

# Assessing Rhetorically: Evidence of Student Progress in Small-Group Writing Tutorials

ANNE ERNEST, PATRICK JOHNSON, DIANE KELLY-RILEY  
WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY

*Author Note: Patrick Johnson is now at Fred Meijer Center for Writing and Michigan Authors, Grand Valley State University.*

## Abstract

***A year-long exploratory project examined how well students could effectively respond to a piece of first-year writing using an articulated framework—Assignment, Focus, Organization, Support, and Proofreading (AFOSP). The students in these small-group writing tutorials received peer-facilitated support while they were enrolled in first-year composition. Results from a one-way repeated measures ANOVA showed statistically significant gains in students' abilities to respond to writing using the framework. The findings suggest that teaching students to use such a framework can improve their ability to critically assess writing.***

This exploratory study examines students' experiences in small-group, credit-bearing writing tutorials in an attempt to identify ways to articulate empirical outcomes from the facilitated writing group experience. Like many university writing centers, the Writing Center at Washington State University (WSU) has struggled to articulate quantifiable outcomes for its tutorial programs. The Writing Center views the work done in our small-group tutorials as important and necessary, but most of the assessment work has been collected qualitatively through student reflective papers in narrative form at mid-semester and at the end of the semester. For many years, assessment based on students' observations indicating increased confidence, acquisition of new skills, and a clearer understanding of effective peer reviews seemed sufficient. However, this study came forward as part of a desire to use objective measures for improving understanding of what students took away from the course.

Exploring tutorial outcomes through quantitative measures was daunting because these researchers had not previously examined what students learn from the small-group tutorial experience using empirical methods. Like other universities who face the onslaught of accreditation and accountability demands handed down from central administration, legislators and the public, these researchers were motivated to look for ways to verify students

learned over the course of a semester in the small-group writing tutorial. Concerns about what might be uncovered from such a study and what such implications would hold for the writing program were allayed by the work of Haswell (2005), Lerner (1997, 2003) and Johaneck (2000) who advocate for the use of empirically based research methods in composition studies. All feel such research illuminates knowledge and helps construct our discipline in important and crucial ways.

Kail and Trimbur (1987) provide notable examples of key research into Writing Center outcomes when they outlined the theoretical differences between the two major types of tutorial offerings. They drew clear distinctions between tutorials that operate within the hierarchy of the institution—like the Brown Writing Fellows program—(Haring-Smith, 1986) and tutorials that operate separately from the curriculum and support student agency and development. Grego and Thompson (1996, 2008) have also theorized small, group tutorial programs and advocate a separate “ThirdSpace” that prioritizes student agency outside of the traditional classroom setting. To date, however, there are few examples documenting empirical outcomes from such small-group writing tutorials. Kail, Gillespie and Hughes (2010) detail outcomes for tutors who have worked in Writing Centers. Diederich and Schroeder (2008) document promising outcomes of structured tutorials for students who repeated first-year writing and who took a structured writing tutorial concurrently. Likewise, High and Damron (2009a, 2009b) examine gains made in student’s writing and critical thinking abilities in engineering courses connected to concurrent, small-group tutorials. None of these studies, however, have examined the merits or outcomes from the tutorial as an independent entity. This study uses quantitative methods to see what students learn from the small-group writing tutorial experience.

## **Background**

### *History and Overview of English 102*

WSU’s small-group, credit-bearing tutorial program began in the early 1990’s as part of the WSU Writing Program. The program explored outcomes from this freshman-level, small-group, credit-bearing tutorial program, English 102. Unlike many universities, the WSU Writing Program is separate from the English Department. At WSU, the Writing Program combines university-wide instructional support for students through the Writing Center, diagnostic assessment of student writing through the Writing Assessment Program, and support for faculty through the Writing in the Disciplines efforts, and it is housed in the University College. The English Department, on the other hand, operates as a traditional academic department—within the College of Liberal Arts— that offers courses and degrees. The English department is responsible for teaching first-year and other composition, creative writing, technical writing, and literature courses.

While English 102 relies on the first-year writing course to provide students with writing assignments with which the group can work in the tutorial, the Writing Program has separate aims from the English department and first-year writing curriculum. Three purposes are articulated for English 102: 1) help students develop the skills needed to effectively recognize and respond to strengths and weaknesses in writing, 2) give students the opportunity to learn how to give and accept critical feedback on writing, and 3) encourage

students to participate in an atmosphere of effective peer collaboration. The aims of English 102 are complimentary to the first-year composition curriculum, but are independent of it.

The small-group writing tutorials offered at WSU represent a unique hybrid of writing center theory. On the one hand, the tutorials exist as regular courses within the undergraduate curriculum and are identified to complement the work of the first-year writing course. The tutorial sections are scheduled with regular course times and meeting places. The small-group tutorial provides institutionally required support for writers based on a locally developed writing assessment examination. Based on the results of the WSU Writing Placement Exam, some students are required to take the tutorial, but many students opt to enroll in this course out of a desire for a structured tutorial experience.

On the other hand, the small-group tutorials are facilitated by a peer tutor and operate from student-centered writing center practices. Similar to Grego and Thompson (1996), our tutorial course was established specifically not to be a “hand-maiden” to other disciplines, but rather to exist independent of the curriculum and to operate as a ThirdSpace (Grego and Thompson, 2008). The tutorial operates as a peer-facilitated small-group in which the interactions are modeled upon the work of Bruffee (1984) and Kail and Trimbur (1987) ushering students into the type of disciplinary conversations they will encounter. Unlike the Writing Fellows program (Haring-Smith, 1986), the tutors are neither agents of the instructors nor the institutional hierarchy, but, instead, they are there to help clarify a framework through which students can assess the rhetorical aspects of their writing and the writing of others (Huot, 2002) going beyond grammatical concerns.

#### *Toward rhetorical assessment*

The focus of this study is to explore the interaction of the students enrolled in the small-group tutorial and the ways they respond to student writing to investigate the possibilities of articulating discernable outcomes. WSU’s English 102 assumes students can be trained to use the vocabulary and insight of writing tutors to develop their own writing as well as the writing of others by providing feedback through a common framework. Bruffee (1984) and Kail and Trimbur (1987) argue for the importance of providing instructional settings free from traditionally hierarchal relationships, the pressure of instructor expectations, and a focus on grades. Their work argues for the importance of peers mentoring other students into the disciplinary conversations of the university. Kail and Trimbur assert these spaces needed to be separate from the regular curriculum and that a writing center would serve as this space. They questioned whether or not such a relationship could exist within the curriculum, arguing that a tutor situated within an actual writing course only serves as an agent of the instructor (as in the Brown Tutor Fellows model) and does not represent a free exchange of ideas idealized by Bruffee and peer learning advocates.

English 102 uses student-centered models to mentor undergraduates into the disciplinary conversations with the guidance of a peer tutor (Bruffee, 1984; Kail and Trimbur, 1987). The relationship is intentionally equal and imports the student-to-student interaction into a classroom setting. This

study's small-group tutorials allow students to discuss topics and self-assess their own writing in a space largely free from the hierarchical systems set up in their first-year composition classrooms. The framework of this study appears unique; it is rooted in the practices of rhetorical assessment articulated by Huot (2002). Huot argues:

. . . the discourses of assessment, grading, and testing have often overemphasized the importance of correctness, while at the same time ignoring the importance of rhetorical features. Certainly, most writing teachers see the need for instruction and emphasis on both grammatical and rhetorical aspects of writing. However, what we assess, grade, or test ultimately determines what we value. It is not surprising, then, that most student revision centers on correctness, since the value of correct writing has been emphasized over and over again in various assessment, testing, and grading contexts. We need to recognize that before students can learn to revise rhetorically, they need to assess rhetorically (p.170).

In English 102, tutors are advocates and mentors for the students, not "extension[s] of the faculty" (Kail and Trimbur, 1987, p. 208). The tutorials are not in service to the composition courses, encourage collaboration among writers, and give students tools to measure their writing's effectiveness independent of their instructors' grades and rubrics. The model disrupts traditional power dynamics and beliefs about the ownership and authority of knowledge, and "asks students to rely on themselves, to learn on their own in the absence of faculty authority figures or their surrogates. They must also learn to free themselves from their dependence on the faculty continually measuring and certifying their learning" (Kail and Trimbur, p. 207).

English 102 provides a regularly scheduled forum for students to meet and discuss their writing and is different from the conference/consultation model often used by first-year writing instructors or a typical tutorial session in a writing center. Kail and Trimbur assert "students have always banded together informally, in rap sessions and study groups, to deal with the intellectual demands of their experience as undergraduates. Collaborative learning, in this respect, is an effort by educators to mobilize the power of peer influence toward the intellectual activity of co-learning" (Kail and Trimbur, 1987, p. 207). By combining students' natural desire to discuss with peers and the formality of a regularly scheduled meeting, English 102 offers the philosophy of a writing center tutorial adapted to suit programmatic goals of collaborative learning.

To guide this interaction, WSU's Writing Center developed a framework representing a hierarchy of values used to guide tutors in their response to student writing (Appendix A). This framework, which has been used for nearly twenty years, includes the extent to which the writer attends to the course Assignment, provides appropriate Focus, adheres to a relevant Organization, integrates Support and evidence into the writing, and utilizes Proofreading strategies. The order deliberately prioritizes global issues of the writing task over the local issues of grammar and syntax. This framework:

Assignment, Focus, Organization, Support, and Proofreading (AFOSP) is used in the individual peer-to-peer tutorials as well as the small-group writing tutorials.

In an individual tutorial session within the Writing Center, a tutor talks with a writer and checks to see if the piece of writing follows the requirements of the assignment. Then, as a team, they see if the essay sets a clear context for the development of the writer's main point and supporting evidence. In addition to context, the "Focus" section concentrates on the writer's thesis statement or sentence that drives the main point of the writing. Next, students check to see if the writing demonstrates a logical progression of ideas, that transitions are present and instrumental to the understanding of ideas, and finally that the piece of writing has a recognizable beginning, middle, and end. Then they look at the piece of writing to see if the writer's assertions are backed up with logical arguments, personal anecdotes, and, when appropriate or required, by research which is correctly documented. Finally, the tutor and the student examine punctuation, spelling, syntax, and other sentence-level issues, and if necessary, patterns of error are identified.

The AFOSP framework is also used in the small-group writing tutorials, but the tutor operates in a slightly different way. Rather than serving as the individual consultant on each student's piece of writing, the tutor trains all of the students in the small-group tutorial to learn the language of the AFOSP framework and then to apply the criteria to other students' writing. At the beginning of the semester, the tutor teaches the framework and models its use. With each meeting, students take more control of the group and interact with each other instead of relying on the tutor to apply the framework to their writing. Ideally, as students practice peer review within their small-group, they form trust in each other, gain confidence in their reviewing skills, ask questions to each other, and rely less on the tutor or group facilitator.

