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Better Writers, Not Just Better Papers

College is an exciting time where students are introduced to new thoughts and ideas. It is a time when they begin to become aware of their life potential. For many, it is also a time of struggle, especially where writing is concerned. The apprehension undergraduates feel can be overwhelming, often causing them to panic. The reason is that the types of papers students are asked to write at the college level are unlike most they were assigned in high school. This new way of writing, coupled with the demands of college life, can leave students to feel unprepared and anxious. In an effort to help with this transitional period and the writing process throughout students' academic careers, many institutions of higher learning have established Writing Center programs. These Centers are open to everyone and are intended to be places where writers can gain insightful help with their work. This research study seeks to answer the question: how does the Plymouth State University Writing Center contribute to students' level of comfort with the writing process?

As someone who has always enjoyed writing, I was curious about people who either do not like writing or who experience anxiety when asked to do so. Therefore, my interest in this topic stemmed from a desire to know: what causes writing apprehension, how can it be eased, and what techniques does the Center's staff use to do this? By

studying the Writing Center, I felt I could open a window into how students perceive the assignments they are given and the process that takes place for a paper to be written well. By gaining insight into how students perceive the Center and the assignments that lead them to visit, I was hoping to learn techniques on how to both ease writing apprehension and promote the Writing Center as a resource available to students, staff and faculty.

To begin, I wanted to find out how our undergraduates perceive the Writing Center. Do they view it as a place where people are sent as punishment for poor writing, or do they view it as a place to go for help with the process? Much literature has been written about how freshman often feel overwhelmed with the writing process. For many, college writing is vastly different from their previous high school English assignments. In order for students to develop their skills as writers, they need to gain a better sense of themselves by exploring topics that have personal meaning to them. (David, Gordon & Pollard, 522-532; Grimm, 523-548). Does the Writing Center do this?

In an effort to find answers to my questions, I began by interviewing two people: 1. A student who was required to visit the Writing Center; and 2. The director of the Center, Jane Weber. One interview was conducted onsite; the other, in another room at the University library. Observations of the Writing Center took place over the course of four consecutive Sunday evenings and were between 2-2.50 hours in length. During this time, I took notes on many conferences, five of which are discussed in this paper. In addition, I decided to take a closer look at the University overall, its expectations pertaining to writing, and how the Writing Center functions within these expectations..

Plymouth State University is a regional comprehensive school located in central New Hampshire and has a student to teacher ratio of 17:1. The tuition rate for in-state

undergraduate students this year was \$6,180; for out-of-state, \$13,730 (PSU Website, University Fast Fact Page). As part of the general education requirements, all undergraduate students are required to take Composition. By the end of this course, students are expected to “be able to write essays that are unified by a central thesis, well developed in carefully organized paragraphs with vivid details, and grammatically competent with effective sentence structure and correct mechanics” (PSU Website, General Education Requirement Page). Students’ backgrounds are diverse, and this course is often seen as challenging during their transitional period into the academic community. Knowing how important writing is during a successful college career, many instructors of Composition encourage their students to visit the Writing Center.

The Plymouth State University Writing Center, located on the bottom level of Lamson Library, has four professional staff— one full-time, two part-time, and one consultant. In addition to this, they employ six student staff members, all from different backgrounds. A non-directive approach is taken to help with student writing. It is the staff’s firm belief that the writer is in charge during the conference session and that everyone no matter how advanced, can benefit from having his/her papers reviewed by a good reader. (PSU Website, Writing Center Page).

Many students who visit schedule appointments ahead of time, others just walk in. They are asked to provide information about the paper they are writing, the class it is for, and what type of writing assistance they are seeking. This information helps the Writing Center staff keep track of how many people visit and also the types of writing with which people have the most trouble. After the student leaves, their professor is notified via e-mail of the visit.

Center Director Jane Weber talked about how she feels students perceive the Writing Center: “Those that have come have the sense that they get to call the shots. Some people, who haven’t come, would view it as remedial or scary. Most people, who haven’t visited, would assume that the Writing Center staffers are authorities over writing, but we have a non-directive philosophy, so the student has the authority” (Personal Interview). We talked a little bit more on the subject, and I asked her how she would advertise the Center. Her answer was one of optimism, and one that speaks to the non-directive philosophy of her Writing Center. She said that her slogan would be, “Better writers, not just better papers. Our emphasis is on the writer improving, so that they can take that to the next paper, not just on a picture perfect paper.” She went on to say that “All writers are different. In college, unfamiliarity with certain types of writing is a real obstacle - unfamiliarity with the depth of critical thinking required in longer writing.”

In addition to the freshman writing competency, Plymouth State has a long history with and a great deal of support for the Writing Across the Curriculum program, of which “a central premise is that the responsibility of teaching writing, especially within the disciplines, should be shared by faculty in all departments and programs” (PSU Website, Writing Across the Curriculum Page). This means that students from all disciplines are expected to write and write often.

