

Constructing Student Learning through Faculty Development: Writing Experts, Writing Centers, and Faculty Resources

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How many times in the course of a semester do we ask our students to visit the writing center, suggest they visit the writing center, or insist they visit the writing center? Like many instructors, when I find that a student can benefit from conversations about her writing (as all of my students can), I suggest she sit down with a writing assistant at our Center for Writing and Research (CWR). What we teachers often fail to do, though, is think about how the writing center can help us. What does the writing center offer faculty? At my college, our center is only in its second year, but we already have plenty of interest from students. As the college strives to develop a writing across the disciplines (WID) approach to writing instruction, the Director of the CWR sat down to brainstorm with me. Both the English Department and the CWR are invested in enhancing student writing across the campus, and we want to use our combined energy to uplift student *and* faculty writing.

How, though, can a writing center uplift a campus culture of writing if it only focuses on student writers? Many of our institutions ask students (both undergraduate and graduate) to use the center, but how many encourage the faculty and staff to do so? In this piece, I describe one way a center can support faculty as a pedagogical resource in the hopes that other writing centers and other English departments might be able to take up the example and bolster writing

instruction on their campuses, too. More specifically, I recommend that writing centers act as faculty development centers for writing instruction, hosting various faculty development opportunities throughout the semester.

Because the CWR is a center for both writing and research, it can serve a multitude of functions while being a hub for research-based writing. So far, for faculty, this has meant encouraging and facilitating the development of faculty writing accountability groups (faculty often refer to these as WAGs). The purpose of the WAGs is to allow faculty members a safe space for discussing their research and publication strategies (and woes) with colleagues from across the campus. Additionally, each WAG member comes to the weekly meeting with a list of goals achieved and goals to set. Each week, when a WAG gets together, group members describe what they accomplished the previous week and what they hope to accomplish the next in regards to their research and professional writing. These are meant to be small-scale goals to help faculty break their research and writing processes down into manageable chunks. For example, a goal might be to review a journal's objectives, call for papers, and submission guidelines. The goal for the next week might be to draft an introduction or locate three or more sources for a literature review. These WAGs have only been functioning for one semester, but the director informs me that he has received positive feedback. I am also a participant in a WAG, and I, too, find being part of the group motivates me and enhances my work. Hosting faculty accountability groups, though, is just one way writing centers can help faculty, and these groups have more to do with faculty writing rather than the writing instruction they incorporate into their classrooms.

As the campus's ideas about writing progress, the administration has asked every faculty member to include some degree of writing instruction in her classes. This is meant to bolster the

WID culture we are crafting. However, a very real concern on our campus is that many of our faculty have no training in writing pedagogy. This may be true for many campuses, where English department faculty take for granted that other teachers support their students throughout writing assignments in similar ways. This simply is not the case because many, many faculty have not received training in pedagogy, let alone writing pedagogy.

To remedy this, I have teamed up with the CWR to offer a series of writing pedagogy workshops. This is one iteration of our search to produce a viable faculty development option coming from within the campus to support the teaching done on campus and encourage the further growth and development of our students as writers; we have hopes that the writing pedagogy workshops will do just that. Before committing to a regimented program (we are considering implementing a three-year cycle of workshop topics), however, we offered a first workshop—a guinea pig workshop. I volunteered to run these workshops and this guinea pig workshop in particular.

Why Faculty Workshops?

David Russell argues that the writing across the curriculum (WAC) movement stems out of the “‘revival of rhetoric,’ which not only gave composition teachers a professional identity apart from literature [...] but also provided institutions with recognized experts who could design and implement curricular reforms in writing instruction” (274). With ongoing attention paid to a so-called national literacy crisis (Russell 275-276), the American education system had to adapt to teach literacy (reading and writing) more broadly. By and large, WAC programs began as responses to literacy crises. As administrators began to pay more attention to writing instruction,

models from other studies (in the United Kingdom and in secondary education) were experimented with in the U.S.:

