

THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E T T E R

Volume 39, Number 1-2

Promoting the exchange of voices and ideas in one-to-one teaching of writing

Sept./Oct. 2014

– FROM THE EDITOR –

As *WLN* launches its 39th volume, we look forward to another year of including your articles, book reviews, announcements, and the calendar of writing center conferences. We are particularly pleased that Kim Ballard is now an Associate Editor, working with Janet Auten, our other Associate Editor. Our Development Editor, Alan Benson, and Associate Development Editor, Lee Ann Glowzinski, are working on some new projects we hope to announce soon. Stay tuned! For those interested in the rate of articles accepted for publication in *WLN*, that information is now included in the Submissions section of our website, along with the names of last year's reviewers, whose dedication to this important professional service is greatly appreciated.

L. Lennie Irvin's article starts this issue by reporting on his study of tutorial effectiveness and finds that students who have three or more tutorials show significant gains in grades, retention, and persistence. Irvin also offers a very useful summary of other studies with similar results. Noting the dearth of scholarship on developing a business writing center, Elizabeth Tomlinson details her review of the existing literature and her findings when she surveyed the faculty whose students would be coming to her center.

For a multi-vocal look at Rebecca Babcock and Terese Thonus's book on evidence-based research, Sherry Wynn Perdue and Sara Littlejohn both offer reviews, each looking at the book from a different perspective. In our Tutor's Column, Elizabeth Busekrus writes about her interest in having writing center tutors interact with writers in a digital setting, to talk and write informally to each other.

◆ Muriel Harris, editor

INSIDE

What a Difference Three Tutoring Sessions Make: Early Reports of Efficacy from a Young Writing Center

◆ L. Lennie Irvin ◆

Page 1



Creating a Space for Business Communication

◆ Elizabeth Tomlinson ◆

Page 6



Review of Researching the Writing Center, by Rebecca Babcock and Terese Thonus

◆ Reviewed by Sherry Wynn Perdue ◆

Page 10

◆ Reviewed by Sara Littlejohn ◆

Page 12



Tutor's Column: "The Writing Space: A Forum for the Technological Age"

◆ Elizabeth Busekrus ◆

Page 14



Calendar for Writing Center Associations

Page 16



WHAT A DIFFERENCE THREE TUTORING SESSIONS MAKE: EARLY REPORTS OF EFFICACY FROM A YOUNG WRITING CENTER

◆ L. Lennie Irvin
San Antonio College
San Antonio, TX

We know tutoring makes a tremendous difference for the writers who use our centers, but how do we show that difference—even prove it—to our key stakeholders (administration, faculty, and clients)? Is there a point at which this difference seems to take hold and manifest itself more strongly? In this data-driven environment, our level of funding, if not survival, depends on the assessment picture we present to our administration—particularly the numbers we present. Neal Lerner labels this numbers assessment “bean counting,” but warns about problems with its validity. As Casey Jones points out, putting together concrete evidence of writing center efficacy is extremely difficult. Instead, Jones contends, we can extrapolate this efficacy more easily from what he calls indirect evidence. Similarly, I believe we can reveal the positive difference we make for students through multiple pieces of evidence, each perhaps indirect and insufficient (even problematic) by itself. However, if the data send a consistent signal, then we can extrapolate from this repeated pulse from multiple sources some conclusions we can reasonably present in our assessment effort.

In this article, I want to share a conclusion my writing center's assessment has repeatedly found: that three

continued on page 2

The *Writing Lab Newsletter*, published bi-monthly, from September to June, is a peer-reviewed publication of the International Writing Centers Association, an NCTE Assembly, and is a member of the NCTE Information Exchange Agreement. ISSN 1040-3779. All Rights and Title reserved unless permission is granted by the *Writing Lab Newsletter*. Material can not be reproduced in any form without express written permission. However, up to 50 copies of an article may be reproduced under fair use policy for educational, non-commercial use in classes or course packets. Proper acknowledgement of title, author, and original publication date in the *Writing Lab Newsletter* should be included.

Editor:

Muriel Harris
(harrism@purdue.edu)

Associate Editor:

Janet Auten
(jauten@american.edu)

Kim Ballard
(kim.ballard@wmich.edu)

Development Editor:

Alan Benson
(bensonat@uwec.edu)

Associate Development Editor:

Lee Ann Glowzenski
(glowzenskil@duq.edu)

Managed and Produced by

TWENTY SIX LLC

1835 E. Hallandale Beach Blvd #178

Hallandale Beach, FL 33009

(866) 556-1743

<www.writinglabnewsletter.org>

support@writinglabnewsletter.org

Subscriptions: The newsletter has no billing procedures but can issue invoices through the website. Yearly payments of \$25 (U.S. \$30 in Canada) by credit card are accepted through the website or sent by check, made payable to the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, to the address above. Prepayment is requested for all subscriptions. For international *WLN* subscriptions, please contact support@writinglabnewsletter.org. For IWCA membership and *WCJ* and *WLN* subscriptions, see <writingcenters.org>.

Manuscripts: Before sending in submissions, please consult the guidelines and suggestions for prospective authors on the *WLN* website. Recommended length for articles is 2500-3000 words, 1500 words for reviews and Tutors' Column essays, in MLA format (including Works Cited). Please send files through the *WLN* website.

tutorial sessions make a substantial difference in “success factors” for our students. These factors include grades, retention (defined as the rate of students who remain enrolled in a class), and persistence (defined as rate of students still enrolled the next semester). While these measures are arguably limited, they are the measures used by our college and state for evaluating academic effectiveness (to the point now where college funding is partially based upon these numbers). This article will chronicle our story and how we have discovered from multiple sources clear signals of the significance of the three-tutorial threshold. These sources include an initial pilot study, the confirmation of this study’s results through five subsequent assessments, and similar research findings from other writing centers. In addition, I will share how this focus on three tutorial sessions has shaped our operations and interaction with faculty.

THE PILOT STUDY WRITING CENTER ASSESSMENT: THE FIRST SIGNAL

The San Antonio College (SAC) Writing Center is a young writing center, having been established in March 2009, after a pilot study in 2006-2007 showed promising results. We are a community college of 22,000 students with a large minority and low-income population and high percentage of first-time-in-college students. Amazingly, we were without a writing center that offered trained, professional tutoring to the entire campus. Our administration’s reticence to fund a writing center was countered by a proposal, in 2006, to conduct a pilot study offering writing center services for a limited number of courses. Soon after beginning the pilot study, our community college district received a grant from the Lumina Foundation’s “Achieving the Dream” program, and we became one of our campus’s assessable “interventions” to make a difference in student success. This grant ended up funding the last three semesters of our five-semester pilot study. My colleague, Ernie Tscalis, directed the pilot study and designed the initial evaluation of its writing center operations. Ernie is sensitive to the “teacher effect” and whether our results are more influenced by the teacher or by our tutoring. He is also keenly aware of the problems of self-selection bias in sampling students who seek tutoring and how this bias can invalidate the numbers we might present showing efficacy. Are we helping a population that would do better anyway?

With these twin dangers to research in mind, Ernie designed an ingenious study to account for them. The study encompassed 28 sections of introductory classes in Developmental English, Freshman Composition, History, and Biology. To account for the teacher effect, Ernie examined the Progressive Grade Rate (PGR means percent with a grade of “C” or better) for the previous semester of each professor involved in the study. He then used this baseline PGR to compare with these professors’ PGR in sections enhanced with writing center support. Thus, he gained a relative measure for writing center impact, controlled for each professor’s historic average grades. Ernie also sought to diminish self-selection bias by having professors require students to attend tutoring. Eventually, after some initial tinkering, he asked professors to require three tutoring sessions during the semester (15 of the 28 sections had this requirement). What he found was remarkable. In two-thirds of the sections requiring three tutoring sessions, the professor’s PGR was 14% higher than his or her baseline. In contrast, without the three tutoring requirement, only five of the thirteen sections did better than their baseline and outperformed the baseline by an average of only 5%. Digging deeper, Ernie also identified that early-term participation, defined as having the first tutoring session within the first quarter of the semester, correlated with stronger results. These positive findings finally convinced the administration to launch our full-scale writing center.

