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ABSTRACT

The writing center at Bluefield State College (West Virginia) is called the SPICE Center, SPICE being an acronym for Self Paced Instruction for Competency in English. In addition to emphasizing skill acquisition and flexibility, it stresses face-to-face evaluation of written work, and places heavy emphasis on writing as process instead of writing as product. To determine the center's effectiveness, instruction in the SPICE Center and in Southern West Virginia Community College's Individualized Learning Center was compared with conventional classroom instruction at the two colleges. The effects of the two modes of instruction on writing quality, the students' concepts of the nature of the writing process, and writing apprehension were compared in a pretest-posttest experimental design. Results revealed no significant differences between the two groups in both holistic scoring of writing samples and mean T-unit lengths. These results might suggest that teaching methods are not of central importance in the teaching of writing.
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The SPICE Center at Bluefield State College

Final Report

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Two reports of the origin and development of Bluefield State College's SPICE Center were delivered at meetings of the West Virginia Association of College English Teachers at Jackson's Mill. The first gave an optimistic view of Bluefield State's version of the writing center at the beginning of the SPICE Center's life during the fall term, 1979;¹ the second was a follow-up report on the center after nearly three years of operation.² This paper is an informal final report on the SPICE Center, for after eight semesters of successful operation, it has now fallen victim to West Virginia's economic difficulties.³

Bluefield State opened the SPICE Center⁴ with three courses in 1979--all three courses were offered at the same time, in the same room, in old one-room school house fashion, as an experiment to try to decrease the time I spent at an off-campus center in Welch, about 32 miles from the main campus. My classes there, while small, consumed my entire teaching load because of the range of courses the students required. The department needed me to teach on campus as well, so I opened the SPICE Center for just six hours per week and picked up a couple of classes on campus.

The SPICE Center, equipped with four conference tables, comfortable padded chairs, media equipment, resource materials, a few small tables, and a desk for the instructor, accommodated about 20 students at a time. Like many writing centers, posters adorned the walls, the atmosphere was light and cheery, and on close inspection pizza sauce and junk food crumbs could often be found. There were no student desks, no lectures, and no rigid schedules. for the course was conducted by student-instructor conferences.

PERFORMANCE-BASED LEARNING

The original version of SPICE was based on South Carolina's performance-based model of vocational education emphasizing skills acquisition, flexible

scheduling, and an open entry/open exit policy.⁵ The SPICE Center emphasized skills acquisition and flexibility. It also stressed face-to-face evaluation of written work, and placed a heavy emphasis on writing as process instead of writing as product. Minor changes were made during the four years, and although the performance-based South Carolina model was adapted for teaching composition in the SPICE Center, SPICE was not a minimum competency program, and I do not subscribe to the minimum competency concepts of many state legislatures.

Instruction in such writing centers asks students to develop skills instead of asking them to passively acquire information, as emphasized by traditional instruction--a dichotomy characterized by Ross Winterowd as "knowing-how" versus "knowing-that."⁶ Success in the SPICE Center was defined as the ability to write well, in relation to individualized criteria; traditional classroom instruction often defines success as the ability to recall a body of information--grammar rules and correct spellings, for example--in relation to a norm based on the amount recalled by others in the class, or to produce a text based on a norm established by departmental or instructor concepts of an "Idealized Text."⁷ Evaluation in the SPICE Center was criterion-referenced, i.e., all who met the criteria for an "A," criteria set for each writing assignment, based on the writer's purpose and goals, received an "A," without regard for so-called normal distribution of grades.⁸ The SPICE Center encouraged the students to retain authority over their texts, authority and responsibility they accepted reluctantly, but soon thrived on.

A Study of the SPICE Center's Effectiveness

Instruction in the SPICE Center and in Southern West Virginia Community College's Individualized Learning Center (together, the experimental group) was compared with conventional classroom instruction at the two colleges (together, the control group) in an attempt to measure the effectiveness of the two modes of instruction at the institutions. The effects of the two modes of

instruction on writing quality, the students' concepts of the nature of the writing process, and writing apprehension were compared in a pretest-posttest experimental design. Five null hypotheses were tested for significance at the .05 level of confidence to determine significant differences in the effects of the two modes of instruction on 82 students enrolled in the first semester of college English. Of the 82 students in the study, 44 received individualized instruction in one of the two writing centers, and 38 received conventional classroom instruction in one of two locations.

Only one of the five null hypotheses was rejected with a 95% confidence in the validity of the rejection: that there would be no significant difference between the experimental and control groups' posttest mean T-unit lengths was rejected. Not only was the control group's posttest mean T-unit length significantly greater ($p=.014$), but the pretest-to-posttest increase of 1.50 words per T-unit for the control group was significantly greater than the .49 word increase for the experimental group ($p<.001$). Expressed another way, the experimental group's posttest mean T-unit length increased 3.5% while the control's posttest mean T-unit length increased three times that much, or 10.5%. However, a closer analysis of the data from individual sections of both groups indicates that the statistically significant difference in syntactic growth may be misleading because one classroom group received instruction in the basics of Christensen sentence rhetoric,⁹ and the other groups did not. Omitting that section from the control group's data lowers the control's gain in mean T-unit length to .73 word, not significantly greater than the experimental group's.

