The College Writing Center:
Best Practices, Best Technologies

Eric Moberg
March 7, 2010

Introduction

Vitoria Matalon entered the fields of writing tutelage and World Wide Web entrepreneurship in 2003 with her for-fee online writing tutoring center. Her brainchild was born out of her own frustration at her alma mater, New York University, where she had to make writing center appointments as much as two weeks in advance for assistance when she was an undergraduate student. As Matalon put it: "no one thinks they need help a week before; everyone needs help the night before" (Carlson A30).

Indeed there is a certain client/provider aspect to the writing center relationships between students and tutors. Partly in response to the popularity of the internet, many colleges and universities have added online writing laboratories to their services. Not surprisingly, these ventures have met varying success. Some institutions, such as Walden University and National University, have no brick and mortar centers whatever, but do offer extensive online writing services (P. Prince, personal communication, March 2, 2010).

Whatever the service delivery model, though, the tutoring methods remain more important than the technologies in the quality of the service. While there are some technologies that are more accessible, useful, and inexpensive than a paper and pen, the technology should be seen as a tool, not a magic wand. There is no replacement for a well educated and well trained tutor managing and facilitating the tutelage in a well organized writing center program aimed at the lifelong learning of each individual student (Griffiths 31).

Andragogy

The concept of lifelong learning requires a consideration of Alexander Kapp's 1833 theory that adults respond better to methods designed for their maturity rather than teaching methods typically used with children. While Kapp's theory of "andragogy" as opposed to "pedagogy" gained little currency in its day, Boston University professor, Malcolm Knowles, elevated it to a new level of prominence in his teaching throughout the 1990's (Moberg 1). The construct of andragogy offers important lessons for how best to design programs such as writing instruction or writing support at the college level.

Several key components are common in most writing center designs. The most important component in the success of a writing tutoring program is the methods employed by the tutors in the sessions. With current technology, most any method available in a face-to-face service delivery model is also available online Modeling, Socratic dialogue, collaboration, presentation, and even lecture are all available options online as well as in person. The online format is only a medium, not the curriculum itself. The curriculum, the service delivery model, and the methods are most successful when tailored to each individual student's strengths and needs.

Keeping the person, or student, foremost in the tutoring process, many long time tutors recommend beginning the relationship by allowing the student to set the agenda (S. Grogan, personal communication, March 1, 2010). Reflection and goal setting are key threshold activities for adult learners beginning a course of study (Merriam et al. 176). This introspection is fundamental to improvement in the writing process. Tutors do well to encourage students to consider their goals before during and after the tutoring session and throughout the tutoring program (Jordan 53). The organization of a model tutoring program should include at least the following: (a) organized tutoring sessions, (b) understanding the complexity of the reading process, (c) development of reading and writing, (d) oral reading by tutor and student, (e) ongoing assessment of competency and comprehension, and (f) planning beyond the tutoring session and beyond the tutoring series (Roller and Newark). Roller and Newark further stress that tutors of writing should understand the process of reading and the teaching of reading to better understand the process of writing and the teaching of writing (11).

Shared writing is a process of collaboration for adult literacy students in which tutors and students each read their writing aloud to each other. This method is part of the writing as a "life skill" school of thought that is currently popular with Canadian educators (Fahy and Morgan). This oral presentation is not new, though; shared writing harkens back millennia to the traditions of the bards and their oral presentations. Homer, as a blind man, could neither read nor write, but composed several classic epics still revered today. Sharing writing with a small and supportive audience is a safe way for developing writers to gain confidence in their skills.

Students and tutors can develop as writers by sharing their works online as well as in person, or both. The use of both online and brick and mortar service delivery models allows programs and institutions to accentuate the advantages of each and accommodate for the weaknesses. This "blended" approach achieves better outcomes for a wide range of students in various stages, situations, or locations (MacDonald). The advantages of online tutoring with respect to cost and convenience are obvious. Some students, however, still prefer or require at least initial face-to-face consultation in writing instruction. Writing centers that can offer both in person and online services can capitalize on the opportunities and qualities of each to provide a comprehensive and

Eric Moberg

effective program to develop the competency of each individual student writer (Donnely 351).