ONGOING ASSESSMENT—THE SIGNAL KEEPS PULSING—AND THE FREQUENT WRITER PROGRAM

Since opening our doors in 2009, the SAC Writing Center has completed five additional assessments that have found the same connection between three or more tutoring sessions and strong student success. These assessments include a small-scale study in Spring 2009 and more full-scale assessments in Fall 2011, Spring 2012, Fall 2012, and Spring 2013. The 2009 small-scale study found that the correlation between a higher PGR and three or more tutoring visits continued to be strong. Although the number of students included was

small (123 total), 100% of these students with three or more tutoring sessions earned a productive grade (“C” or better) in the courses for which they received tutoring. In contrast, students in English classes with only one tutoring visit had a PGR of 80%, and those with no tutoring had a PGR of only 56%.

We also initiated a program to encourage frequent visits to the writing center for tutoring called “The Frequent Writer Program.” In this program, tutors give students a Frequent Writer Card upon their first tutoring session. The card is divided into three sections with space to track sessions one to three, four to six, and seven to nine. When students complete each set of three sessions, they receive a prize. These prizes have varied, but last year we gave out a pocket dictionary after three sessions, a writing center coffee mug after six sessions, and a writing center T-shirt after nine sessions. For each set of three completed sessions, we tear off that portion of the card, write the student’s name and contact information on the back, and put the card into a glass jar for a drawing at the end of the semester. So far our grand prizes have been Kindles and smart pens. This promotion program costs some money from our supplies budget, but we believe it is worth it because this program provides a tangible way we can encourage students to come back for tutoring and a way we can emphasize three sessions as a target. Over the last four semesters and the 5117 tutoring sessions captured for assessment, 73% of our sessions have been for returning students, and these frequent writers average 3.6 sessions per semester.

ONGOING ASSESSMENT: CONTINUING TO HEAR—AND REPORT—THE SIGNAL

The assessments since Fall 2011 have been more comprehensive and included all of the students who receive tutoring in the writing center. Although these assessments include qualitative feedback from students and faculty, numbers were also obtained on the student success factors of PGR, retention, persistence, and grade point average for all students who received tutoring in the writing center. Comparative data on these success factors was analyzed on two levels. First, we compared how well students who received tutoring did versus the entire population of students at SAC. For instance, in the Spring of 2013, the average PGR for all SAC students was 74.5%; however, for students receiving three or more tutoring sessions their average PGR was 88.7%, or 14.2% higher. In addition to these gross comparisons, we examined the difference in success factors within individual courses. For instance, in Spring 2013, the average PGR for Freshman Composition II students was 77.1% but 94.7% for students who received three or more tutoring sessions—17.6% higher.

“ Students required to attend tutoring outperformed students who came in on their own—by a lot. ”

The following chart and table show an example of how we present our data in our semester reports. The first example shows data on Freshman Composition I (ENGL1301) for Fall 2012.

Effects of Multiple Tutoring Sessions—ENGL1301

What is the effect on PGR, Retention, Persistence and GPA of multiple tutoring visits for English 1301?

Number of Tutoring Sessions	None (N=1607)	One (N=112)	Two (N=43)	Three or More (N=40)	Change from None vs. Three	% Change from One to Three
PGR	76.0	83.0	88.4	95.0	+19%	+12%
Retention	87.8	92.9	95.3	97.5	+9.7%	+4.6
Persistence	75.5	84.8	88.4	95.0	+19.5%	+10.2
Course GPA	2.72	2.86	3.05	3.28	+.56	+.42

All numbers provided by the SAC Office of Institutional Effectiveness.

Here also is an excerpt of an administrator-friendly research brief of our larger, year-end reports with data on the effect of multiple tutoring sessions:

What is the effect on PGR of three or more tutoring sessions in selected courses compared to students who do not receive tutoring in that course?				
Course	Fall11	Spring 12	Fall12	Spring 13
ENGL0300	+42%	+37.6%	no data	no data
ENGL0301	+30.1%	+35.2%	no data	+19.5%
ENGL1301	+13.8%	+10.9%	+19%	+18.6%
ENGL1302	+7.8%	+13.2%	+5.7%	+17.6%
HIST1301	+23.9%	+28.2%	no data	no data
HIST1302	no data	no data	+27.4%	+19.2

Although this “bean counting” displays outward performance and certainly does not account for self-selection bias or other factors that may be at work, this data presents a clear signal that one or two tutoring sessions make a measurable difference. But something more seems to happen after three sessions. I should say that not all our data shows this dramatic and progressive an increase in success factors. For instance, the Spring 2013 average PGR for English 1301 students receiving two tutorials was 1.1% lower than students tutored only once, and as the table above shows, the difference for English 1302 in Fall semesters is modest. However, the persistent signal we get from our data indicates the importance of the three tutoring threshold—particularly for introductory courses like Freshman Composition I, Developmental English classes, and for first-time-in-college students.

REQUIRED TUTORING SESSIONS: A VERY INTERESTING SIGNAL

Because our pilot study showed positive results coming from requiring students to attend tutoring, we have talked with faculty about making a tutoring requirement part of their curriculum. As controversial as this practice of requiring tutoring is for many other writing centers, it has been part of our culture since our opening in Spring 2009. In Fall 2011, we began tracking the percentage of required tutoring sessions and found that this percentage was substantial. For instance, the percentage of required tutoring was 41% for Fall 2012 and 36% for Spring 2013.

We decided to examine this population of required tutoring sessions more closely in the Fall 2012 and Spring 2013 data and to compare their performance to students who self-selected to attend tutoring. What we found was surprising. Students required to attend tutoring outperformed students who came on their own—by a lot. In Fall 2012, students required to attend tutoring three or more times averaged a PGR rate of 90%, while students not-required to attend who completed three or more sessions had a PGR rate of 78.4%. Spring 2013 data showed the same superior outcomes for students required to come for tutoring: 94.3% for required students versus 87.4% for non-required students. While the numbers certainly do not yet represent a statistically significant random sample (40 and 35 respectively for required students with 3+ sessions), these findings seem to contradict the self-selection bias that so confounds our attempts to use gross comparisons of students who receive tutoring versus those who don't. We will continue to watch this comparison between required and not-required tutoring sessions in the future. Taken separately, these findings from our ongoing assessment lack strong validity. In combination, however, they confirm the original conclusions we found in the pilot study. They represent Jones' indirect evidence—a repeated signal from different directions—that serves to corroborate the difference of three or more tutoring sessions.

SIGNALS FROM THE OUTSIDE: WHAT OTHER RESEARCH SAYS

A number of studies of writing center efficacy have connected frequency of tutoring with better student achievement. In his own study, Lerner found a correlation between the achievement of weaker students and the number of times they came for tutoring. Rowena Yeats et al. in another small-scale study also found “a highly significant association between writing center attendance and achievement” (499). They also extended this association to student progression or persistence. Students with more tutoring from the writing center stayed in school in greater numbers—a finding we have discovered as well. Heather Robinson, in a study she performed at York College, identified three tutoring sessions as the point when many developmental students began to grow in confidence and skill (88). Specifically, at this three tutorial threshold, she found students shifted from a more external motivation and locus of control (LOC) to higher level of intrinsic motivation and internal LOC.