Students should be instrumental in their own growth as writers. Richard Straub notes "with remarkable consistency, the recent scholarship on response has urged us to reject styles that take control over student texts and encouraged us instead to adopt styles that allow students to retain greater responsibility over their writing" (1996, p. 223). The approach of encouraging student agency ties into both writing center practice as well as instructional assessment. Student investment is an essential determinate in the work they produce and their likelihood to examine and change their own writing process. Student ownership of this process is augmented through collaborative learning. "The major characteristics of a studio in these different contexts are that learners are producing work, of which they take ownership, and that they work both individually and collaboratively in some way" (Grego and Thompson, 2008, p. 7). Providing students with the language of AFOSP grants them agency to use evaluative criteria in examining their own work. Instead of relying on instructors to provide the sole or primary feedback for a student's writing, English 102 students are asked to evaluate and analyze their own work and the work of their peers.

Some teachers or administrators might be nervous about the prospect of peers taking up the role of providing what Huot (2002) describes as "instructive evaluation...[which] is tied to the act of learning a specific task

while participating in a particular literacy event (p. 170). Huot argues two key features of instructive evaluation exist: 1) assessment is a common feature of any literate activity, whether reading or writing, authors and audiences are evaluating and categorizing information as they interact with it, and 2) the ability to assess quality is an essential component of any interaction (p. 165). However, Huot avoids conflating grading—as a means of evaluating or testing—and assessment—as a strategy to examine the application of successful and unsuccessful techniques. “The type of judgment we know as grading has little relationship to the type of evaluation writers constantly make in the drafting of a particular piece of writing...Giving students an A or even a B, even when we suggest revision, probably doesn’t encourage them to revise, because the grade itself carries more weight as an evaluation than what we can say about the need to revise” (p. 167).

The separation of grading and assessment is what allows students to focus on peer feedback rather than a subjective—and final—label of quality in English 102. Both peers and tutors are instructed not to discuss grades in English 102 and focus only on the writing. English 102 creates an environment—separate from the first-year writing course and the instructor—where grades and instructor expectations are absent and are replaced by a focus on rhetorical assessment and the students’ goals for their writing.

As Lerner (1997, 2003) has noted, not a great deal of empirical scholarship is available related to writing center outcomes. Haswell (2005) observed—more generally for composition studies—that a study that fails to conduct replicable, aggregable, data-driven studies does so at its own peril. Other studies for outcomes from structured tutorial experiences show promise. This study is guided by the desire to find out if there are discernable outcomes that extend the peer-centered philosophy into a course within the regular institutional curriculum.

### *Description of the study*

Demonstrating how rhetorical assessment can benefit students is only half the battle. Without a means to know if or how such a system works, this process falls victim to common writing center practice which avoids quantifying our work using quantitative measures. Lerner (2003) asserts very few published statistical studies of writing center effects exist (p. 61). While anecdotal evidence provides comfort that the process has benefits, convincing others and ourselves those benefits can be replicated requires more data. Traditionally, empirically driven research and Writing Center studies have avoided crossing paths. As White (1994) observes:

The typical evaluation of writing programs (including writing projects, writing-across-the-curriculum programs, research and grant designs, in-service training seminars, and regular instructional programs) usually fails to obtain statistically meaningful results. This failure should not be taken to mean that writing programs are failures. The inability to get results ought, in general, to be seen as a conceptual failure, deriving, in part, from a failure to understand the state of the art in the measurement of writing ability (p. 248).

In our Writing Center, there is ample anecdotal evidence students are satisfied with their experience in the Writing Center, but it has never been systematically or empirically examined whether or not students gain anything from their experience in the small-group tutorials. Huot (2002) asserts,

we need to recognize that before students can learn to revise rhetorically, they need to assess rhetorically. Certainly much current writing instruction focuses on rhetorical concepts, but there is no clear evidence that our assessment of student writing focuses on these same criteria (p. 170).

This research project took this type of observation to heart and set out to answer whether students learn anything measurable about responding to each other's writing in a small-group, credit-bearing writing tutorial using the AFOSP framework representing the researchers hierarchy of values.

### **Method**

In the spring of 2008, an exploratory research study was set up to examine whether or not students were able to learn how to apply the AFOSP framework to other students' writing. This framework was developed by the WSU Writing Program. This study sought to answer the following questions:

1. Do students' learn anything measurable about responding to each other's writing in a small-group, credit-bearing writing tutorial using a course framework that includes the following criteria— understanding of Assigned task, Focus, Organization, Support and Proofreading (AFOSP)
2. Is there a difference between the gains made in homogenous group tutorials comprised of students from the same section of first-year composition compared to mixed group tutorials comprised of students from a variety of sections of first-year composition?

Students enrolled in English 102 during spring semester 2008 were asked to participate in this study. There were 411 total participants. The design of the study examined students' responses to a piece of writing at the beginning of the semester and at the end of the semester, which required looking at paired samples. Of the 411 students enrolled in English 102, 72 completed the beginning and end of semester responses for this study, which meant there were 72 pairs of students' responses to a similar paper. All student participants signed an Institutional Review Board approved consent form for participation in this study.

#### *Data Collection*

The study explored two distinct issues: 1) potential outcomes from small-group, peer-review sessions and 2) the best method to facilitate this peer review. The first phase looked at students' abilities to respond to each other's writing using the AFOSP framework to see if gains were achieved from the beginning of the semester to the end of the semester; the second phase examined whether a difference in gains is present according to the make-up of the tutorial (homogenous vs. mixed groups). In other words, the

study explored if grouping students in small-group tutorials by similar first-year writing course sections was important or if ensuring the enrollments in the tutorials had students from various first-year writing courses was more important.