Programs that teach writing as a competency rather than a set of discrete skills help students grow faster and further as writers and scholars (Smits et al. 496). The ultimate goal of the tutoring session series should be the overall competency of the student to communicate in a written medium. Learning grammar, spelling, format, or research methods as individual skills are only means to the end. Tutors should interact with students as writers, as opposed to viewing their tutees as grammar students or spelling students or formatting students. Interestingly, students with more education tend to reject lower level criticisms on grammar and format, even when well-founded (Waring 142). Negotiating such issues with aplomb requires solid orientation training as well as ongoing in-service training.

Training

Many writing center tutors feel underprepared to teach all of the skills necessary to help students with their writing (Griswold 67). Roller and Newark recommend extensive training for tutors and introductory training for students (12). Untrained or poorly trained tutors can cause as many problems in an online model as they can in a brick and mortar model (Martinovic 165). One key to the success of an online tutoring program is not the distance between tutor and student, but in the training each receives. Students and tutors with moderate computer skills can quickly learn enough about Adobe Connect or Elluminate to master the programs to a degree that allows most or all of the same opportunities of in-person interaction at a brick and mortar center.

UMUC's Effective Writing Center has no bricks or mortar, but exists strictly online. The Effective Writing Center actively recruites a cadre of well trained English teachers as tutors. UMUC conducts extensive initial training and ongoing in-service training for its tutors. Part of the practice at the Effective Writing Center is to replace "track changes" type of correction editing with "positive feedback" comments (Online Writing Tutorials 41). Similarly, National University's Writing Center conducts monthly in-service training stressing a student-centered philosophy. The National University Writing Center staff share methods and collaborate on how best to maintain and improve the success of the organization (S. Grogan, personal communication, February 4, 2010).

Organization

Another key to the success of the writing tutelage is in the organization of the service. Writing center services that are well organized and well managed offer better and more reliable outcomes for students than poorly organized or poorly managed centers do. Student ease of access and predictability are important to success of a tutoring program and are as easy to facilitate online as in person with proper organization.

Eric Moberg

Organization requires clear establishment of mission, goals, responsibilities, and roles. Many college and university administrators, however, complain about the lack of clarity in their roles in campus leadership (Anderson et al. 1).

Leadership is required to run any organization, especially those with large numbers of human resources, such as institutions or higher learning. Tutors and students each need to know the basics of who, what, where, and when from the management. National University uses an online scheduling portal that the administration, tutors, and students all can access. The tutor's schedules are set by the director on the portal; students use the portal to seek open appointments and select them online. Tutors then receive an e-mail each time a student sets an appointment with them. This system allows for each interested party to know the who, what, where, and when of the writing tutelage. The information is available to any of the parties day and night, so long as they have internet access (S. Grogan, personal communication, March 3, 2010).

A recent internet redesign of the Purdue Online Writing lab employed a highly collaborative process from start to finish. Faculty, technical writers, graduate students, and administrators all participated in the program improvement project. The goal was to facilitate optimal experiences for each interested party in the collaboration. This collaborative model encouraged discursive interaction between the various interested parties and related technologies (Salvo).

Technologies

Older, but still widely used, technologies such as spell check and grammar check, have saved countless gallons of red ink from professors' still older technology of correcting pens. The advent of word processing has likely done more to encourage writing as a multi-step process than the eraser or white-out could ever do. Researching, re-writing, revising, and re-formatting are now relatively fast an easy as compared to the heyday of the typewriter, carbon paper, and the card catalog (Badge and Badge).

Online databases and file depositories such as the Education Resource and Information Clearinghouse have replaced card catalogs to make research for writing projects easier, faster, and more convenient. Students can now do all of their research, writing, and revising from the comfort of their homes. The cost of a netbook computer to access most of this free software and web content is as low as $299 in 2010. Many databases and journal subscriptions are free or included in tuition and student fees at most colleges and universities. Educators are promoting these technologies across the curriculum and across the globe. There are even a host of sites catering especially to developmental writers (Calfee 78) and developmental students in all subjects (Broderick and Caverly 39). Other uses of newer technologies as means to promote older teaching methods include a project at Michigan Technology University that recruits historically

under-represented students to write and share personal narratives in an online forum (Valentine).