Holistic scoring of the writing samples showed no significant differences, either in pretests or in posttests. Unfortunately for our purposes though, the writing center mean holistic score, although above the classroom group's mean holistic score on the pretest, fell below the classroom group's score on

the posttest. In fact, the posttest score for the writing center students decreased .03 point on a six-point scale (about 1%), while the classroom group score increased .19 point on the same scale, an increase of about 6%. Still, the differences were not significant at the .05 level of confidence, indicating that the two groups wrote equally well.

IMPLICATIONS

Because this study found no significant difference in the growth of writing quality of students taught by writing center instruction and by classroom instruction, teachers and administrators in West Virginia may wish to consider, for various reasons, alternatives to traditional classroom instruction. The alternatives include the Garrison¹⁰ and the Murray¹¹ methods of conferencing, and other applications of what James Moffett refers to as "student-centered" instruction.¹²

Interpreted conservatively, this experiment did not resolve the question of the effectiveness of the SPICE Center. However, one can argue that the experiment shows that the SPICE Center instruction was as effective as classroom instruction, and therefore argue for the former on theoretical grounds. Indeed, if one turns to the narrow institutional questions at issue, one can argue that the experiment re-affirms the writing center models at the two institutions, since such instruction achieves the same gain in writing quality at approximately one-half the instructional cost.¹³

One might interpret the results of this comparison of teaching methods, in the light of Frank Smith's injunction to "prefer people to programs,"¹⁴ as suggesting that the teaching methods, in and of themselves, turn out to be rather unimportant in the teaching of writing. Such a conclusion would follow similarly from Roger Shuy's argument that the crucial determinants of mastering literacy are below the conscious awareness of teachers and learners,¹⁵ and it might lead us to realize that the teacher's own writing, and what the teacher

knows about learning theory and culture are far more important than modes of instruction. Teachers who have a positive attitude, are sensitive to student learning, are knowledgeable in learning theory, and who are practicing writers can help students learn to write better. Lickteig singles out attitude as the "most important ingredient in a successful composition program."¹⁶ Teacher attitude is reflected by others, who say that writing teachers should also be competent writers. Several teacher-researchers relate their personal attitudes by admonishing writing teachers to write with their students, to write often, and to share their writing with their students in an effort to show their students how to write instead of telling them how.¹⁷

Teacher attitude is the critical factor in recognizing individuals and molding instruction to meet individual needs, and the writing center, with its built-in flexibility and its one-on-one instructional opportunities, is quite well suited for meeting individual needs. Hopefully, other West Virginia colleges and universities will not abandon attempts at individualized writing instruction in the face of economic difficulties, but will find other creative ways of putting the state's financial resources to full use to continue carefully cultivating the state's greatest resources, its college and university students.

Notes

¹David H. Roberts, "Spicing Up the Curriculum with Self-Paced Instruction for Competency in English," West Virginia Association of College English Teachers, Annual Meeting, Jackson's Mill, West Virginia, November 1979.

²David H. Roberts, "Individualized Writing Instruction at Bluefield State College; A Follow-Up Report on the SPICE Center," West Virginia Association of College English Teachers, Annual Meeting, Jackson's Mill, West Virginia, November 1982.

³When I left Bluefield for my present post, Bluefield State's financial needs were deemed more pressing in another department, so the position was not filled and the SPICE Center was closed.

⁴SPICE is an acronym for Self Paced Instruction for Competency in English.

⁵Clemson University, South Carolina Vocational Education Media Center, and South Carolina State Department of Vocational Education, Implementing Performance-Based Vocational Education Utilizing V-Tecs Catalogs (Columbia, SC: State Department of Education, 1978) (ERIC ED 159 382 - ED 159 391)

⁶W. Ross Winterowd, The Contemporary Writer (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975).

⁷L. Brannon and C. Knoblauch, "On Students' Rights to Their Own Texts," College Composition and Communication, 33 (1982), 157-166.

⁸David H. Roberts, "Individualized Writing Instruction in Southern West Virginia Colleges: A Study of the Acquisition of Writing Fluency," Diss. Indiana University of Pennsylvania, 1982.

⁹Francis Christensen, "A Generative Rhetoric of the Sentence," College Composition and Communication, 14 (1963), 155-161.

¹⁰Roger W. Garrison, Teaching Writing (Portland, Maine: Westbrook College, 1973).

¹¹Donald M. Murray, A Writer Teaches Writing (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968).

¹²James Moffett, Coming on Center: English Education in Evolution (Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook, 1981).

¹³Cost estimates for this report were based on full time faculty salaries plus benefits. Since adjunct faculty salaries are lower and since no benefits are provided for adjunct faculty (i.e., health care and retirement) the present use of adjunct faculty in conventional classroom instruction is far less expensive than the cost of full time faculty, making the SPICE Center a bit less cost effective than the report indicates.

¹⁴Frank Smith, "Demonstrations, Engagements and Sensitivity: The Choice Between People and Programs," Language Arts, 58 (1981), 634-642

¹⁵Roger W. Shuy, "What the Teacher Knows is More Important than Text or Test," Language Arts 58 (1981), 919-929.

¹⁶M. J. Lickteig, "Research-Based Recommendations for Teachers of Writing," Language Arts 58 (1981), 44-50.

¹⁷See Patrick M. Hartwell, Open to Language (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); Frank Smith, "Myths of Writing," Language Arts 58 (1981), 792-798; and Donald Murray, "The Teaching Craft: Telling, Listening, Revealing," English Education 14 (1982), 56-60.