Due to this level of importance placed on writing at the University, it only makes sense that the Writing Center is a hub of activity. I was curious to find out just how busy it gets and what techniques were incorporated to make the first time visitor feel at ease. I also wanted to see how comfortable students were with return visits and whether they

would recommend the Center to their friends. Furthermore, how a student is approached by their instructor to seek assistance with work is critical, because it will have a huge impact on pre-conceived notions of what they will get out of the experience (Boquet 469). In order for students to understand that being sent to the Writing Center is not a punishment, it must be handled in a positive manner.

JP, a junior at Plymouth State University who is majoring in Graphic Design and minoring in Art History, was required by his art professor to visit the Writing Center. While he has only visited once, his experience is one worth looking at, because it provides a glimpse into how the Center is perceived. I began my interview with him by asking why his professor required him to visit the Writing Center. He told me that the instructor considered the initial papers that were handed in to be terrible and that she was allowing the class to do a revision. JP's instructor also required the entire class to visit the Writing Center for help with this.

Since JP considered himself a good writer (He had always gotten high marks on his work) I asked him if it made him feel awkward, in any way, to be sent to the Writing Center. Did it make any of his classmates feel awkward? He answered by saying that he had heard that the Center was a useful place to visit but that having someone else read his paper out loud was "kind of a little nerve wracking at first."

I asked him whether he thought the Writing Center had helped him improve his writing and whether or not it helped him think about the process more. He said that yes, he did, because they made him pay attention more to the details. JP went on to say that he felt the Writing Center had a comfortable atmosphere and that "everything's kind of laid back." This statement seemed to be right on track with the literature that says how

writing centers tend to take up spaces that are neither academic nor home-like. They are, rather, somewhere in between and this middle-ground enables them to “offer a momentary respite away from the competing cultures to which our students and colleagues belong” (Sunstein 11). Furthermore, this liminality allows writers to feel more comfortable and more open to examining the writing process (Sunstein 11).

I was curious to see if this was the impression JP also got, so I asked him if he felt the Center provided him with enough privacy. He responded by commenting on how the Center was “off in its own kind of little section” and how “it kind of sits back a little.” That kind of setup, he said would be comfortable even if he had gone in completely stressed about his assignment. He also said that he would definitely recommend the Writing Center to a friend or classmate (Personal interview).

Much literature has been written on the subject of writing centers and their increasing role on college campuses around the country and their common factors. To begin with, in order to be successful, the center must be perceived in a positive light by the students and by the faculty. Its staff must have an understanding of cultural diversity and writing apprehension. Finally, it must be a place where students feel at ease enough to ask questions and talk openly about their writing concerns. (De & Gregory 118-132). In addition, students may be more comfortable working with someone on a one-on-one basis to help address their own needs (Harris 436). Writing centers become truly invaluable in these circumstances, because the professionals who work in them have struggled for years to find ways to reach the individual. These people are persistent and imaginative in their efforts to help students develop their skills as writers, gain a better sense of themselves, and explore topics that have personal meaning to them (David,

Gordon & Pollard 522-532; Kail 315-318; Grimm 523-548).

Jane Weber told me how the current Writing Center opened for business in the fall of 1994 and was originally located in the basement of Mary Lyon until 2004 when it moved to its first location in Lamson Library – a windowless location on the lower level. In October of 2006, the Center moved to its current location in Lamson – an area also on the lower level, but with a very large picture window. By the fall of 2007, it went from being called the Writing and Reading Center to become known simply as the Writing Center (Personal interview).

The location of the Writing Center today is in a world unto its own. Currently, it takes up a corner section on the lower level. While this is probably the most prominent place it has ever been, it still occupies kind of a marginal nook, an area that does not meet the typical definition of defined physical and cultural space. Instead it is an area that encompasses the interpersonal space of the center itself, the broader space of the campus community, and the wider space beyond the campus. It is a place where students are free to think between their multiple cultures and concentrate on the process of writing (Sunstein 19 & 20)

At the entryway, there is an enclosed office to the left for the supervising staff member on duty. To the right is a sign with the hours of operations and just beyond that are two chairs and a couch. In the inner section of the Center, there are round tables and chairs. Off to the left, just beyond where the inner office ends, there is a row of computers. A large picture window takes up just about the entire length of the back wall and overlooks the walkway between Lamson and Russell House.

During the month of April, I visited the Center for four consecutive Sundays.

Each visit lasted between 2-2.5 hours. In the following section, I write about five writing conference consultations I observed- two that a student conducted and three that the supervising staff member, who doubles as one of the assistant directors, held.

In the first conference, Peter, a student staff member at the Center, consulted with a walk-in named Victor:

PSU Writing Center Conference #1:

At first, Peter welcomed Victor to sit down at the table. Then he inquired about the nature of the visit. Was he there for a class? What was he working on? What would he like help with?

Victor replied by telling Peter that he was working on a paper about *Frankenstein* and he was hoping someone could read his paper out loud to him. Victor said it would be easier to see if his paper flowed, if someone read it to him. He also wanted to see if he could catch any obvious errors.

As Peter read the paper, Victor stopped him periodically to make corrections. At one point, Victor smiled and said, "This is why I like this place." When Peter was done reading, he talked with Victor about what he liked concerning the paper – the smooth transitions, his strong ending, and the way he kept to his thesis. Peter then said that the only thing that stuck out in his mind was one place where he felt a citation was needed.