Current online technologies, such as Elluminate Live or Adobe Acrobat Connect Pro, allow for file and document sharing in real time. A student and a tutor can collaborate on the same paper on two different computers miles away (Vallance et al. 20). This collaboration can be done on a synchronous basis as well as an asynchronous basis. Each of these online presentation and collaboration platforms is available on a fee for use basis, but is typically paid by the colleges or universities hosting the online writing center. Many college writing center employ more than one platform as well as multiple systems at the same time in their online writing labs (Byrne 459).

Online Writing Labs

The majority of online writing centers are outgrowths of the brick and mortar facility on campus. Some online writing centers do little more than act as electronic billboards to usher students into the campus physical center itself (Anderson-Inman 650). Most, however, offer at least web links, answers to frequently asked questions, and documents for download, such as Modern Language Association or American Psychological Association templates for research papers. Many online writing labs also offer virtual tutoring sessions via internet, e-mail, phone, or instant messaging (Harris 21).

The Purdue Online Writing Lab purports to be the first of its kind to offer writing tutelage on the internet. The founder of the Purdue Writing Lab, Dr. Murial Harris, and a colleague from Purdue Educational Computing launched the site in 1994 with a specially designed e-mail server, gopher, and web site. Their intent was to provide services for students who found it inconvenient to visit the brick and mortar center during its normal hours. The Purdue site has evolved into a state of the art stand-alone reference center and clearinghouse for countless students and writers worldwide. Purdue claims that their site received over 31 million visits from students and writers in more than 125 countries during 2005 and 2006, in which time, the staff tutors report having answered over 3000 writing queries strictly online (Mayer).

The University of Maryland University College (UMUC) is an online institution only and serves students from around the globe. UMUC's Effective Writing Center offers writing assistance in the form of reviewing papers, general writing advice, writing related lectures, and writing related workshops for faculty development. As with the Purdue online writing lab, UMUC also posts general writing information, tips, and resources on its site (Online Writing Tutorials 41).

Online writing lab sites continue the movement toward more education offerings being based online. This movement is often a strategic decision for institutions wanting to offer services and reduce costs so as to stay competitive (Fullmer 54). The online format

reduces overhead such as rent, insurance, and energy costs. Tutors, too, reduce their commuting and parking costs while enjoying the advantages of working from home, which saves time and allows for tutors to accomplish more in the event of a cancelled appointment (Calvani 214).

Conclusion

Lifelong learning is a must in our information age, especially in the worldwide recession that began in 2008. In order to gain the most from their education, adult learners in any subject, major, program, or school must master the basics of academic reading and academic writing. Towards this end, writing tutors and writing centers offer individualized attention to students who need more direction than their professors have time to share in class or during office hours. The training of these tutors, organization of their services, and management of the quality of the tutoring program stand out as key considerations in establishing and maintaining a quality writing support program. Whether writing centers stay within their bricks and mortar, move online, or blend their service delivery, the quality of their services will remain an essential part of the success of their students and their host school.

Works Cited

Anderson, Philip, John P. Murray, and Arturo, Jr. Olivarez. "The Managerial Roles of Public Community College Chief Academic Officers." *Community College Review* 30.2 (2002): 1-26.

Anderson-Inman, Lynne. "OWLs: Online writing labs." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 40.8 (1997): 650.

Badge, J. L., and R. M. Badge. "Online Lab Books for Supervision of Project Students." *Bioscience Education* 14 (2009).

Byrne, Timothy. "Marrying Two Existing Software Packages into an Efficient Online Tutoring Tool." *Computer Assisted Language Learning* 20.5 (2007): 459-469.

Broderick, Bill, and David C. Caverly. "Techtalk: Websites for developmental students." *Journal of Developmental Education* 21.1 (1997): 38.

Calfee, Jane. "Online Tutoring and Student Success in Developmental Writing Courses." *Journal of Applied Research in the Community College* 15.1 (2007): 77-80.