During the first week of tutorials during Spring 2008, the English 102 tutors were asked to distribute copies of the paper "The Watering Hole" (Appendix B). "The Watering Hole" was written for an actual freshman composition class by an actual student. The paper, used with permission, contains multiple problems. Tutors gave the students a copy of the paper, which also briefly outlined the writing assignment. Students were instructed to give feedback to help the student revise the paper, and they were asked to write their suggestions on the response sheet (Appendix C). Tutors did not prompt the type of feedback the students should provide for the paper. Students were given ample time during the tutorial to provide written feedback for "The Watering Hole." When the students were finished, they returned their written responses to the tutor, who subsequently returned them to the program administrator.

Nine weeks later, during the final week of the semester, tutors were asked to distribute copies of "The Watering Hole" as well as the response sheets. Students were again instructed to write down revision feedback for the author of "The Watering Hole." Again, students were not instructed or prompted to give any specific type of feedback and they were given ample time to write down their revision suggestions. Materials were returned to the tutor who then returned them to the program administrator for coding. Students responded to the same piece of writing, "The Watering Hole," at the beginning and end of the semester to ensure a uniform comparison of the quality of their feedback.

In the first round of student responses to "The Watering Hole," much of the initial feedback focused solely on grammar, in some cases providing line-by-line editorial changes for the sample piece of writing. For example, student A gave extensive editorial suggestions: "Take out 'be' in line 1. Change 'that' to 'who' in line 2. Change 'Families'" to "Family's." The student focused only on grammatical feedback and provided line-by-line editing for two of "The Watering Hole's" three pages. While a focus on grammar was common for the beginning-of-semester responses, the end of semester responses employed more variety in the types of feedback, in some cases writing AFOSP along the margin of the page to correspond with their feedback. Student A's feedback at the end of the semester still included grammatical concerns, but they were not the sole focus. Student A addressed the major categories of AFOSP with comments like "The paper seems to lack purpose. It fails to answer any of the questions," which directly relates to assignment and focus. Student A also asked questions regarding content and purpose, such as "how does women socializing at the watering hole tie in?" and "Why are you telling us this?" Student A seemed more equipped with a structure and vocabulary for responding to writing that went beyond grammatical concerns. For a comparison of Student A's response at the beginning and end of the semester, please see Appendix D.

There was an adequate amount of time—at least nine weeks—between the first and last data collection points. Students would have been engaged

in a variety of other activities, homework assignments and extra-curricular activities to minimize their recall of “The Watering Hole” thus limiting any type of practice effects. Likewise, the tasks for this project at the beginning and end of the semester were the same—the students were instructed to provide feedback without any particular guidance of the type of feedback they should give. Although all of the students had been in the course for the entire semester, this study sought to verify empirically that the students could learn how to apply the AFOSP framework. For the research project, assigning the same task and same sample paper provided appropriate comparisons.

### *Rating Procedures*

Two separate rating sessions were held to evaluate the quality of students’ feedback to “The Watering Hole.” A group of five Writing Program faculty served as evaluators for this project. Raters were asked to evaluate each revision suggestion using the criteria of the AFOSP framework. The AFOSP Inventory was developed for the raters to collect their evaluations (Appendix E). Each revision suggestion was evaluated based on the quality of the student’s feedback for “The Watering Hole.” Raters were instructed to evaluate the quality of the student’s feedback according to five discrete areas: attending to the assignment, focus, organization, support and proofreading. Raters were asked to decide if a student’s response to a particular area represented a weak, adequate or strong response (Table 1). Raters were also encouraged to use ‘in-between’ scores to best reflect their assessment of the quality of the feedback. If a student did not provide any feedback on a particular area, the rater was asked to mark the box to the left of the Weak box to indicate no response.

Table 1. Example of AFOSP Rating Inventory

Dimension	No response (1)	Weak (2)	(3)	Adequate (4)	(5)	Strong (6)
Assignment						
Focus						
Organization						
Support						
Proofreading						

As a result, the qualitative assessments of the raters could be translated into a six-point scale then used for statistical analysis. This rating methodology was adapted from Condon and Kelly-Riley’s (2004) methodology for rating critical thinking.

A norming session was held before each rating session to review actual samples of students’ responses to ensure that raters were employing similar understandings of the benchmarks for the rating scale. Likewise, the weak-strong benchmarks were emphasized as needing to be defined within the context of the type of feedback a freshman could provide. The essays were coded so the raters did not know whether the responses had been written early or late in the semester. As a result, the 72 student participants provided feedback suggestions at the beginning and end of the semester to

"The Watering Hole," so a total of 144 student responses were evaluated.

Stemler's (2004) approach to estimate reliability was followed. Stemler argues that "the general practice of describing interrater reliability as a single, unified concept is at best imprecise, and at worst potentially misleading." Recognizing the limitations in simply examining inter-rater agreement, resulted in structuring the study to focus, instead, on how well the raters measured the construct of AFOSP and examined the consistency estimates. Stemler states "consistency estimates of interrater reliability are based upon the assumption that it is not really necessary for two judges to share a common meaning of the rating scale, so long as each judge is consistent in classifying the phenomenon according to his or her own definition of the scale." The first rating session examined the overall quality of students' responses on the discrete AFOSP dimensions. This analysis employed a one-way repeated measures ANOVA. This analysis had a Cronbach's Alpha of .7668 indicating very good reliability. The second rating session examined the difference in student performance by group composition. This data was analyzed using an independent samples t-test. This analysis had a Cronbach's Alpha of .7873, again suggesting very good reliability.

Student grades intentionally were not chosen as a measure for this study. While Lerner's studies (1997, 2003) both use grades as a measure of Writing Center effectiveness, student grades were avoided as a measure for several reasons. First, the study focuses on small-group, peer-facilitated writing groups, which have received little to no research attention compared to research of Writing Center effectiveness. Actual grades are not assigned in the tutorial, as the course is Pass or Fail. Second, while grades may be a more commonly appreciated outcome, they are often inconsistent across sections of courses. At WSU, over 50 sections of first-year writing are scheduled with at least 26 students enrolled in each section. With a program this large, variations will exist between student experiences, for peer review, instructional feedback, and so on. In addition, the grades in first-year writing are reflections of many variables within a course; therefore, extrapolating how much the small-group tutorial plays in a student's final grade is difficult. Lastly, because our Writing Center has a policy of not discussing grades, our choice to avoid them as an outcome is consistent with our pedagogy and practice.

## Results

First, the exploratory study looked at whether or not students improved in their ability to respond to each other's writing. A one-way repeated-measures, ANOVA, was used to examine 72 students' abilities to apply the AFOSP framework to a piece of writing. Students' AFOSP scores were averaged together at the beginning of the semester for AFOSP-A and again at the end of the semester for AFOSP-B. Intentionally, the analysis for the discrete criteria areas of AFOSP was not run in order to see how well students used the framework as a whole (as opposed to the individual parts). This decision was to prevent any appearance of data mining for the best possible outcome, so our analysis relied solely on the use of the entire framework. Students' AFOSP scores showed statistically significant gains in their abilities to respond to others' writing using the AFOSP framework from the beginning of the semester to the end of the semester.

Table 1: Analysis of Variance for Differences in AFOSP Application

Source	df	F	eta Squared	P
	Within subjects			
AFOSP Ax	1	27.381**	.278	.99
AFOSP B				
	71	(.994)		
A x B within group error				

Note. Value enclosed in parentheses represents mean square errors. \*\* $p < .01$

A one-way repeated measure ANOVA was run to see if there was a difference in students' abilities to apply the AFOSP framework at the beginning and end of the semester in a small-group, credit-bearing writing tutorial: English 102. An analysis of variance showed that the effect of teaching students to apply AFOSP was significant,  $F(1, 71) = 27.381$ ,  $p = .05$  such that the beginning AFOSP score was lower ( $M = 2.26$ ,  $SD = .92$ ) than the end of the semester AFOSP score ( $M = 3.13$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ ). The effect size was large at .76, and the observed power was .99. The strength of these gains was quite strong.

Second, a separate exploratory study was conducted to see if there were differences in students' performances based on the makeup of the tutorial group. This study compared homogenous groups, in which students from the same sections of the first-year writing course were in the same small-group tutorial, to mixed groups in which students in the tutorial group were from a variety of first-year composition sections. An independent t-test was conducted between the performances of homogenous groups and the mixed groups. For the homogenous groups,  $n = 63$  ( $M = 2.30$ ,  $SD = .94$ ); for the mixed groups,  $n = 71$  ( $M = 2.59$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ). No significant difference between the tutorial group type and students' ability to apply the AFOSP framework  $F(132) = 4.04$ ,  $p = .120$  was found. This meant that the make-up of the groups did not affect the students' performances. This was an important finding because this information streamlined the WSU registration practices which had been very labor intensive.

A few limitations appeared in this study. First, this study is exploratory. Therefore, the researchers caution readers against using these findings as strong generalizable claims for in other Writing Center settings. The findings from this study for this center were compelling enough to share the design and the outcomes for providing an opportunity for others to explore the issues in wider writing center contexts.

Additionally, this is a quasi-experimental study conducted within the constraints of an active program. As Campbell and Stanley (1963) observe, "there are many natural social settings in which the research person can introduce something like experimental design into his scheduling of data collection procedures...even though he lacks the full control over the scheduling of experimental stimuli" (p. 34). To that end, several limitations were found in the interpretation of the findings. First, the results tended to be a bit of "a chicken and egg predicament" because true experimental

design dictates a precise and validated definition of the treatment students receive as the instructional model for the small-group writing tutorial. However, the dynamic and social nature of an actual small-group writing tutorial program makes it difficult to extensively chronicle and define the instructional treatment. Suffice to say, the AFOSP framework was a common tool for all tutors who served as facilitators in the WSU Writing Center and it was a reasonable framework to conduct this exploratory investigation. It is not, however, feasible to account for the variety of ways in which tutors might present the AFOSP framework. Again, as in most Writing Center settings, differing approaches are encouraged and it is virtually impossible to capture a precise definition of how the AFOSP framework may have been presented to the various groups. A dissertation length study could address the precision of the facilitation received in small-group writing tutorials.

Second, limitations exist in the test study population. The WSU Pullman campus has a fairly homogeneous population who would enroll in English 102. Most of the subjects at WSU institution are traditional 18-24- year-olds who attend a residential campus. Predominantly, the student population at WSU comes from white, middle-class backgrounds. Furthermore, this study did not include multilingual writers because most multilingual writers take a different first-year writing course than native speakers of English.

Finally, it was necessary to give students the same piece of writing to respond to at the beginning and end of the semester in order to have what Campbell and Stanley (1963) call a "time series quasi-experimental design." Such a design opens the study up to potential problems with history or the interaction of our assessment with other variables since the study takes place in a setting that cannot be controlled. But, given the context of the exploratory study, having students examine the same piece of writing with nine weeks in between was a reasonable way to retain some of the issues of experimental control that was forfeited with the dynamic setting of a small-group undergraduate writing tutorial. Given these limitations, the findings provided hopeful directions that might open up further lines of inquiry.

