



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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The Writing Center: A Center for All Disciplines

When educators discuss writing centers, they usually refer to a lab setting with writing tutors available for students enrolled in writing classes, particularly developmental writing classes. But a writing center should be an interdisciplinary facility. With the focus of education on cultural awareness and on literacy, colleges are faced with the need for centers of learning that provide students with multifaceted learning opportunities. One such center is the interdisciplinary writing center—a center that provides students a setting for cross-curricular writing assistance.

Community college students need somewhere they can go for help in writing for any discipline—a place where they can feel comfortable asking for suggestions on how to get started on a paper, how to punctuate, and how to document correctly. Many writing centers provide assistance on freshman composition papers, but few provide assistance for writing assignments in other general education or elective courses.

Today more instructors are including writing in their classes, and students are looking for ways to meet the criteria delineated in these different writing tasks. Students must now not only write for Humanities classes (expository essays, critical analyses, book reviews, music critiques, literary analyses, and research papers), but they must also write for social science classes (expository essays, causal analyses, outlines, summaries, abstracts, research papers), for natural science classes (descriptions, process analyses, lab notes, summaries, abstracts, research papers), and for health science classes (lab notes, summaries, abstracts, nursing care plans).

Students need a place to go for writing assistance—a place that provides tutoring to help them understand how to meet the specific demands of different audiences and purposes in their writing. So, the question remains—how does one make the college writing center an interdisciplinary writing center?

First, directors of writing centers should hire tutors, preferably full-time, to work in the writing center. These tutors should have a minimum of a B.A. in English or Composition and should be selected according to the following criteria:

- a determined level of proficiency in writing,
- some knowledge of the composing process,
- some experience with nontraditional students,
- an understanding of the needs of nontraditional students, and
- an awareness and some understanding of interdisciplinary writing.

Since consistency is important in order to maintain a continuum for students, and in order to provide an area consistently conducive to the development of writing skills, these tutors need to work regular hours.

Second, directors of writing centers should draft faculty tutors from the Humanities, as well as other disciplines. This is relatively easy to do. Directors can meet with division or department chairpersons and request a few minutes of time at a division or departmental meeting for a discussion of the writing center's "new role" or new direction. They can ask colleagues who are friends to "be brave" and volunteer to tutor. They can seek out new faculty members, particularly tenure-track faculty eager to fill a curriculum vitae with innovative items. Above all, they can be honest and clarify their intentions, their long-range goals, and their emphasis on meeting the needs of students.

Third, directors of writing centers should make the prospect of tutoring in this center attractive to faculty members. They should consider what "perks" they can offer. In some instances, depending on the performance review structure, faculty members feel intrinsic rewards and feel that they earn intangible credit, nonvisual "feathers in their caps" for this involvement with students. Faculty members often receive letters of evaluation at year's end—letters that not only acknowledge the faculty members' participation as tutors, but that also verify advising or conferencing credit needed to satisfy contract agreements. Whatever the situation, directors can make this tutoring more than just intrinsically worthwhile for faculty members.

Fourth, directors of writing centers should provide hired tutors and faculty tutors with an orientation session at the beginning and a sharing session at the end of each semester. The focus in these orientation sessions should be on the following:



- the goals of the writing center,
- the general policies of the center,
- ways to meet student needs,
- ways to encourage colleagues to make student referrals, and
- schedules—making sure to “spread out” or balance faculty tutoring as much as possible.

These beginning orientation sessions should include ideas about typical writing assignments, methods for working with developmental as well as advanced writers, ways to help students develop self-confidence as writers, tactics for dealing with students who want editors, and diplomatic and sensitive ways to work with students who may have acquired assistance in the writing center, but who, nonetheless, did not receive the A's they wanted. The sharing sessions at the end of each semester should simply put into focus the accomplishments and/or problems of the center in relationship to the goals presented at the beginning of the semester. This can be a fine justification for an open-house sharing with faculty tutors, as well as with faculty members not yet involved with the writing center.

Fifth, directors of writing centers should have available, contingent on budget, at least some of the following resources for student use:

- handouts on writing in the Humanities, the Social Sciences, the Natural Sciences, the Health Sciences;
- dictionaries (unabridged, etymology, foreign language [Latin, French, German, Spanish], literary terms, social science terms, medical terminology);
- style manuals—*MLA*, *APA*, the University of Chicago *Manual of Style*, *CBE Style Manual* (Council of Biology Editors), *Handbook for Authors* (American Chemical Society), *A Manual for Authors of Mathematical Papers* (American Mathematical Society), and *Style Manual for Guidance in the Preparation of Journals Published by the American Institute of Physics* (for health sciences);
- sample assignments and papers from various disciplines.

For writing centers with computers, there are useful software packages available: e.g., word processing programs and tutorials that focus on the process of writing; on causal relationships; and on logic, reasoning, analysis, and synthesis of ideas. The purpose in providing these resources for students is to make available to them a center as conducive to writing as possible. Students writing analyses of a play should have access to a dictionary of literary terms; students writing sociology reports should have access to a

dictionary that provides definitions of social science terms; and students writing nursing care plans should have access to a dictionary of medical terminology.

Finally, directors of writing centers should advertise to students the goals of the center, the resources available, the types of assistance available (for example, help with writing, editing, word processing, etc.), the names of the tutors and faculty, and the hours for the center and for “specialized” writing help. Above all, they need to let students know that the center is an interdisciplinary setting conducive to learning about writing and that students from all levels of all disciplines are welcome. Directors also need to inform faculty members of the same—via memos, in-house publications, or division or departmental meetings—and to encourage them to refer (bring) their students to the center. A community college writing center should be, and can be, a successful interdisciplinary writing center for all students.

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