The most influential of the early private, liberal arts college WAC programs—inspired in large part by the Carleton College experiment—was at Beaver College in Glenside, Pennsylvania [now Arcadia College]. In December 1975, the Newsweek exposé led the dean to call in the new composition director, Elaine P. Maimon, and charge her with the task of improving student writing in conjunction with the Educational Policy Committee (EPC). Rather than adopting a remedial approach, as some advocated, she and several colleagues from psychology, anthropology, and biology interested in student writing began sharing ideas and collaborating on research and pedagogy to ‘galvanize scholarly and research interests’ in composition. (Russell 284)

Later, in 1975, “A \$207,000 NEH grant [...] funded a program to create ‘a liberal arts college committed to teaching writing in all parts of the curriculum’” (Russell 284). In this brief history, Russell shows the beginning of the WAC (and WID) movements as investments in writing pedagogy that incorporate experts in writing from multiple disciplines in order to enhance and situate writing instruction.

At the heart of these types of programs, then, is faculty interaction, usually headed by someone versed in composition pedagogy, though this does not have to be the case. As Steve Parks and Eli Goldblatt point out, “If compositions reframe WAC to reach beyond university boundaries, we can foster cross-pollination and interdisciplinary discussion of how knowledge is shaped and conveyed in culture” (585). They claim creating a truly interdisciplinary program that moves students’ literate practices beyond the university will require diverse faculty collaboration

(Parks and Goldblatt 586). Although they advocate for much more than a workshop program, every WAC or WID program has to start somewhere. For my school, on the border between identifying as a WAC or a WID program (which is more fitting for us?—this is just one of many questions), in order to craft the cross-pollination and interdisciplinary interaction Parks and Goldblatt advocate, having a resource center and various workshops and discussion meetings hosted by that resource center is a start. As writing centers frequently see themselves (and pitch themselves) as homes for writers and writing (Bergmann 528), writing centers may be good places to house such faculty development initiatives.

Because writing centers emphasize writing at all stages and in all disciplines, they are in a strong position to advocate for cross-campus writing instruction (or at least to team up with a department or office that can support such an initiative). As Bergmann points out, early work on WAC programs led to “the idea that with some workshops and maybe consultations, faculty in all disciplines could and would become expert in teaching writing to their students” (526). The reality is, though, that a more solidified collaboration taking place over time is what can produce a stronger program and stronger teachers.

Bergmann suggests that writing centers are poised to enhance such collaborative efforts over time. She shows that workshops and resources need to be sustained over time (Bergmann 528), and with an established campus presence, writing centers can serve as foundational resources for long-term initiatives to flourish. Because writing centers may have resources for writing expertise, especially when they pair up with composition pedagogy experts, they can succeed where other programs may have failed. Bergman suggests, “Taking on the role of an expert consultant can give writing specialists the disciplinary weight they need to develop and

implement effective and sustainable cross-curricular faculty development programs in teaching,” and pairing with a campus’s writing center can strengthen such a position (528). Such a collaboration with a writing center would be well-poised, as Bergman says, to demonstrate to faculty that they are “not [...] the recipients of development, but its agents; that faculty development is not the mindless banking of information, but a movement, sometimes brilliant, sometimes slow and indirect, to reflective and meaningful changes in pedagogical thinking and practice” (534). Locating the crux of the WAC or WID program in a writing center welcomes faculty to the center while offering a sense of ongoing development, longevity, and sustainability.

The Participants

Because the college is moving toward a WID program, our first workshop was geared to a broad audience: we reached out to the entire teaching faculty. The workshop generated a substantial amount of interest in the English department, but more importantly, participants came from across the campus. Our participants came from an array of departments: economics, mathematics, political science, biology, communications, art, history, women’s studies, philosophy, and psychology. Our participants were also varied in their faculty status. Some participants were tenure-track faculty, others were post-docs, non-tenure track full-time faculty, and there was even an emeritus faculty member who attended. Although the workshop was relatively small (with just twenty participants), we had a diverse group of faculty from the arts and humanities, social sciences, and physical sciences.

The Workshop Set-Up

Our first workshop was aimed at the types of writing diverse faculty already assigns students. We examined the writing the faculty assign through the lens of scaffolding and sequencing writing assignments. When I opened the workshop, a quick show of hands told me that less than half of the workshop participants had heard of scaffolding and sequencing techniques before (see White's *Assigning, Responding, and Evaluating* for a brief discussion of scaffolding and sequencing).

Because useful workshops are workshops in which participants are *doing* rather than simply *listening* (however *active* their listening may be), this workshop had several components. First, I asked faculty to write down notes about the types of writing they assign, how they assign writing and talk about it in their classes, and why they assign writing at certain times or for what specific reasons. Next, I gave descriptions of scaffolding and sequencing, and as I talked, I used imagery on the overhead to help faculty understand why scaffolding and sequencing are useful for students.¹ Throughout this discussion, I encouraged participants to ask questions, and many did. This opened the way for a useful, focused conversation. I gave a handout to the group that included a brief description of scaffolding and sequencing, a brief description of sample scaffolding assignments and writing assignment sequences, a short list of resources for further reading, and several descriptions of assignments I use in my courses. We discussed these sample assignments at length as I took questions from the faculty. However, this wasn't a Q & A run solely by me; the faculty jumped in and began discussing ways they have been using these

¹ My images were of a construction site where workers were using scaffolding to remodel the exterior of a castle (scaffolding) and a strand of DNA (sequencing).

techniques (albeit without knowing the theoretical rationale) in their classes, sharing ideas with each other, and developing together a better sense of how they might use scaffolding and sequencing in future classes. The discussion led me to believe that various faculty are already using these techniques to a certain degree, but they do not have a vocabulary with which to talk about and further develop these and other writing instruction techniques.

At the end of the workshop, I wanted the participants to have a clear sense of the usability of these ideas; I asked participants to draft ideas in their notes about how they would implement these techniques next semester. I encouraged the faculty to work with those sitting closest to them (we were at a conference table rather than small group tables, which may have been preferable) and help each other work out their ideas. While they engaged in animated, even excited discussions and note taking, I floated around the room answering questions, offering advice, and giving input on potential assignment ideas.

The ideas teachers had of incorporating scaffolding into their writing assignments were as diverse as the disciplines the teachers represented. For example, one of the communications faculty suggested beginning the semester with brief reflective paragraphs that describe a fight with a friend; the next brief assignment would ask students to describe a heated conversation they once witnessed; and the midterm writing assignment would ask students to incorporate communication theory with an analysis of a third conversation. In this way, the faculty member demonstrated a desire to bolster students' writing abilities while helping them understand content; his ideas suggest the movement from students writing about what they know toward writing more complex analyses and, later, engaging in written academic conversation (perhaps even entering the Burkean Parlor) (Burke 110). Another faculty member, an art historian,

considered how her students might begin with papers that simply describe pieces of art. She suggested having them write to understand, learning what it means to describe in detail and to write cogently about such deep descriptions. This would set the stage for later projects where detailed descriptions must coincide with analysis of form and structure. A biology faculty member suggested scaffolding content as well as writing skills when helping students move from observations and descriptions needed to explain the results of an experiment to a more mature understanding of biological structures that would enable students to devise and describe suitable experiments for the class to practice.

Throughout this hands-on segment of the workshop, multiple faculty from varied disciplines were able to see the value behind scaffolding. They were able to tie scaffolding to some of the assignments they already ask students to complete, yet they were also able to envision how they might scaffold assignments in the future. Such examples demonstrate how a WID curriculum functions at its best: allowing students the opportunity to see, understand, and utilize the connections between content and written skills.

Other Ways to Run Workshops

In this scenario, I was the resident expert on scaffolding and sequencing because my degrees are in Rhetoric and Composition and I have studied pedagogy at length. Additionally, my work in writing center studies allowed for an easy opening with the Director of the CWR. However, just because I ran this workshop does not necessarily mean I will run future workshops. Both the director and I hope the workshop series will grow over time and that diverse faculty will become involved. If a department or writing center has several composition pedagogy specialists, it

would be helpful to have each of them take on a different workshop in accordance with their skills and interests. Even better than having faculty from only the English or Communications Departments host such workshops would be to establish an interdisciplinary lineup with guest speakers from various disciplines and departments speaking about strong writing (and encouraging strong writing) in their classes and fields. To this end, I am developing another workshop with a colleague in the Philosophy Department. This colleague is a writing-instruction ally but also is invested in classroom technologies, especially course management systems (CMS), such as Moodle (which our campus uses, but other CMS include Blackboard, Canvas, or Sakai). While part of the workshop will be devoted to a short presentation on the theory and praxis behind rubrics, the second half—my colleague’s half—would focus on designing appropriate rubrics for a hybrid or digital course using the CMS software.

