknesses in the subject area, observe their personal interactions, and ask for their schedules. These instructors can then consult with the director of the writing center or learning center, who can attest to the strengths, weaknesses, interpersonal approach, and schedules of her tutors, and pair students and tutors accordingly. Students may be more willing to use tutoring services if they know that these efforts have been made to ensure a helpful experience targeted at their success in a course, encouraging repeated visits.

Further Study

One of the challenges in applying quantitative analysis of a writing center at a smaller institution, like The University of Findlay, is sample size. Repeating this study with a larger population would be valuable. Moreover, it would be worthwhile to investigate the results of more targeted pairings of students and tutors not only with a larger population but also across disciplines. Such investigations could corroborate these results both for writing centers and with other tutoring services, complicating and deepening our understanding of how, when, and if methods like targeted pairing yield measurable and successful results. We offer this study as a first step in that direction, aimed at expanding our methods at learning centers and our assessment of these methods.

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