James Williams, Seiji Takaku, and Karen Bauman also performed a longitudinal study of writing center efficacy and the factors that influence student performance. Sorting through the variables of SAT scores, TOEFL scores, reading scores, a pre- and post-test writing evaluation, and writing center visitations, they found a significant correlation between frequency of visits to the writing center and higher grades (31). Frequency of visits was the only “significant predictor” of grades (35). For Williams, et al., frequency of visits is an expression of self-regulatory and self-efficacy behaviors, and the better achievement of students exhibiting these behaviors confirms social cognitive theory. In their 2011 article reporting on their follow-up research, Williams and Takaku found that “writing center visitation was the only unique significant predictor of grade” with the suggestion of a “mediation path with writing center visitation being a mediator between self-efficacy and grade in composition” (12). In a recent study complementing this research, Katherine Schmidt and Joel Alexander found that “clients completing three tutoring sessions showed significant, consistent increase in overall writerly self-efficacy rating, whereas the control group did not show a significant change” (“Discussion”). Putting these two results together suggests that frequency of writing center tutoring—particularly a minimum of three sessions—improves student writers’ self-efficacy with a positive effect upon grades. Williams and Takaku conclude their 2011 article by claiming that their results “illustrate how writing center efficacy can be assessed empirically by examining the relation between frequency of visitation and grades” (13). This measure of what Schmidt and Alexander call “overt performance” is enough to display whether writing center tutoring was effective or not. In essence, Williams, Takaku, and Bauman are saying we can count beans to show the effectiveness of what we do.

THE THREE TUTORIAL THRESHOLD—CONTINUING TO LISTEN

Our ongoing research connecting frequency of tutoring and student achievement suggests that the benefits of our tutoring manifest themselves more significantly after three tutorial sessions. Three tutoring sessions represents a threshold where the efficacy of tutoring moves from being satisfactory to being more significant—particularly for students in introductory classes. Going forward, we will continue to examine this three tutorial threshold in our assessment to see if it continues to be significant. However, I want to dig deeper into what happens for students as they reach three tutorial sessions. Research done by Barry Zimmerman and Albert Bandura found that students’ beliefs about their self-efficacy in writing “played a key role in writing course attainment” (859). Work by Williams and Takaku, Robinson, and Schmidt and Alexander point to the important role tutoring in the writing center has for influencing students’ beliefs about writing and about themselves as writers. In future research, I plan to examine more closely “writerly self-efficacy” as it connects to the three tutorial threshold. Can we identify more closely what happens for writers as the frequency of tutoring increases? While focusing on outward student success factors, as we have done, may be one way to show numbers indicating our writing center’s efficacy, a more detailed understanding of tutoring’s influence on writerly self-efficacy at the three tutorial threshold may provide different and added ways to show the benefits and effectiveness of what we do. ♦

Works Cited

- Jones, Casey. “The Relationship Between Writing Centers and Improvement in Writing Ability: An Assessment of the Literature.” *Education*. 122.1 (2001): 3-21. Print.
- Lerner, Neal. “Counting Beans and Making Beans Count.” *Writing Lab Newsletter* 22.1 (1997): 1-3. Print.
- . “Choosing Beans Wisely.” *Writing Lab Newsletter* 26.1 (1997): 1-4. Print.
- Robinson, Heather M. “Writing Center Philosophy and the End of Basic Writing: Motivation at the Site of Remediation and Discovery.” *Journal of Basic Writing* 28.2 (2009): 70-92. Print.
- Schmidt, Katherine, and Joel E. Alexander. “The Empirical Development of an Instrument to Measure Writerly Self-Efficacy in Writing Centers.” *Journal of Writing Assessment* 5.1 (2012). Web. 25 Aug. 2013.
- Williams, James D., Seiji Takaku, and Karen Bauman. “Effects of Self-Regulatory Behavior on ESL Student Writing.” *Toboku Psychological Folio* 65 (2006): 24-36. Print.
- Williams, James D., and Seiji Takaku. “Help Seeking, Self-Efficacy, and Writing Performance among College Students.” *Journal of Writing Research* 3.1 (2011): 1-18. Web. 25 Aug. 2013.
- Yeats, Rowena, Peter Reddy, Anne Wheeler, Carl Senior, and John Murray. “What a Difference a Writing Center Makes: A Small Scale Study.” *Education + Training* 52.6/7 (2010): 499-507. Web. 25 Aug. 2013.
- Zimmerman, Barry J., and Albert Bandura. “Impact of Self-Regulatory Influences on Writing Course Attainment.” *American Educational Research Journal* 31.4 (1994): 845-862. Print.

NEBRASKA WRITING CENTER CONSORTIUM

**Sept. 12-14, 2014
Crawford, NE
Chadron State College
"Writing Center
(Hi)Stories"**

Opening address will be held on the Chadron State University campus, in Chadron, and most events will occur at the Fort Robinson State Park, west of Chadron: <www.stateparks.com/fort_robinson_state_park_in_nebraska.html?official+home+page>.

We welcome individuals who are interested in exploring and writing about their writing center histories and future, and they need not be from Nebraska. Conference fee is \$50.

Chair: Lee Miller: <lmiller@csc.edu>; Conference website: <www.nebwritingcenters.org/>.

CREATING A SPACE FOR BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

◆ *Elizabeth Tomlinson*
West Virginia University
Morgantown, WV

When I interviewed for a newly created business communication position situated within the College of Business and Economics (B&E) at West Virginia University, the recurring faculty refrain was, "Our students can't write. Can you help us?" In 2011, B&E shifted to a four-year college, as opposed to admitting only juniors and seniors. As part of the administrators' proposal for the move, they planned to provide in-house tutoring to address "deficits" they had identified in their students' preparation for business communication and future employment. The administration was particularly interested in ways to continue helping students' communication improve as part of the assurance of learning process associated with the business school accrediting body. After accepting the position, I began planning the Business Communication Center (BCC), and quickly noted the dearth of scholarship about BCCs.

When I began researching scholarship on BCCs, an internet search identified approximately five business communication centers with a web presence. As of 2012, I identified twenty-three BCCs, five of whom had web presences. I discovered the oldest, at Lehigh, dates to 1981. Those at Notre Dame and Michigan State began in the early 90s. However, the majority were founded within the past 10 years, and I learned several other universities are currently seeking funding for or are planning new centers. With the ever-increasing concerns about students' preparation for workplace success, particularly regarding communication skills, business schools are becoming more interested in providing resources to help students learn effective communication. Accordingly, writing center scholars should be aware of this building trend and may benefit from the research model I employed to establish a center, as they may want to propose or partner with such ventures. While writing center scholarship sometimes deals with business writing issues, the limited scholarship on BCCs exists primarily within business writing journals. Two articles offer some of the only extant consideration of BCCs. Frank Griffin explains the staff "should see itself as a colleague committed, alongside the teaching faculty, to helping students achieve a level of comfort with their chosen professional discourse community" (78). He suggests that these centers focus heavily on both instructors and future employers as audiences due to the case studies and employment documents commonly found in business pedagogy. Griffin argues the center's role requires helping students negotiate discourse communities within the disciplines and beyond the university, and he suggests the importance of close partnerships between the business-based writing center and faculty. Shirley Kuiper and Martha Thomas discuss how they used a strategic management paradigm (SWOT analysis) by consulting with relevant stakeholders.