Victor made a note of this, thanked Peter and went to the nearby computer to work on his paper. While I was watching the interaction between these two men, I noticed how Peter followed the non-directive approach the Center endorses. He allowed Victor to have complete ownership of his work and of the conference. In addition, Peter told Victor what he liked about the paper before offering any suggestions, a method that puts writers at ease.

The pace at the Writing Center during the second conference was less frenzied than the first, and it was relatively quiet when Aaron came in for his scheduled conference. Since the paper he was working on was for an Organizational Behavior class, it was a perfect opportunity to observe writing across the curriculum in action:

PSU Writing Center Conference #2:

Scott welcomed Aaron to the Center, took down his intake information, and asked the student if he had any concerns about the paper. When Aaron replied that nothing immediately came to mind, Scott asked if the instructor had provided the class with some sort of template. The answer to this was also no but that the class was required to visit the Writing Center for the assignment, so since he was there, he would like his paper checked over for any obvious problems.

As Scott did this, the two men talked a little about the subject of the paper which was a lightweight laptop, relatively new to the market. They talked about word choice, and at one point, Scott suggested that Aaron use the word "imperative" instead of "prominent." Aaron seemed quite pleased by this and nodded in agreement. While the two men continued to go over the paper, Scott periodically stopped to ask questions about specific terminology. He asked who the intended audience was and pointed out areas where the paper could use some improvement in terms of readability. They also discussed how streamlining can be used as a way of eliminating any unnecessary words.

They talked about how to include just the right amount of background so that the reader would have a better understanding without feeling insulted. They also talked about the use of parallel construction. Aaron wrote periodic notes in his margins. During the conference, Aaron appeared to be genuinely interested in what Scott had to say, and he did a lot of nodding. Scott spoke to him in a very kind manner and mentioned when passages were well-written. He told Aaron that the writing, as a whole, was very good when the actual product was discussed.

It seemed that during this consultation, Scott was learning quite a bit about the product and business lingo at the same time that Aaron was learning about the writing process. Scott was not afraid to ask for clarification on terms and ideas he was unfamiliar with, and this seemed to make Aaron feel more in control over the process.

The third consultation occurred with Peter and Carmen. Since the paper was on the student's laptop, the consultation was handled a little differently:

PSU Writing Center Conference #3:

Carmen visited the Writing Center, because it was requirement for her Careers Exploration class. She told Peter that even though she had to come, she felt it would be a good idea to have her paper looked over. Since the paper was on Carmen's laptop, Peter read it directly from the machine. He read it silently and stopped periodically to let her know when something should be looked at further. He suggested that she include some current examples. Carmen was receptive to this. Peter asked her if she wants to work on expanding a section. The woman agreed – she said she would like to but "doesn't really get it."

They continued to talk about breaking things up into paragraphs. Carmen talked about tying it all in at the end – about future career goals. Peter asked her whether she would include her current job. Carmen responded by saying that she wanted to talk about a personal experience – a field trip in high school that helped to inspire her to pursue a Criminal Justice degree.

Because the paper was well written and because Carmen was having it looked at the day before it was due, I wondered why she came to the Center. I decided to ask her how her instructor assigned the Writing Center as a requirement for 10 points on the paper. Carmen responded that they (the class) had the opportunity to visit the Center at any point in the paper. It did not have to be at the end, and that her class has had plenty of time to visit before tonight. She admitted that she herself should have visited the center prior to the night before.

During this session, Peter asked questions and made suggestions, but Carmen was an active participant who used the opportunity to strengthen an already well-written paper.

Until now, I have shown writing consultations that show the Center's philosophy of putting the writer in the driver's seat in action. The following two conferences, however, show what happens when a staff member does not follow this non-directive approach. Below is the conference that occurred between Scott and Austin:

PSU Writing Center Conference #4

Scott was sitting next to a different student at the computer closest to the inner office. They were working on a paper together. Scott was filling out the form. He asked for the name, major, year. Scott told Austin that the instructor wanted sources cited. The paper appeared to be due the following morning. It was clear that Austin had waited until the last minute.

The two continued to talk. Scott recommended labeling the sections of the paper – one area could be considered confusing without it.

Austin appeared at one point to be staring at his computer screen. He appeared to be having some difficulties with his paper. He kept checking to see if Scott was available to help him. A few minutes later, he accidentally dropped all of his papers on the floor. He looked very frustrated for a minute. Then he picked up speed – a brief burst of energy.

At the beginning of this session, Scott treated Austin with respect, but part way through, he left him to tend to other students. This in itself would not have been a problem if when the students left, Scott returned to help Austin. This did not happen. Instead, Austin was left to fend for himself. Conference 5 did not go any better:

PSU Writing Center Conference #5

It was a very busy evening at the Writing Center. There were people who had scheduled appointments and others who just showed up needing assistance, because several classes had papers due the next day. It was clear that Scott and Peter had their work cut out for them.

When Rebecca walked in without an appointment, she appeared a little nervous. