

Respectful Alignment of Programs as a Possible Factor in Remedial Writers' Pass Rates

Mary McDonald
Cleveland State University

Abstract

For over four years, students enrolled in remedial writing classes who attended eight writing center tutorials directly linked to their assignments had an average pass rate of 95.6 percent, whereas students who did not attend any writing center tutorials had an average pass rate of 39.4 percent. These correlations are just that—correlations that cannot speak to causation—but they can encourage writing center directors to analyze trends. Examining the alignment among various programs inside the First-Year Experience Program at a large, urban Midwestern university, this project proposes that tacit collaboration might be a factor in yielding high pass rates.

Keywords: correlation, writing centers, tutorials, collaboration, course-based tutoring

Respectful Alignment of Programs as a Factor in Remedial Writers' Pass Rates

Measuring the value of writing tutorials reminds me of the mythical figure Atalanta who would not marry anyone who could not beat her at a race. She ran so swiftly that no one could catch her, and in the tale, the goddess Aphrodite advised Melanion to drop three golden apples to slow her down. As researchers, I believe we are all seeing glimmers of what to drop in order to estimate the value of writing center tutorials. Boquet (1999), Driscoll and Perdue (2012), Lerner (2001), and Macauley and Schendel (2012) all advocate replicable, aggregable, data-supported (RAD) research. A large, randomized empirical study would be a golden apple: scholars with a grant and great cooperation could randomly assign students

to various composition classes, give pre-tests to level students, and then evaluate tutorials via writing quality measures and surveys of all involved—something perhaps only possible with a large grant at a large institution. However, in this article, I want to propose another glimmer to consider, the product of a correlation, which, as readers know, does not yield causation or generalization, and that glimmer refers to something Harris (2000) and Eodice (2003) have advised for over a decade—collaboration. Even in a large school, collaborative alignment can begin. Alignment gives hope that tacit collaboration and working together quietly can yield great results, even though these results may remain only a distraction for Atalanta.

Programs can be aligned with few meetings between directors and the multitude of employees involved; this article discusses the alignment of several programs at a large Midwestern urban university over a four-year period. Eight Writing Center tutorials are directly linked with four first-year writing assignments (one tutorial for two drafts of four papers) for remedial writers within a First-Year Experience Program that includes strong advising and the student tracking software program, Starfish. Correlations are shown to be very high in that, consistently, for over four years, 95.6 percent of students who came to the eight required tutorials in the Writing Center passed remedial writing, whereas students who did not attend passed at a rate of 39.4 percent (Appendix A). The patterns in these figures intrigued me. To obtain the glimmers, like Melanion in the tale, I needed advice, and my colleagues at the Northeast Ohio Writing Centers Association, the Eastern Central Writing Centers Association, and *Writing Center Journal* virtual retreat were all very generous, cautioning that correlational studies do not yield results that point to causation. While waiting for the large-grant golden apple studies, we can look backwards and cautiously analyze what is working.

Data Collection

Data were collected over a four-year period using the tracking software called Starfish (2016) that was available to the Writing Center beginning in the fall 2013 semester. In the fall 2010 semester, remedial writing shifted from a two-course, non-credit-bearing

program (English 085 on paragraphs and English 090 on essays) to a stretch model (Glau, 1996, 2007) where students obtained credit for graduation from one course, English 100, while spending more time in the classroom (one credit hour more) and going to the Writing Center. The number of students that took remedial writing over the four-year period averaged 455 in the fall and 204 in the spring. That initial fall 2010 semester, students attended workshops on writing because the Writing Center was insufficiently staffed to give individual tutorials. The next academic year of 2011-2012, however, after the addition of a small fee of \$50 that paid for more tutors, remedial writers were required to attend eight individual tutorials, and attendance grew by 200 appointments. In the fall 2013 semester, the Writing Center obtained the software tracking service, Starfish (2016), that enabled the monitoring of the number of Writing Center tutorials and the pass rates for English 100 presented in Table 1 (Appendix A).

Literature Review

Historically, researchers investigating the factors associated with the effectiveness of writing tutorials for improving pass rates have cautioned the need for a variety of methods of investigation—ones beyond surveys that most directors usually collect (Lamb, 1981; Neulieb, 1980; Bell, 2000). In their book *Building Writing Assessments that Matter*, Macauley and Schendel (2012) advocated a rich blend of assessments. In one chapter, Schendel refers to the way the Cleveland Orchestra gained funding through telling readers about its success in a wide variety of ways: invitations to prestigious festivals, awards, ticket sales in New York, and imitation by other orchestras (pp. 145-146). Such qualitative triangulation presents various kinds of evidence of success that administrators often trust in order to secure funding. However, with the spotlight on retention and graduation rates, writing center professionals often need to offer more.