Calvani, Antonio, et al. "Visualizing and monitoring effective interactions in online collaborative groups." *British Journal of Educational Technology* 41.2 (2010): 213-226.

Carlson, Scott. "Frustrated by Campus Tutoring, a Writer Sets Up an Online Service for Students." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 47.42 (2001): A30.

Donnelly, Roisin. "Harmonizing Technology with Interaction in Blended Problem-Based Learning." *Computers & Education* 54.2 (2010): 350-359.

Fahy, Patrick J., and Deborah Morgan. "Seeking the "Phenomenological Nod": Report of an Inquiry into Current Writing Practices in Adult Literacy Programs in Western Canada." (1999): *ERIC*. EBSCO. Web. 6 Mar. 2010.

Fullmer, Patricia. "The Assessment of a Tutoring Program to Meet CAS Standards Using a SWOT Analysis and Action Plan." *Journal of College Reading and Learning* 40.1 (2009): 51-76.

Griffiths, Jane. "It's all about the learners." *Adults Learning* 21.6 (2010): 30-31. *Education Research Complete*. EBSCO. Web. 7 Mar. 2010.

Griswold, W. Gary. "Postsecondary Reading: What Writing Center Tutors Need to Know." *Journal of College Reading & Learning* 37.1 (2006): 61-72.

Harris, Muriel. "From the (writing) center to the edge: Moving writers along the Internet." *Clearing House* 69.1 (1995): 21.

Jordan, Jeanette. "Change from within: The Power of a Homegrown Writing Center." *Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas* 80.(2006): 52-54.

MacDonald, Janet. *Blended Learning and Online Tutoring : A Good Practice Guide*. Abingdon, Oxon, GBR: Ashgate Publishing Limited (2006).

Mayer, G. A. "Online writing lab at Purdue (OWL)." *Choice: Current Reviews for Academic Libraries* 42. (2005).

Martinovic, Dragana. "Being an Expert Mathematics Online Tutor: What Does Expertise Entail?." *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning* 17.2 (2009): 165-185. *ERIC*. EBSCO. Web. 6 Mar. 2010.

McGreal, Rory. "A Case Study of an International E-Learning Training Division: Meeting Objectives." *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning* 10.6 (2009): *ERIC*. EBSCO. Web. 6 Mar. 2010.

Merriam, Sharan B., Caffarella, Rosemary S., and Baumgartner, Lisa M. *Learning in Adulthood: A Comprehensive Guide*. (2010).

Moberg, Eric. "Pedagogy Is for Kids: Andragogy Is for Adults." *Education Resource Information Clearinghouse Report No. ED507785* (2006): *ERIC*. EBSCO. Web. 6 Mar. 2010.

"Online Writing Tutorials: A Comparison of Two Programs." *Journal of Developmental Education* 30.3 (2007): 41.

Roller, Cathy M., and Newark, DE. International Reading Association. *So...What's a Tutor To Do?* (1998).

Salvo, Michael J., et al. "Usability Research in the Writing Lab: Sustaining Discourse and Pedagogy." *Computers & Composition* 26.2 (2009): 107-121.

Smits, Marieke, Dominique Sluijsmans, and Wim Jochems. "The Effects of a Competency-Oriented Learning Environment and Tutor Feedback on Students' Reflection Skills." *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 34.5 (2009): 491-498.

Valentine, Kathryn. "The Potential and Perils of Expanding the Space of the Writing Center: The Identity Work of Online Student Narratives." *Writing Center Journal* 28.1 (2008): 63-78.

Vallance, Michael, Phillip A. Towndrow, and Charles Wiz. "Conditions for Successful Online Document Collaboration." *TechTrends: Linking Research and Practice to Improve Learning* 54.1 (2010): 20-23.

Waring, Hansun Zhang. "Peer Tutoring in a Graduate Writing Centre: Identity, Expertise, and Advice Resisting." *Applied Linguistics* 26.2 (2005): 141-168. *ERIC*. EBSCO. Web. 6 Mar. 2010.