### **Discussion**

The exploratory studies found students in small-group facilitated tutorials were able to effectively provide guided feedback for writing improvement. According to the analysis, students made statistically significant gains in the ability to respond to each others' writing through the AFOSP framework. These gains are strong in both effect size and power. Such gains speak to Huot's contention that students need to be able to assess rhetorically before they can revise their own writing, and given the opportunity, students can respond to each other's writing in meaningful ways. Such findings illustrate the value of having students work in peer facilitated small-group writing tutorials without the pressure of the instructor or grades, and such an interaction has meaningful instructional and quantifiable outcomes.

Likewise, the results also suggest the student make-up of the group does not affect their ability to effectively provide feedback to each other. For us, this was an important finding. The operating assumption that students needed to be in the same tutorial and first-year composition course since English 102 was conceived nearly 20 years ago. Trying to make this

configuration work resulted in huge amounts of administrative effort and ran counter to institutional procedures and infrastructure. The findings from this study helped the researchers to decide to significantly streamline the approach to grouping students.

This study embraces the concept of necessary peer-facilitated spaces that allow students to mentor each other while also supporting a more balanced power structure — tutors are student peers. The findings from this study suggest a course, facilitated by peer tutors, is possible within the curriculum—a separate space, or ThirdSpace in Grego and Thompson’s terminology—that can produce meaningful student learning outcomes.

Additionally, this study shows Writing Center administrators and personnel empirical studies can be part of writing scholarship. The informal anecdotal feedback model has been an intrinsic piece of Writing Center identity and such modes of inquiry are central to the way Writing Centers view themselves. However, in the modern university’s budget climate, Writing Centers may exist in more dangerous territory facing cuts or outright elimination because of the tendency to stay away from easily quantifiable measures or outcomes. Studies like this can be used as a model for other Writing Centers to examine and communicate value based on data to university officials. Likewise, such studies help us define and articulate outcomes of writing center work in ways that Haswell (2005) deems essential to the discipline of composition studies. Such empirical forays help validate the theoretical suppositions often held about writing center theory and practice. These inquiries help us determine the effectiveness of our face-to-face practice with students.

This study examined students’ abilities to provide effective feedback to one another based on the rhetorical assessment vocabulary of our hierarchy of values framework, AFOSP. The intended outcome of this study was to demonstrate teaching first-year writing students a vocabulary based on rhetorical assessment, instructive feedback, and writing center pedagogy would lead to better evaluation of the work of their peers. While the results of this exploratory study support this outcome, the larger implications of how these effects translate to a student’s success in first-year writing or their development as students over their college career remain to be explored.

## References

- Bruffee, K. (1984). Collaborative learning and the ‘conversation of mankind’. *College English*, (7), 635-52.
- Campbell, D. T. & Stanely, J.C. (1963). *Experimental and quasi-experimental designs for research*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Condon, W. & Kelly-Riley, D. (2004). Assessing and teaching what we value: The relationship between college-level writing and critical thinking abilities. *Assessing Writing*, 9(1), 56-75.
- Diederich, N. A. & Schroeder, S. J. (2008). Effect of writing centers and targeted pairings on students repeating first-year composition. *Learning Assistance Review*, 13(2), 17-26.

- Grego, R. & Thompson, N. (1996). Repositioning remediation: Renegotiating composition's work in the academy. *College Composition and Communication*, 47(1), 62-84.
- Grego, R. & Thompson, N. (2008). *Teaching/writing in Thirdspaces: The studio approach*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Haring-Smith, T. (1986). Brown University. In P. Connolly & T. Vilardi (Eds.), *New methods in college writing programs: Theories in practice*. New York, NY: Modern Language Association.
- Haswell, R.H. (2005). NCTE/CCCC's recent war on scholarship. *Written Communication*, 22 (2), 198-223.
- High, K. & Damron, R. (2009a). Paired-course and peer-tutoring impact on critical thinking and writing skills of first-year engineering students. *American Society for Engineering Education*.
- High, K & Damron, R. (2009b). Writing to learn: The effect of peer tutoring on critical thinking and writing skills of first-year engineering students. *American Society for Engineering Education*.
- Huot, B. (2002). Toward a New Discourse of Assessment for the College Writing Classroom. *College English*, 65(2), 163-80.
- Johanek, C. (2000). *Composing research: A contextualist paradigm for rhetoric and composition*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press.
- Kail, H., Gillespie, P, & Hughes, B. (2010). What they take with them: Findings from the Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project." *The Writing Center Journal* 30(2), 12-46.
- Kail, H. & Trimbur, J. (1987).The politics of peer tutoring. *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 11, 1-2.
- Lerner, N. (1997).Counting beans and making beans count. *Writing Lab Newsletter*, 22(1), 1-4.
- Lerner, N. (2003). Writing center assessment: Searching for the 'proof' of our effectiveness. In M. Pemberton & J. Kinkead (Eds.), *The center will hold: Critical perspectives on writing center scholarship* (pp. 58-73). Logan, UT: Utah State University Press.
- Stemler, S. E. (2004). A comparison of consensus, consistency, and measurement approaches to estimating interrater reliability. *Practical Assessment, Research & Evaluation*, 9(4). Retrieved February 7, 2009 ,from <http://PAREonline.net/getvn.asp?v=9&n=4>.
- Straub, R. (1996). The concept of control in teacher response: defining varieties of "directive" and "facilitative" commentary. *College Composition and Communication*, 47(2), 223-51.
- White, E. M. (1994). *Teaching and assessing writing*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

**Appendix A****WSU Writing Program Writing Assessment Criteria**

Assessment Criteria: The following criteria are used to assess both the Writing Placement Exam and the junior Writing Portfolio.

**Assignment**

Your assignment attends to the instructions set forth by the instructor.

**Focus**

Your writing demonstrates an understanding of:

- the assignment
- essay writing conventions:
  - The essay sets a clear context for the development of your main point and supporting evidence.
  - The essay uses a vocabulary consistent with your context and which demonstrates an interest in the topic.
    - The essay provides reader information which is accessible or recognizable to the reader and relevant to your main point.

**Organization**

- Your essay has a recognizable beginning, middle & end.
- The introduction clearly explains your purpose; the body “flows” logically in support of that purpose; the conclusion provides a sense of closure.
- You have chosen the correct format for your writing task.
- You avoid redundancy or unnecessary repetition of ideas and information.

**Support**

- Your assertions are backed up with personal anecdotes, logical arguments, and, when appropriate or required, by research which is correctly documented according to MLA (Modern Language Assoc.), APA (American Psychological Association), or Chicago (footnoting) documentation styles.
- Your research can be confirmed by the reader, if necessary.

**Proofreading**

- Punctuation is correct and appropriate.
- There are no spelling errors.
- Vocabulary (word choice) is appropriate for a university-level audience.
- Subjects and predicates are in agreement; tenses of verbs are correct.
- Pronouns are in agreement with antecedents and consistent with guidelines for non-sexist language.
- Capitalization is appropriate.
- Sentence structure is correct (no run-ons, comma splices, fragments).
- Use of numbers is correct.

## Appendix B "The Watering Hole"

*Used with Permission*

**Assignment:** Write a 3-4 page profile of a location in Pullman. Use observation and interpretation to give the reader some sense of a place.

Name

Instructor's Name

Course Information

Date

### The Watering Hole

Since the beginning of time most people have chosen to be wash their clothes every so often, and for those that haven't I would rather not discuss them in detail. In the past, women have traditionally gone to the local watering hole to wash and dry her families' weekly laundry. This was also when women often took time to socialize and gossip with other women. However, since then the washer and dryer has been invented and people no longer need to do their laundry in a nearby stream instead they go to the Laundromat. In the twenty-first century usually students, travelers, or the less fortunate are the ones who typically use the laundromat. Occasionally the wealthy might be spotted there if the need arises to wash their king size comforter (because it won't fit in their brand new Kenmore).

Since I'm a college student and I'm not able to do my laundry at home any longer, I have chosen to go down to the local laundromat. The idea of this first time experience excited me. I envisioned the typical Laundromat stereotype something you would likely see in a movie: meeting the love of my life, finding my long lost twin, or maybe even finding a winning lottery ticket in they dryer. I doubted I would have such an extreme experience, but was ready for an interesting afternoon (plus I would least get to check out cute college guys and, if nothing else, get two weeks of laundry out of the way).

Before I even reached the laundromat my adventure had already begun. Reaching my car was a challenge the involved struggling with my hands full in trying to open the door and when I looked behind me I realized that my sparkly thong was in the middle of the crosswalk, so I sprinted back, extremely embarrassed, and tucked them into my back pocket.

I then walked a few blocks and entered the stuffy laundromat that smelled of downy fabric softener, and fresh lavender flowers. In the midst of the heat I could barely breath, but luckily I held back my sneezes so that I don't drop any more thongs, or my handful of quarters. I took my quarters and spent two dollars for two tickets, so I was able to wash and dry one load. I threw my clothes along with some soap in the washer, push in the ticket and press start.

I then found a quiet place to sit in the corner and admire the lovely wall décor. The bottom half of the wall is a blue chalk color, while the other half is a light blue with big fluffy clouds. These color were probably purchased in a mass quantity for a cheap price at a paint store going-out-of-business sale. I sit a few feet away from a woman filling out a job application, and I look behind me and see a sign saying "Help Wanted." I think maybe I could work here, but decide I need to get a better feel for the place first. To the other side of me is and a young man doing his mechanical engineering homework and sipping from his Starbuck's coffee cup. For the rest of the afternoon I sit in my plastic lawn chair typing away on my little laptop, constantly peeking over the top to observe the other laundry doers. I keep thinking to myself, "where are the cute guys?" Nothing much interesting is happening and I think, "how am I supposed to write about the ugly blue walls in possibly any more detail?"

The next couple to walk in is carrying large garbage bags of clothing, as if they haven't done their laundry in years. The woman looks to be no older than twenty-five, and the man she is with looks to be well over fifty. They both have wedding rings, so I assume they are married. I sit there staring (like a creep) trying to figure out the relationship of this couple. I come to the conclusion that he is probably a professor that had an affair with one his young students, got fired, is currently unemployed and now living in some cheap college apartment with her. Since he doesn't have a job anymore, he has to embarrass himself at the mall laundromat with the wife that is less than half his age. The couple then begins to separate their laundry by putting them into five different machines. I over hear them arguing that they have to spend so much money on their laundry they say it is the other partners fault that they have so much laundry. Eventually they settled their laundry differences and decided to sit down and read their unusual reading materials.

It perplexes me how any one could possibly study, or read with all the obnoxious dryer and washer sounds. The washer cycle begins with a muffled rush of water and then for the next twenty minutes goes swish, swish over and over. The other annoying sounds come from the old creaky dryer that thud and thump with every turn. I listen and detail these awful sounds as I stare at the old Mickey Mouse clock on the childish blue walls. I wait a few more minutes until my laundry finally finishes. While transferring my laundry from the washer to the dryer, I dread having to stay any longer in order to describe how many pounds of dirt, dust and lint lie under the machines. I think to myself, "this might just be the most boring experience of my life, and that listening to my math lectures sounds fun."

I decide to see what else I can find out about this job that is being advertised, so I ask the woman working at the front desk what one would do if employed here. She tells me that the job consists of helping customers with laundry problems and ironing. After she said "ironing" I didn't even listen to the rest of what she had to say. As much as I acknowledge that I need to be responsible for my own laundry for the rest of my life, I don't think working in a hot small room ironing other people clothes is my ideal job, no matter what I would be paid. I walk back to my old crappy plastic lawn chair and wait another twenty minutes, which feels like eternity, until my clothes are finally dry. I leave my observation post with a story, but not with the promise of a paycheck: the love of my life, my lost twin, or a winning lottery ticket.

**Appendix C**  
**Student Response Sheet**

**YOUR TASK:** Provide feedback on "The Watering Hole" to help guide the author through revisions

Include all of your suggestions for revision on this sheet (DO NOT WRITE ON THE WATERING HOLE PAPER). Use the back of this sheet if necessary. Your comments do not have to be complete sentences.

**WATERING HOLE ASSIGNMENT:** Profile a cultural location.

Recreate a time and place for the reader using specific details and examples. Include a strong thesis that addresses one or all of the following questions.

- 1) What does the chosen location say about our culture and/or values?
- 2) What informs your reading of this location?
- 3) How might people with other perspectives view your location differently from you?

REVISION FEEDBACK

**Appendix D**  
**Sample student feedback**

Student A – beginning of semester feedback to "The Watering Hole"

Page 1

- Take out 'be' in line 1.
- Change 'that' to 'who' in line 2.
- Change 'Families' to 'Family's'.
- 'In the past' is past & 'have' & 'gone' are present, change to 'went'
- 'I' between stream & instead in line 6
- Move 'usually' in line 6 to between 'are' & 'the' in line 7.
- Lowercase 'laundromat' in line 6.
- Separate 'if the need arises' with commas
- Lowercase laundromat line 12
- Insert 'as' between 'stereotype' & 'something' line 12.
- Take out 'likely' line 12.
- ":" not ":" line 12.
- Insert 'at' between 'would' & 'least' line 15
- Change 1<sup>st</sup> sentence in line 17 to 'My adventure began before I reached the laundromat'
- 'The' to 'that' line 18
- Separate 'with my hands full' with commas line 18
- Change 'in' to 'and' line 18
- Take out 'and' and end sentence with 'door.' 'When starts new sentence line 18

Page 2

- Change 'them' to 'it' line 2.
- Take out comma after 'softener' line 4.
- Take out comma after 'things' line 5.
- Take out 'took my quarters and' line 6, take out comma after 'tickets,' & take out 'so I was able' line 6.
- Change 'push' to 'pushed' line 7 & 'press' to 'pressed.'
- Change 'color' to 'colors' line 10.
- Comma after 'quantity' & 'price' line 11.
- Change 'sit' to 'sat' line 12
- Change 'look' to 'looked' line 13.
- Change 'think maybe' to 'thought' line 13.
- Change 'decide' to 'decided' line 14.
- Change 'need' to 'needed' line 14.
- 'Is' to 'was' line 14.
- 'Sit' to 'sat' line 16.
- 'keep' to 'kept' line 17.
- 'Is' to 'was' & 'think' to 'thought' line 18.
- 'Is' to 'was' line 20 'haven't' to 'hadn't'
- 'Looks' to 'looked' line 21.
- 'Is' to 'was,' 'looks' to 'looked' line 22.
- 'Have' to 'had' 'assumed' to 'assumed' 'are' to 'were' line 22.
- 'Sit' to 'sat' 'come' to 'came' line 23.

Student A – end of semester feedback to "The Watering Hole"

- Chose a better 1<sup>st</sup> sentence that grabs the reader.
- How does women socializing at the watering hold tie in?
- Thesis? Why do we care that people now use the Laundromat? Why are you telling us this?
- Avoid all the parenthesis
- You said you carried the stuff to your car, then walked there...?
- Too much detail about the wall, off-topic.
- Restructure sentences and take out " " around your thoughts.
- The paper seems to lack purpose. It fails to answer any of the questions. You just told a story about your trip to the Laundromat.
- You said how you view the Laundromat, how would others view it? (Question 3)
- There is a lot of irrelevant information. The first paragraph does not fit with the rest of the paper.
- Work on conventions & grammar: spelling & typos, same verb tense, tense confusion (past & present tense, singular & plural), sentence structure, capitalization, punctuation, conventions.

**Appendix E**

**AFOSP Inventory Scoring Sheet  
WSU Writing Program**

Mark the box that indicates the quality of the student’s response to “The Watering Hole” for each dimension:

**WSU ID Number:**

**Color of Check Mark:**

Dimension		Weak		Adequate		Strong
Assignment						
Focus						
Organization						
Support						
Proofreading						

**WSU ID Number:**

**Color of Check Mark:**

Dimension		Weak		Adequate		Strong
Assignment						
Focus						
Organization						
Support						
Proofreading						

**WSU ID Number:**

**Color of Check Mark:**

Dimension		Weak		Adequate		Strong
Assignment						
Focus						
Organization						
Support						
Proofreading						