Qualitative studies do not lend themselves to replication or generalization, hence the need for RAD research. The studies conducted empirically on the effectiveness of writing tutorials to improve pass rates reveal the confusion brought on by various quantitative measures. Lerner (2007) especially has cautioned that we

must consult Macauley and Mauriello (2007) for ways to assess and be on our guard against some easy measures: SAT scores are not a way to level students; grades vary by instructor; and grades do not indicate writing quality. Being inherently unstable, these measures present problems. Researchers cannot see the quality of the writing if grades are used as a measure.

That said, some empirical studies show students do make improvements when they attend writing tutorials. In a descriptive study comparing students who attended tutorials with those who did not, Sadlon (1980) found 65 percent of students given tutorials improved in a post-test essay compared to the control group. Advocating small scale evaluation for writing centers, Bell (2000) compared students' judgement of the value of their tutorials over time in several increments (immediately after a tutorial, two weeks after, and two months after); all students found tutorials valuable, indicating that the value of writing center tutorials did not fade. Additionally, students found the advice helpful for future writing needs. Using pre- and post-test writing samples, Niiler (2003, 2005) found writing center participants improved on global issues such as the focus and development of the writer's work. Williams et al. (2006) found the same results over a four-year period for students in first-year and advanced composition courses: more writing center attendance meant higher grades. Pairing one student with one tutor promoted better pass rates in first-year composition courses in a study by Diederich and Schroeder (2008). In a controlled, randomized study of students in English Composition, Henson (2009) found that the students who visited the writing center voluntarily demonstrated a statistically significant better "clarity of purpose" in the introductions of their essays. Students with low self-efficacy but high writing center visitations had higher composition grades than those with high self-efficacy but low visits. This finding held for both native and non-native speakers, but especially so for non-native speakers (Williams & Takaku, 2011).

Basic writers who were frequent writing center participants persisted and graduated at higher rates than did their non-participant peers (Bell & Frost, 2012). The researchers advocated using such institutional data to formulate comparisons to illustrate the

engagement that writing center tutorials provide for students. As they noted, “regular and ongoing involvement of students over time proves to be an important factor in student persistence” and especially so for minority students (p. 24).

What if, however, pass rates are not, generally speaking, the concern of writing center professionals? In her important book *Retention and Resistance*, Powell (2014) warned the academic community that a focus on pass rates and retention efforts misses our duty to educate students for language skills they need today—ones that will last into their future instead of preparing them for solely academic ventures. Our focus in tutorials remains (at the advice of North [1984] and so many after him), to help the writer develop the skills needed to improve written communication, not to focus on a specific programmatic goal.

Assignment-Linked Tutorials

One afternoon right after midterm, a student sneered the words many readers have heard, and they had a great impact: “My teacher says I need to come here, but I don’t have anything to work on.” She was right. Everyone from advisors to instructors to tutors knew remedial writers needed tutorials—everyone except them. We had to tell students why they needed to come—exactly why. At that point, we began a different approach, and the form used was key.

Writing center forms, as Beech (2007) cautioned, reveal so much about writing centers’ policies and attitudes. In fall 2012, after two years of figuring out how to shift from the workshops to individual tutorials, the Writing Center began using a chart to help remedial students know why they needed to attend (Appendix B). Our chart contains two individual tutorials: one before and one after each of the students’ four assignments. The decision to make eight tutorials came from a \$50 student fee initiated by the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Studies and the Vice Provost for Academic Affairs, who realized we needed more tutors. If we pay tutors \$13 an hour, then the fee yields eight tutorials, which then fit perfectly with the pedagogical goal of helping students before and after their drafts for the four papers.

The chart provides a visual cue to students; students and teachers alike use it to check off tutorials, even though they are recorded electronically in Starfish as well. The visual impact of the chart is important. Our chart says the FYWP and the Writing Center are aligned. We choose to be ancillary to their program; we want to help students before they submit a draft and then after they receive instructor feedback. The chart also allows everyone to be manually involved in checking off the required tutorials. Students handle it carefully when asking us to check off appointments, and instructors have created their own versions of this chart. It is a visual cue of progress.

Initial Habituating Workshops

At the beginning of each semester, the Writing Center staff offers short workshops for remedial writers on the Myers Briggs Temperament Inventory, reading skills, and grammar. These workshops help to habituate students to our services. Students attend either in person or online, and they must turn in homework in person. This means they learn where we are located on campus, fill out our student information form, and begin to make appointments.

Tutors and Tutor Training

Tutors are largely but not exclusively graduate students in literature or creative writing placed in the Writing Center by the English Department with a tuition waiver and small stipend. Our undergraduate tutors sport a wide variety of majors such as business, chemistry, and music. They are hired from the Honors Program when possible, and when not, from general applicants.

Tutor training occurs both at the beginning of the academic year (with a full day orienting tutors to our policies) and then each week throughout the semester during one-hour staff meetings. We review the assignments in the FYWP along with various techniques for working with remedial writers. Hospitality is our top value in this urban, largely commuter-student environment. The Counseling Center Director comes in one time during the year to discuss working with remedial and difficult students. The Director then also shares advice from previous years.

When tutors work with remedial writers, the Director advocates the following strategies: knowing their assignments and

readings well; working with a cognitive approach that Shaughnessy (1979) described in *Errors and Expectations*; reframing an assignment referring to students' experiences in high school; and using the Cycle of Change Model ("Transtheoretical Model," 2017), particularly the pre-contemplative stage, to highlight awareness of poor behavior patterns.

In addition to the top value on hospitality, tutors who know well both assignments and readings communicate to remedial writers that they do know how to help them with their writing. When examining writing, tutors use Shaughnessy's cognitive approach to deduce why a student would write a sentence the way he or she did, and then use the student's intention and language to teach them a better way that respects the student's language and intent. In other words, a prescriptive approach with a weak writer would be harmful. Another technique for welcoming a remedial writer is to communicate that the college task is just that—not a high school task. Once students realize they need to learn a new skill, they pull away from blaming themselves to focus on what is new. Finally, remedial writers often pose great challenges to tutors. For instance, after several tutorials, a student did not print out the right version. In another instance, a student did not take any of the suggested revisions. The Stages of Change Model allows a tutor to shine a light on poor behavior patterns without judgment. Tutors are instructed to say, "Something must have happened that you didn't print out the right version." Such a strategy does not fix the problem: it does create awareness and dialogue. That dialogue allows both tutor and student to discuss poor strategies.

Quiet Collaboration

Writing centers can often exist separately from other types of academic support, as Griswold (2003) noted. At our university, academic supports like the Writing Center, the Tutoring and Academic Success Center, and Advising are housed under the Provost's Office in the Office of Undergraduate Studies, while the FYWP functions out of the English Department. To address the needs of our large Midwestern urban university's many non-traditional, minority, and first generation students, Academic

Advising and the office that concerns Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Student Support Service (called TRIO) offer advising and success coaching. These groups work with other programs such as library instruction and an Introduction to University Life class. There never has been a single meeting where all of us (advisors, Starfish wizards, directors, and other staff members) are in the same room. We just quietly work together with student success as our goal. Instead, the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Studies will often suggest collaborations, and the Director of the FYWP corresponds with all groups. Each group seeks to add to the success of first-year students especially in its own way.

Tutors' Perspective on the Shift from Workshops to Assignment-Linked Tutorials

Tutors who responded to an anonymous, voluntary survey from SurveyMonkey regarding the shift from large workshops to eight assignment-linked tutorials reported that the tutorials improved the attitudes and the writing itself. They also noted that a supportive instructor mattered in regard to student attendance at tutorials. Of the 17 tutors, seven responded, which is a 41 percent response rate.

Questions were open-ended and as follows: describe your experience with the transition from workshops to eight individual tutorials; relate whether, in your experience, these tutorials were helpful to remedial writers; and advise what could be done to help remedial writers improve their skills. Most valuable about the tutors' responses was their perspective as they moved into teaching in the semesters that followed: they saw the results that the tutorials made that were directly related to assignments.

From one tutor who now teaches first-year writing:

As a former tutor and current writing instructor, I have witnessed improvement in student writing due to the 8 tutorials. Additional one-on-one feedback is critical to student success, especially for students who are otherwise unwilling to seek help outside of class from their instructors. As an instructor, I have noticed that students who do not complete the 8 tutorials produce less successful papers than those that meet the Writing Center requirement.

From three different tutors:

I felt like it helped to have the tutorials directly related to their assignments. Without a specific task, students were more likely to arrive unprepared or unsure of exactly what was required. The attitude before was “I’m required to be here” versus coming in with an understanding that the WC supplemented their coursework and arriving with appropriate questions and more direction in their assignments.

Having a specific topic to speak to students about helped structure the appointments and made the students more prepared - they generally knew what they needed to bring and were more on-task in my experience than when they did not have direction initially.

The assignment-based tutorials do indeed seem to help remedial writers, especially because they are encouraged to work with a tutor at least twice for each assignment. With this process in place, writers are able to receive feedback during both the drafting and revision stages of the writing process.

One tutor cautioned the proper use of tutorials, however:

The 8 tutorials are very helpful, but only when students use them properly. End of the semester tutorials have little benefit, unless students are making up/redo-ing assignments. It would be great if we could set a cut off deadline before finals week.

The Stability of the First-Year Writing Program

A set curriculum of four assignments makes the FYWP quite stable, in that Writing Center tutors expect that same assignment from many students. In his book describing course-based tutoring (CBT), *Beyond Dichotomy: Synergizing Writing Center and Classroom Pedagogies* (2015), Steven J. Corbett noted that:

the task of assignment translation can take a different turn when tutors have insider knowledge of teacher expectations. The affective or motivational dimension, often so important in tutoring or in the classroom

(especially nonmainstream settings), can either be strengthened or diminished in CBT. And the question of tutor authority, whether more “tutorly” or “teacherly” approaches make for better one-on-one or small-group interactions, begins to branch into ever-winding streams of qualification. (p. 15)

In our urban setting, insider knowledge of assignments and instructors is crucial for establishing a good relationship with students and efficiency in tutorials.

Students who test into remedial writing (English 100) have the exact same syllabus as students in non-remedial, first-year writing courses (English 101). Currently, the texts for this course include *Readings from Writings* by Stephen Wilhoit (2011) and the reader created by the FYWP Director and a committee of faculty members from the program. The reader offers many short essays on multiple topics (e.g., gentrification, sports, education, gender). The four assignments include a summary, a critique, a rhetorical analysis, and an argumentative paper that includes a counterargument.

Starfish and Academic Advising

The academic student tracking software package, Starfish (2016), has been a key tool in helping academic support professionals and instructors track student appointments in order to target students having difficulties and encourage those doing well: students receive a red flag in the first case and a green kudos check in the second. Undergraduate students schedule appointments online using Starfish. Advisors and instructors see the record of student attendance at meetings with advisors or with tutors in the Tutoring and Academic Success Center and the Writing Center. Academic Advising has instituted success coaching as well, a special program that offers students having difficulties a specific coach to map out strategies designed for their needs. When an instructor places a flag of concern on a student’s record, the advisor is alerted, and a meeting is called to resolve the issue. Instructors are sent a note when the issue is resolved (e.g., poor attendance). This careful monitoring of student behavior has yielded much success; our university won the 2015 Excellence and Innovation Award for Student Success and College

Completion from the American Association of State Colleges and Universities. Retention rates improved by 17 percent since 2002, and graduation rates by 49 percent (AASCU, 2015). When so many units of support work together for student success, they contribute to these rates.

Conclusion

This study used Starfish data from fall 2013 through spring 2016 to examine the pass rates of remedial writers as they related to the number of Writing Center tutorials they attended. We cannot draw any conclusions or causations from these correlations, yet the consistent pattern points to an analysis that includes the linking of assignments and the quiet collaboration among the many groups at this university that work toward student success.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Table 1

Pass Rates for English 100 Students without Withdrawals or Never Attended

PASS RATES	8+ tutorials	7-1 tutorials	0 tutorials	N=students
Spr 2013	100%	78%	34%	205
Fall 2013	95%	76%	47%	480
Spr 2014	90%	60%	32%	207
Fall 2014	100%	83%	57%	441
Spr 2015	95%	73.9%	34.1%	196
Fall 2015	95.5%	84.4%	42.9%	452
Spr 2016	94%	67%	29%	209
Fall 2016	100%	87%	62%	448

Appendix B

English 100 Assignment-Linked Tutorials and Workshops

Workshop Number	Date	Topic	Comments	Tutor Initials
1		MBTI		
2		Reading		
3		Grammar Highlights		

Tutorial Number	Date	Topic (Ideal— planning welcome too)	Comments	Tutor Initials
1		1 st version Summary		
2		2 nd version Summary		

3		1 st version Critique		
4		2 nd version Critique		
5		1 st version Rhetorical Analysis		
6		2 nd version Rhetorical Analysis		
7		1 st version Argument		
8		2 nd version Argument		