Our administration proposed that the initial goals for the center were to provide support for students taking writing intensive ("W")-courses in B&E, with plans to support a new business communication course launching in 2013. As a professor teaching multiple sections of students and as a former writing center administrator, I had a fair grasp of student needs and desires. However, developing a new center requires consideration of varied stakeholders, including both students and faculty. Incorporating faculty perceptions into the initial decision-making about the center offered an opportunity to involve them as stakeholders, which could, in turn, lead to fruitful partnerships between the center and the classes. If faculty felt that their views were taken seriously, they would be more likely to consider the center as a collaborator in teaching their writing classes and in preparing students for the working world. Additionally, the information faculty could provide about disciplinary expectations for writing would prove useful for training center staff.

The faculty teaching at this research-intensive university are experienced writers within their own disciplines, although they generally lack exposure to methods of tutoring and teaching writing. I was also aware that developing relationships with faculty often opens doors for opportunities to share with others who take writing seriously and desire to help their students improve as writers, what we, as resource people, know about writing and best practices for writing instruction. Upon IRB approval, I identified six faculty members in different B&E departments who had a range of experience (1-10 years) teaching their department's W-course. Interview questions asked about current expectations for writing within courses—both those with and without writing-intensive designations—and strengths and weaknesses identified within students' writing. I adapted interview questions Wei Zhu used for her English for

Academic Purposes (EAP) study of business and engineering faculty perceptions of student writing. The interview questions I adapted focused on types of assignments, faculty observations about writing quality, and the significance of writing within the field. I added other questions dealing specifically with our center and the potential functions the center could offer. The interviews were semi-structured; although I used an interview schedule, as the conversation unfolded, I sometimes added follow-up questions. Interviews ranged from twenty-five minutes to just under an hour; I taped and transcribed them, resulting in approximately seventy transcript pages. I combined all participants' responses into charts by question and coded themes within each question.

Faculty definitions of good writing proved particularly interesting. Three participants observed that good writing is best known by example, and they suggested students could benefit from reading more high-quality writing. Two followed up by recommending current books they found to be particularly well-written; interestingly, the books (Eric Foner's *The Fiery Trial*; Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*) were not within the subject areas these two professors taught. Instead, they suggested students ought to read more literary prose. Five indicated good writing was reader-friendly: it did not impede or distract the reader. They seemed to use this definition to help determine when their own students' writing passed muster; a marketing professor explained, "you don't stumble over the writing. . . . at a minimum, you don't notice good writing." She explained that truly exemplary writing was characterized by a "smooth" quality. Two other participants noted the importance of "flow" within good writing. Three faculty explained good writing was deliberately crafted. Concision also came up in three respondents' definitions. As a finance professor explained: "People try to fill lots of space, use words or phrases that are not what they would say. They're far too complicated for what they're trying to say . . . simplify. Get to the point." Two participants also indicated good writing demonstrates the author's understanding of the topic. These responses demonstrated to me that style and content mattered to faculty. Faculty wanted students to write concisely, yet elegantly. I would need to ensure our consultants were prepared to address issues of content-clarity and field-specific diction, as well as stylistic considerations such as transitions and conciseness.

To better understand how the faculty viewed writing development, I asked them about the goals and expectations they had for students at the beginning and end of their W-courses. A marketing professor explained that at the beginning, "I expect them to know basics of what is a good business style: to write without grammatical errors. Not all of them meet this standard." An accounting professor new to teaching W-courses indicated he had initially thought his job was to help students adapt skills they already had "to fit the business perspective," but he had discovered "some of them need remedial things." Two participants identified teaching business perspectives as particularly important goals for their students. Four professors noted their goals included further improvement of non-business-specific writing qualities. By the end of their courses, all expected significantly improved writing. They did not fully articulate what improved writing would look like, but that might be extrapolated on the basis of their definitions of good writing stated above. For these scholars, good writing is typically concise, accurately employs diction appropriate to the rhetorical context within the discipline, and carries the reader along fluidly without distractions.

The faculty surveyed did speak specifically about how those improvements would occur. They suggested students' writing improved because the students knew that a professor was paying specific attention to the writing. An economist noted "the students see that I'm paying attention to some things, so they're now paying attention to some things." Faculty also explained improvement occurred because they held their students to high standards. A finance professor explained, "They adapt well when you show what your standard is. . . . I'm impressed with how well our students will adapt. I don't know that we set the bar high enough for them." Finally, two faculty suggested improvements occurred because the students themselves took greater agency in the process. The faculty members' statements suggest they value providing a thoughtful audience for students' writing and encouraging students to recognize themselves as stakeholders in the writing process. In the classroom and workplace, students will encounter varied audiences and genres. In the BCC context, consultants not only need to possess expertise in writing center pedagogy, but also need to understand how to help students find answers to discipline-specific genre questions.¹ Understanding writing center pedagogy and theory helps consultants act as engaged, rhetorically-minded audience members, while genre-knowledge—and access to resources about the specific genres and content—helps consultants unpack the disciplinary discourse community norms for students. Both aspects are helpful, as writing style, rhetorical savvy, genre knowledge, and subject matter content will face scrutiny within the business W-courses.

NORTHEAST WRITING CENTERS ASSOCIATION

**April 18-19, 2015
Hackettstown, NJ
Centenary College**

Conference registration fees:
Full-time faculty/staff—\$155
Part-time faculty/staff—\$135
Peer tutors—\$75.

For further information, contact the conference chair: Richard Severe: <severer@centenary-college.edu>; Conference website: <www.centenarycollege.edu/collaboratory>.

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA WRITING CENTERS ASSOCIATION

**February 28, 2015
La Jolla, CA
University of California—San Diego
“Passport: Writing Centers”**

Conference Chair: Madeleine Picciotto: mpicciotto@ucsd.edu; conference website: <sandbox.socialwritingcenters.org/2015-tutor-conference/>.

Most participants expressed genuine enthusiasm for teaching W-courses. However, as I sought ways to continue building supportive relationships with their classes, I inquired about whether the course raised particular challenges for them. Their honest responses pointed me toward resources I could provide to help them. Three participants said the greatest challenge was they sometimes felt as if they did not have enough training to teach writing. This response connected with another recurrent theme: participants sometimes had difficulty articulating writing-related concerns. As writers, they were able to notice problems and act as audience members, but did not always feel confident in their ability to explain why issues they had noticed was a problem. A marketing professor explained, “even though you write for a living, you can’t describe what’s wrong or what’s right . . . part of it is that lack of training. . . there is something wrong but you can’t identify what it is.” These responses suggested that part of the center’s ongoing work would involve providing resources to faculty and students that assist them in articulating their concerns about writing, such as handouts, workshops, and websites dealing with technical aspects of writing and specific genres. As Clyde Moneyhun and Patti Hanlon-Baker suggest, writing centers can work in many ways as a resource to enhance teaching.

I also asked about services faculty hoped to see our center provide to undergraduates, graduate students, themselves as professionals, and the B&E community. Three professors noted the importance of offering a space for students to read their papers aloud. An accounting professor recalled his own experiences as a writing center user during his graduate work:

I had written something . . . and amazingly enough what they [consultants] did was either they read it out loud or I read it out loud. You could hear the things. They weren’t doing that much that I couldn’t have done for myself but just the feedback of this is pretty good, or you know you need to work on these areas from an independent third party . . . that would be my hope.

The latter part of this response demonstrates another common thread among the respondents: they wanted their students to have an interested reader/audience prior to turning in papers. The participants recognized their own role as audience members and how that led to student motivation, as described above, but they wanted additional audience responses for their students. Two participants also hoped that our center could offer some form of assessment so undergraduate students could better understand their own capabilities and whether they were meeting assignment criteria. Several participants gave suggestions that did not recur across interviews, such as supplying information on citation and plagiarism, offering a framework for developing writing assignments, giving feedback on oral communication, and aiding students’ development of self-help skills.

For themselves, the faculty wish list included receiving general feedback on their own papers, providing information about writing-related technology, offering project management advice, and proofreading. A marketing professor explained she would find audience responses to her introduction and conclusion useful even if a consultant did not have the expertise to interpret her statistics. A faculty member who noted English was her second language acknowledged proofreading might be “beyond the scope of your center,” but she would take advantage of such a service if it were offered. Another interesting, anomalous response came from the accounting professor who was seeking new tools for being more “efficient and effective with the writing,” both for his own research projects and for providing feedback to his students. The interview results suggest that while these faculty sometimes struggled to articulate exactly what they want from student writing, and how and why writing sometimes fails to meet their expectations, they simultaneously possess a certain level of writerly knowledge from their own experiences as scholars. From the center, they sought the provision of an additional interested audience for their students, as well as tools for defining and discussing the characteristics they identify as good writing. The expectations and desires they have for assistance mesh on several levels with generally accepted writing center practices. For instance, in their own teaching and writing experiences, these faculty found reading aloud helpful. They recognized the value of writing for an interested audience and receiving feedback on early drafts. On the other hand, their hopes and desires sometimes differ from what may be considered mainstream writing center practice. The faculty expressed interest in resources to aid oral communication skills. Two also expressed interest in a proofreading service, an ambition that has raised some controversy in the writing center

literature. Several were interested in the center playing an assessment role, a possibility that seems to locate itself on a slippery slope because of its potential gate-keeping implications. Specifically, while centers may indeed develop tools for helping students self-assess, it seems prudent to avoid engagement with grading-related activities.

This small study helped identify starting points for relationships; other writing center and BCC staff and administration may wish to investigate similar relationships within their own contexts. By unpacking faculty expectations and explicating the disciplinary discourse communities in B&E, the faculty interviews yielded insights into how consultants could be trained and what services we should offer. Our center is now fully operational, with a staff of five communication consultants (graduate students in business and English, all trained in writing center theory and pedagogy) who assist students with written and oral work across the business disciplines. We also house subject-area tutors who focus on quantitative skills within business, such as statistics and financial calculations. This semester, we held 798 sessions; B&E's population is approximately 1500. Sometimes the tutors and consultants work together during sessions to provide feedback to students preparing work that contains both text and calculations. Due to our expanded services, our name is now the Business Learning Resource Center; however, the communication consultants follow writing center theory throughout their sessions.

The initial relationships formed with faculty through this study have led to conversations about the writing assignments they use, as well as invitations to visit their classes to run workshops and share information about the center. I began ongoing discussions with several faculty members, helping them re-envision their students' communication challenges in relation to learning new disciplinary conventions and rhetorical contexts. While typically we consult one-to-one, we also lead mini-sessions in classes with individuals and groups and we present business communication-related topics, such as how to develop a professional portfolio. My research with faculty also contributed to the development of materials in the center. For instance, we developed an extensive collection of business communication handouts used by both faculty and students. As faculty discussed goals for their students, they referenced particular genres their students would write, so we developed genre-specific resources, such as tips for writing an executive summary, approaches to constructing a business plan, and pointers for presentation design.

This study expands the limited body of research on approaches to business communication centers, and it helped me establish working relationships with faculty and build a center designed to meet stakeholders' needs. While it is critically important to understand student needs, understanding how faculty approach writing in their classrooms also aids in developing centers designed to satisfy multiple users, particularly in environments where the relationship between the center and the faculty calls for a high level of collaboration. ♦

Note

1. Of course, many writing centers employ consultants from across the disciplines as well. Diverse consultant backgrounds prove useful to students in both the BCC and WC context.

Works Cited

- Griffin, Frank. "The Business of the Business Writing Center." *Business Communication Quarterly* 64.3 (2001): 70-79. Print.
- Kuiper, Shirley, and Martha Thomas. "A Strategic Consultancy Model for Establishing a Center for Business Communication." *Business Communication Quarterly* 63 (2000): 52-67. Print.
- Moneyhun, Clyde, and Patti Hanlon-Baker. "Tutoring Teachers." *Writing Lab Newsletter* 36 (2012): 1-5. Web. 9 May 2012.
- Zhu, Wei. "Faculty Views on the Importance of Writing, the Nature of Academic Writing, and Teaching and Responding to Writing in the Disciplines." *Journal of Second Language Writing* 13 (2004): 29-48. Print.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Invitation for a Visiting Scholar

I am a lecturer at the University of South Africa, UNISA, and my main interests are in academic writing at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Many of our students struggle with writing, and I have dedicated my time into supporting students in this area. I intend planning a 3-4 year project examining our practices for teaching writing, especially for EFL, ESL, and EFL students. I have several requests:

- First, I invite any of your colleagues to my university in 2015 or 2016 as a visiting scholar, to offer workshops and a presentation or two.
- Second, I request 5 or 6 scholars in academic writing who are willing to come to UNISA for a year or so beginning in 2015 or 2016. The U.S. Embassy here in Pretoria offers funding for U.S. scholars, and my university can also contribute to the funding.
- Third, is it possible to come up with a collaborative research project on student writing between UNISA and a university?

Miriam MK Lephala, PhD (Edinburgh)
Associate Professor
Manager: The Povey Centre
Coordinator: Short Learning Programmes
Department of English Studies
University of South Africa
Office 6-38, Theo van Wyk Building
Tel: 012 429 6396
Fax: 012 429 6222
E-mail: <lephammk@unisa.ac.za>.

BOOK REVIEW

Babcock, Rebecca Day, and Terese Thonus. *Researching the Writing Center: Towards an Evidence-Based Practice*. New York: Peter Lang, 2012. (\$38.90, 239 pp. paperback)

◆ Reviewed by Sherry Wynn Perdue, Oakland University, Rochester, MI

I learned of the project that would yield *Researching the Writing Center (RtWC)* when Dana Lynn Driscoll and I presented an early version of “Theory, Lore and More: An Analysis of RAD Research in *The Writing Center Journal*, 1980-2009” at IWCA 2010. In the presentation and subsequent article, we advocated Richard Haswell’s RAD paradigm and argued that more writing center scholarship should take the form of replicable, aggregable, and data-supported research—“a best effort inquiry into the actualities of a situation, inquiry that is explicitly enough systematized in sampling, execution, and analysis to be replicated; exactly enough circumscribed to be extended; and factually enough supported to be verified” (201). During the Q and A of our presentation, Terese Thonus noted our adaptation of Haswell might be useful as she and Rebecca Babcock completed their book on evidence-based research. As I read the introduction to *RtWC*, I was delighted to discover that it was, and I became hopeful that Alice Gillam’s call for more tangible discussion about what writing center (WC) scholars mean by research, especially data-supported research, would finally be accomplished in a book-length study.

After reading *RtWC*, however, I concluded that the authors’ rhetorical choices in chapters one and two, particularly their overly narrow definition of and contextualization of research, renders them vulnerable to resistance from the group they hoped would embrace the need for RAD/evidence-based research. Further, the book lacks explicit discussion of critical terminology, specific guidance on quantitative and qualitative methods, and a primer in the means of data collection. *RtWC* is at its best from chapter three forward, when it overviews potential research projects and offers recommendations for practice. Once the authors move to center-specific questions and model essays upon which others could build, the text offers novice researchers a guidebook for specific studies, albeit a limited one. Still, in this review, one of two that express reservations about *RtWC*, I examine why readers might reject Babcock and Thonus’s claim that data-supported research is essential to our field’s longevity and focus on two questions:

- How does *RtWC* potentially discourage readers from dining at the evidence-based research (EBR) research table?
- Should the field follow the authors’ research/assessment divide?