Along with interdisciplinary speakers, some of our college’s community partners are professional writers. Community partners can be excellent additions to a faculty writing instruction workshop because they help faculty see the types of writing and components of writing that will be most useful to students upon graduation and integration into the professional workforce. Having even a lecture with a Q&A in which the community partner speaks to faculty about the transition from academic to workplace writing would help faculty see more than simply the needs of their classes but also the transferable writing and rhetorical skills students will need if they are to succeed beyond the classroom. Further, community partners might be able to bring in examples of workplace writing, demonstrating areas where new college graduates and entry-level workers lack finesse or development, which would generate a sense of importance beyond the classroom.

Aside from varying the speakers and styles of the workshops, if I could do the workshop over again, I would ask faculty to bring with them outlines of their writing assignments over the course of a semester for a given class rather than asking them to think on-the-spot about the writing they assign (as with teaching grammar out of context, very little from a workshop will stick if we don't ask faculty to try their hand at it by applying the ideas to their own, already drafted documents) (Weaver 150). Because many learners are kinesthetic, hands-on learners (regardless of whether they are faculty or students), finding a point of application is important. Whereas guest speakers may offer faculty valuable insights, they are not prepared to help faculty incorporate those insights into their courses.

When given the opportunity to actually work with their prepared course assignments, syllabi, schedules, and lesson plans, faculty will benefit from contextual application. Hands-on workshops offer faculty the chance to implement what they have been thinking about and discussing throughout the first part of the workshop. Workshops with application components also allow faculty to troubleshoot with an expert in the room. For example, a faculty member might run into a problem or question while trying to rearrange her course schedules to fit in more scaffolding, or she might have a question about whether a particular sequencing ideas might be useful for her class. Rather than struggling with this concept on her own, she has a group of peers to help her troubleshoot, including a "writing instruction expert." Collectively, the theoretical knowledge coupled with the combined teacher-lore experience in the room can provide further assistance to craft strong assignments and effective pedagogical techniques.

Faculty Success

While it is hard to say right now how effective the workshop was or will prove to be in the future, both the Director of the CWR and I have received compliments on the workshop and notes about its usefulness. Though anecdotal, the comments have been reassuring. Several participants have since spoken with me about their successful implementation of workshop ideas into their courses this past semester. One respondent, a chemistry faculty member, emailed me to say, “Thanks so much for the writing workshop today! It's great to have colleagues like you who are so knowledgeable [sic] about one of the biggest faculty challenges. I plan to work on trying to look at student writing more holistically and figure out what two or three points I want to make that can help the writing improve.” Another noted during a hallway conversation that he looked forward to using peer review as a scaffolding strategy for his philosophy course, and a third participant told me she was already using one of the activities discussed in the workshop (a “thesis gallery critique”) to great success in her fine arts course.

I will be interested to watch our workshop series grow and evolve: with the next workshop, perhaps a survey or debriefing interview can take place to better assess the workshop's effectiveness. At the very least, this one workshop has opened the door for faculty to have conversations across disciplinary borders about how we can encourage our students to craft more effective writing, regardless of the rhetorical situation.

English Departments and writing centers are both in the unique situation of having some expertise in regards to writing pedagogy and best teaching practices dealing with writing. Both the Director of the CWR and I encourage other campus writing centers and English Departments to capitalize on their knowledge by helping to develop, host, and even house interdisciplinary

discussions about the teaching of writing.

A Special Note

The workshop series described above is a part of the collaborative efforts of the Hope College Center for Writing and Research, English Department, and Office of Teaching and Learning. Without the generous gifts of time and financial support offered by these programs, the workshop series would not exist. Strong ideas can set faculty development in motion, but only the support of various programs on a WAC/WID campus can keep them moving forward. I would like to thank the Center for Writing and Research, the English Department, and the Office of Teaching and Learning for their support and collaborative energy.

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