I agree with the claim that “writing center scholarship, while continuing to value lore and anecdotal evidence, must begin to collect, analyze, and theorize from empirical research evidence to mediate between theory and practice” (57), but a successful book on data-supported center practice must do more than preach to the proverbial choir. Several articulate and well-read WC administrators with whom I have spoken remain unreceptive and unconvinced AFTER reading the book. Therein lies the problem. Although I could use this review space to rearticulate the case for data-supported research, the book review genre dictates that I appraise the evidence Babcock and Thonus provided (or not) and to critique how they framed *their* research manifesto. To that end, I begin with the admonition that RAD research is nuanced and should have been unpacked more carefully within the introduction and more consistently throughout the book. Unfortunately, *RtWC*’s coverage of this high-stakes discussion is uneven and sometimes incorrect. For example, the “A” in the RAD acronym was at least once incorrectly identified as “applicable” (179) rather than aggregable, which essentially reduces the efficacy of the practice. Additionally, the authors used the term “generalizable” in association with RAD, which effectively excludes qualitative research from their definition, a semantic choice I believe to be inadvertent. Qualitative research cannot be generalized, but it can be transferred. I am pretty certain this was a slip, but for an audience not already convinced of the value of RAD research, it creates confusion at the least and resistance at the worst. Had the authors invoked the field-specific reasons Haswell cites in his defense of RAD or those Driscoll and I outlined in the rough draft we provided Thonus, which explicitly include qualitative research and identify the important differences between the language of qualitative and quantitative inquiry, they might have better negotiated this minefield.

The authors’ decision to use the terms “evidence based” and RAD to advocate the same process also deserves more explanation. The two concepts can be used to describe similar methods and have been used as synonyms (even within my own work), but a composition scholar coined RAD, whereas EBR originated in human medicine and was, initially, understood as antithetical to qualitative research (Denzin and Lincoln 7). When Babcock and Thonus offer EBR from the nursing field as one example of research to which WC researchers might aspire, they leave unaddressed the historical baggage accompanying this term for some composition scholars, particularly those who conduct qualitative research. In sum, the etymological, epistemological, and disciplinary history of these methods must be acknowledged and explained to mediate the appearance

that the definitions employed, guideposts identified, and affirmations sought are the domain of outsiders, perhaps even hostile outsiders.

The definitions of what research IS and IS NOT present another problem. Like Babcock, Thonus, and many before them, I agree that WC studies need consensus about what the term “research” implies. Not everything currently labelled research is indeed research. I encourage our field to follow other disciplines AND a growing number of researchers within our field to distinguish differences among secondary source review, practitioner reflection, anecdote, and theory disconnected from its role in support of a specific study from research. Although the term research should be reserved for specific behaviors and withheld from others, we must be wary of efforts to be too circumscribed in our definitions. As such, the authors’ decision to differentiate assessment from research (4) is particularly problematic. They fail to cite assessment researchers in support of their claims and would do well to consider Rose and Weiser’s *The Writing Program Administrator as Researcher: Inquiry in Action and Reflection*, which in no ways recommends such a polemic distinction. Although education researchers also once withheld the research distinction from “evaluative” scholarship such as program assessment, they now recognize the importance of this work as research.

The authors stake their distinction between assessment and research on seemingly superficial grounds: because IWCA has separate assessment and research special interest groups (SIGs), readers are encouraged to conclude that assessment is not research. However, the presence of two SIGs could also acknowledge that while all assessment can be research, all research is not assessment. The authors’ second attempt at solidifying the distinction is perhaps more erroneous. They argue that assessment is local, which, they imply, limits its replicability and aggregability. This distinction cannot hold, however, because many research studies begin in local contexts and then are expanded into a larger frame in an approach similar to that of their example of Neal Lerner’s assessment efforts. Nothing requires research to have originated outside of one’s own center before it can be called research. Had the authors more carefully examined Haswell’s RAD paradigm or even the RAD rubric Driscoll and I employed in our study, they would understand that assessment can be research if it specifically addresses such questions as the following, all of which emphasize the three criteria of data-supported, aggregable, and replicable:

- How and in response to what earlier studies/assessment or gaps in literature/practice was the research question/assessment project forged? In other words, is the project contextualized within the field of WC studies?
- What method did researchers use? Can data be triangulated or crystalized by using multiple sources to address the same question?
- Did researchers collect, organize, and present data in a systematic and ethical way?
- Did researchers use an appropriate approach, data package, or technique to ensure the analysis is replicable? Do the data address the research question posed?
- Did researchers present results in a way that is relevant not just to their center but also to others? Have they anticipated how their findings might apply in another setting? That is, have they anticipated the limits of local assessment and its relationship to other centers?

More troubling, however, is how this research/assessment distinction discourages a large contingent of our community from investing in the self-training and data scrutiny research requires. If the main reason WC administrators currently collect data is to justify their program’s existence and to evaluate the quality of their services (e.g., assessment), as Driscoll’s and my survey of 133 WC directors and interviews of a subset of 15 indicates (article currently under review), then why would Babcock and Thonus suggest such assessment can never be research? Rather than polemics, I encourage our field to pursue assessment practices that represent a Both/And. In sum, *RtWC*’s first two chapters will likely prove problematic for all readers, albeit in different ways: those trained in data-supported practice will find the overview of RAD and evidence-based methods superficial and incomplete, largely unnecessary for their research practice; whereas novice researchers might become discouraged from pursuing RAD/evidence-based research because their greatest incentive for doing so—to document their centers’ success for assessment

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Tweet WLN? “Like” WLN?

If your writing center and/or tutors have Twitter accounts and/or Facebook pages, we invite you to “follow,” “tweet,” “like,” and/or “post” on our Twitter account and Facebook wall. We invite you to post news of your writing center, photos, online resources, conference notices, other news you wish to share, and links other writing center folk would be interested in.



@WLNewsletter



Writing Lab Newsletter



International Writing Center Blog

CONNECTING WRITING CENTERS ACROSS BORDERS

“Connecting Writing Centers Across Borders” is a blog intended for those of you in writing centers around the world to share blog entries, photos, questions, resources, and comments about topics relevant to your work. There is a link on the *WLN* home page, or connect directly to it at <www.writinglabnewsletter.org/blog/>.

purposes—was dismissed as “not research.” While subsequent chapters offer a wonderful primer for projects that can expand existing research, I fear too many readers will stop reading before they discover these models. ♦

♦ *Reviewed by Sara Littlejohn, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Greensboro, NC*

In today’s Great Era of Accountability, Rebecca Day Babcock and Terese Thonus’s book *Researching the Writing Center: Towards an Evidence-Based Practice (RtWC)* offers what might seem like a sanctuary for writing centers (WC) trying to prove their worthiness in concrete and legible ways. The authors argue that WC research needs to take a turn toward practices common to other disciplines that depend on empirical (perhaps scientific) evidence to determine best practices, and they speak about pressure to illustrate WC effectiveness. How can WC research best explore and reflect our important work? *RtWC* attempts to address this worthy question. The authors define Evidence-Based Research (EBR) as the process of identifying a research question and using an intentionally designed methodology to gather empirical evidence (both qualitative and quantitative) from which practitioners can make decisions about their work. For example, to help nurses make the best decisions while caring for patients, EBR informs practice by drawing on case studies and other research to provide nurses with proven options. The authors also champion RAD (replicable, aggregable, and data-driven) research, a term Richard Haswell coined, as explained in Sherry Perdue’s review of this book. However, when Babcock and Thonus explain they want this type of research to “become so much a part of the fabric of writing center work that all administrative and pedagogical decisions will be founded upon it” (169), I wonder if their positioning of RAD/EBR is ultimately too limiting. Should all WC research look this way?

While arguing our field can benefit from such research, the authors suggest, “writing center scholarship has been largely *artistic* or *humanistic*, rather than *scientific*, in a field where *both* perspectives can and must inform our practice” (emphasis in original 3). They claim EBR can offer a “credible link” (3) between WC theory and practice; however, I would have liked to see their text offer evidence that this link is actually missing. If one accepts the authors’ claim that the scientific must inform our practice to connect our supposedly unconnected theory and practice, then EBR is important because such research could prove the effectiveness of our work, improve our visibility within the academy, and potentially provide funding arguments. However, I question the depth of this missing link as well as the potential of RAD/EBR to be the best answers to the claim of disconnected theory and practice.

The author’s privileging of RAD/EBR suggests that although WC scholars currently research and develop pedagogy—building upon applicable composition, rhetorical, educational, and communication theories—the practice emerging from our research lacks empirical evidence to prove a center’s worthiness. Thus, current research practices and theory undergirding WC pedagogy are not sufficient to illustrate the importance and value of our work. Instead, for Babcock and Thonus, research should begin with an EBR question and gather related evidence that may include “observations, recordings, microanalyses of actual tutoring sessions, analyses of session feedback forms and textual revisions; and interviews with participants when feasible” (3). So even though many WC administrators already employ such methods to collect evidence on a local level (often as assessment), the authors suggest the field would benefit from formalizing this process so that decisions could yield evidence that can be generalized beyond the local.

The first important question the authors pose, “Who gets to decide what counts as evidence?,” accurately points to the increasing need for our field to take hold of its own research and assessment measures. I agree that the field has historically been known for counterpunching (reacting to the most immediate, urgent administrative demands) rather than self-fashioning (to borrow Stephen Greenblatt’s term), and the authors rightfully argue that the “who” from the above question, “will increasingly be fellow writing center researchers, conference organizers, and publication editors” (171). But I am not convinced that our current research lacks depth because, as the authors claim, WC journals have been “unclear about their purpose” and not “rigorous in their methodological review of submissions” (171), especially given the ethos of two major journals and their fairly low acceptance rates (17.4% for *Writing Center Journal* and 15% for *Writing Lab Newsletter*).¹

The authors suggest that science, in the form of EBR, is the best way to answer who decides what evidence is valid. While some readers may walk away with a sense that science will be good for the WC field, this positivistic approach feels too narrow to

encompass the full range of our work, and I wonder if the science-driven approach risks being too reductive. For example, the authors often recommend WC practices that are based on only one study. And though it is good to be able to scientifically illustrate what WCs do, scientific evidence alone cannot capture much of the craft of our work. I am concerned about the authoritative statement that “both assessment and research should be based on *empirical data*” (emphasis in original 4), given that WC research can include the theoretical as well as the empirical. As a WC researcher, I wonder if accepting the premise that the purpose of WC research is to prove the value to outsiders (and in the case of this text, using RAD/EBR to do so) contributes to the historic marginalization of our work. Perhaps it should be enough for some of our research to generate new knowledge about WCs in the same ways that it is enough for traditional humanities scholars to generate new knowledge about literature or history. If we reduce the WC research process to an illustration of efficacy, do we risk closing down other areas of inquiry that generate new knowledge and intellectual ideas about our work?

The authors argue that RAD/EBR forms the next important path for WC research, but their argument is built upon WC practices that have long been in place: conducting surveys and interviews, observing sessions. Such work is not new to WCs, and perhaps turning those familiar practices into more data that outsiders value as a particularly visible type of research does meet certain outcomes-driven institutional goals. However, given recent declarations of No Child Left Behind failings, educational policies are shifting. Policies that privileged the “bottom line” of learning, focusing on outcomes and evidence alone, didn’t correlate to smarter, more capable students. So rather than our focusing exclusively on RAD/EBR results as the only valid measures of value, WC scholars should continue to explore research avenues that expand rather than constrict notions of our work and its effectiveness. Beth Boquet asks, “What is being left out of our discussions on writing centers by our inability to account, in complex ways, for its relationship to the teaching of writing? By our continued insistence that writing centers give us simply the hard numbers, just the facts?” (479). Focusing too much on the empirical qualities of EBR research reduces our ability to account for our work in the full and complex ways Boquet describes, ways that are a significant part of our work. I am not convinced that RAD/EBR is the best or only future avenue for WC research, although the authors’ presentation of such practices and the potential relationship of those practices to WCs are worth exploring. Perhaps this approach is most useful as one of many pieces of our research (and assessment) puzzle—a puzzle that includes multiple methods, methods that can provide triangulation and balance, so that WC research can account for the richness of the work that draws so many of us to the field. ♦

Note

1. The *WLN* acceptance rates for 2012-2013 (16%) and 2013-2014 (15%) are posted on the *WLN* website: <writinglabnewsletter.org/submit.php>. The 2013-2014 figure (17.4%) for *WCJ* is cited by Steven Price, in an e-mail to Kim Ballard, on 24 July, 2014.



Works Cited

- Boquet, Beth. “‘Our Little Secret’: A History of Writing Centers, Pre- to Post-Open Admissions.” *College Composition and Communication* 50.3 (1999): 463-482. Print.
- Denzin, Norman K., and Yvonna S. Lincoln. “Introduction: The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research.” *Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln. Los Angeles: Sage, 2011. 1-20. Print.
- Gillam, Alice. “The Call to Research: Early Representations of Writing Center Research.” *Writing Center Research: Extending the Conversation*. Ed. Paula Gillespie, Alice Gillam, Lady Falls Brown, and Byron Stay. Mahwah: Routledge, 2002, 3-22. Print.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. Chicago: U. of Chicago P, 1980. Print.
- Haswell, Richard. “NCTE/CCCC’s Recent War on Scholarship.” *Written Communication* 22.2 (2005): 198-223. Print.
- Rose, Shirley K., and Irwin Weiser, eds. *The Writing Program Administrator as Researcher: Inquiry into Action and Reflection*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1999. Print.



TUTOR'S COLUMN

THE WRITING SPACE: A FORUM FOR THE TECHNOLOGICAL AGE

◆ Elizabeth Busekrus
Missouri Baptist University
St. Louis, MO

As a tutor in the decade of status updates, multimedia, and information overload, I have had to reevaluate what writing is. At first, I turned to the digitized student's grammar: the "u" and "r," the missing words, and the acronyms. I wanted to help these students understand academic language. Gradually, the real problem became clear to me; the lack of a critical thinking process in their writing is the problem, not grammar. In a face-to-face session, developing that process is a difficult task to do in that short period of time. From this observation, I created a space that applies the dynamics of social technology, which students are so engaged in, to academia. By reaching out to students' technological locations, writing labs can start from students' familiar writing bases to encourage critical thinking, help them with their writing practices, and move them toward the unfamiliar writing community of the university.

The space I developed is an online writing forum, called *The Writing Space*, for the Missouri Baptist University (MBU) Writing Lab. Intended as a supplemental tool for students to use in addition to our tutoring services, this idea was under implementation for four months when I wrote this essay. From the thirty-four posts that tutors have created, there have been thirty-five comments, or seven participants. Hosted on WordPress, *The Writing Space* merges academic writing skills into a social, student-friendly layout. The two sections, *Daily Writing Prompts* and *Keep It to 140*, contain questions, problems, or reading passages addressing aspects of academic writing: critical thinking, argument, organization, and conciseness. With a majority of college students using social media and technology, this digital territory has helped to align our Writing Lab with the interests of college students. *The Writing Space* is a way for students to improve their writing skills by interacting with others and by engaging with writing prompts. For the *Daily Writing Prompts*, tutors post writing exercises, including the following:

- What is your biggest struggle in writing college-level essays? Why?
- What is your stance on the elimination of foreign languages from American high schools? Do you think foreign languages are necessary at that age or at all? Why or why not?
- Observe a group that you spend time with frequently. What do they say? What do they do? How does this group personally impact you?

This atmosphere differs from a discussion board because students respond to one another's comments on the topic, and tutors send messages to students regarding their arguments, structure, and supporting evidence. Tutors do not negatively discuss students' writing abilities but talk about them in a positive manner. This dialogue acts as more of a conversation than as an assessment of their writing. Tutors give feedback to encourage students to talk and think about their writing.

Taking part in this conversation allows students to enhance the skill of critical thinking. According to John C. Bean, academic essays largely emphasize the ability to argue effectively and to offer logical reasoning (22). Bean advocates critical thinking in relation to writing instruction. Oftentimes, I tutor students on essays with flawless grammatical structures but no substantial content. In this section of *The Writing Space*, I encourage students to analyze a topic, view it from multiple perspectives, and reevaluate their thinking. *The Writing Space* gives me the opportunity to guide students through this process; I do not necessarily teach them how to think, but I ask questions and give suggestions regarding their writings. Another section of *The Writing Space*, called *Keep It to 140*, stems from the 140 characters (each letter, space, and punctuation mark) that people use when composing tweets on Twitter. This section applies to more personal, everyday matters. Based on Andy Selsberg's article, "Teaching to the Text Message," this section requires students to write about a topic, restricting the numbers of characters they can use to 140. Some examples from *The Writing Space* are:

- Explain your process of writing a paper in 140 characters or less.
- A metaphor is a figure of speech that compares two unlike things without using "like" or "as." An example would be "her heart is a warm fire." Use a metaphor to describe yourself. Keep it to 140 characters or less.
- Persuade a *Craigslist* client to buy your textbook (of whichever subject you would like) for the price listed in your ad. Keep it to 140 characters or less.

By composing short pieces, students learn the art of brevity. Selsberg points out that “concision first will encourage students to be economical and innovative with language.” Learning these skills impacts the academic writing of students, helping them cultivate stronger voices and creativity and combat wordiness in their essays. Students, including me, often ramble in their essays, using three sentences to express an idea when one sentence would deliver that point more effectively. Having a limited space to communicate ideas helps students develop as academic writers. In their *Keep It to 140* responses, students conveyed ideas succinctly and did so without any of the abbreviations of Twitter and “text speak.” When I further assessed both *The Writing Space* sections, I was surprised that six students responded to the *Daily Writing Prompts* while only two participated in *Keep It to 140*. Perhaps students had more to say and felt they could construct more of an idea in *Daily Writing Prompts*. Though *The Writing Space* only resulted in these few participants, the number is promising, given that our Writing Lab is still establishing an identity on campus.

The Writing Space acts as a multifaceted forum: a place to write, to interact with peers, and to receive feedback from tutors. Each segment mixes the voices and perspectives of students and tutors into one collaborative forum. For small institutions, such as MBU, whose Writing Lab staff consists of four people, complications can arise. I am the main administrator and marketer of *The Writing Space*, and as a part-time employee, I found it difficult to market and raise awareness of and interest for *The Writing Space*. I fostered participation by posting flyers around campus, visiting classes, displaying an advertisement on the electronic bulletin board, making a video, and discussing advertisement methods with professors.

One method that worked well for our university was to integrate *The Writing Space* with one of our workshops. In the workshop, students wrote character sketches, which we posted on *The Writing Space*. Some of the dialogue that ensued from this prompt is as follows:

Student: He walks casually to and from the tables. There’s a linger in his walk and work behind the counter. Something seems to linger on his mind, whether tiredness from the semester or a more immediate circumstance. . . .

Me: You clearly illustrate the posture and gait of your character. How else does he carry himself? What is he doing with his hands? Where are his eyes looking?

Another tutor: I like the alliteration between “walk” and “work.” My suggestion would be to play around with the sentence structure. The very structure of a paragraph and its individual sentences can affect the feel of what is going on. Consider making your sentences linger just like your character is. Great job!

My goal for this project mirrors this amalgamation, creating bridges between different services in 1) the Writing Lab, 2) the Writing Lab and classes, and 3) the academic and social environment. My end goal for this project is to create a space for tutors and students to interact.

Even if *The Writing Space* does not increase more student participation, this experience helped me recognize that writing labs should reach out to where students are as writers. The title, *The Writing Space*, connotes that writing occurs everywhere, and writing labs’ presence in both face-to-face and digital platforms blurs the boundaries of what writing is and where it takes place. Personally, through this forum, I learned about how to reflect on my own writing and the diverse ways that I shape writing. In the same way, I, along with other tutors, can better understand and target how students write to bridge the gap between social writing, digitized writing, and academic prose. The base of this forum is flexible, and writing labs can tweak it to fall in line with their students’ needs. My goal is for writing labs to implement this idea or a form of it, either one or both of the sections, to improve students’ academic writing skills through social, technological means and to encourage them to enjoy the writing process through those means. In this way, *The Writing Space* allows for both the improvement of academic writing skills and a celebration of the writing process. ♦

Works Cited

- Bean, John C. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor’s Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. 2nd ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011. Print.
- Selsberg, Andy. “Teaching to the Text Message.” *The Opinion Pages. The New York Times*, 19 Mar. 2011. Web. 23 Feb. 2012. ♦



Muriel Harris, editor
TWENTY SIX DESIGN LLC.
1835 E. Hallandale Beach Blvd #178
Hallandale Beach, FL 33009

Prsrt Std
US Postage
PAID
Milwaukee, WI
Permit #4496

CALENDAR FOR WRITING CENTER ASSOCIATIONS

September 12-14, 2014:

Nebraska Writing Center
Consortium, in Crawford, NE

Contact: Lee Miller: <lmiller@CSC.edu>; Conference website: <www.nebwritingcenters.org/>.

October 1, 2014: Chicagoland
Organization of Writing, Literacy,
and Learning Centers: Tutor
Leaders, in Aurora, IL

Contact: Erin Micklo: <emicklo@imsa.edu>; Conference website: <sites.google.com/site/chicagoowllc/tutor-conference-2014>.

October 30-November 1, 2014:

International Writing Centers
Association and the National
Conference on Peer Tutoring in
Writing, in Lake Buena Vista, FL

Contact: <iwcancptw2014@gmail.com>; Conference website: <iwcancptw2014.com>.

November 7-8, 2014: Middle
East/North Africa Writing
Centers, in Dubai, UAE

Contact: Nadine Ashkuri
<Nadine@tud.ac.ae>;
Kathy O'Sullivan <Kathy@tud.ac.ae>; Conference
website: <menawca.org>.

February 12-14, 2015: South
Central Writing Centers
Association, in Austin, TX

Contact: <abatt@austin.utexas.edu>; Conference website: <http://scwca.net/>.

February 19-21, 2015:

Southeastern Writing Center
Association, in Nashville, TN

Contact: Stacia Watkins <stacia.watkins@lipscomb.edu>; Conference website: <www.iwca-swca.org/Conferences.html>.

February 28, 2015: Southern
California Writing Centers
Association—Peer Tutoring,
in La Jolla, CA

Contact: Madeleine Picciotto:
<mpicciotto@ucsd.edu>;
Conference website:
<sandbox.socialwritingcenters.org/2015-tutor-conference/>.

April 10-11, 2015: East Central
Writing Centers Association, in
Notre Dame, IN

Contact: Matthew Capdevielle:
<matthew.capdevielle@nd.edu>; conference website: <ecwca.org/>.

April 18-19, 2015: Northeast
Writing Centers Association,
in Hackettstown, NJ

Contact: Richard Severe:
<severer@centenarycollege.edu>.
Conference website: <www.centenarycollege.edu/collaboratory>.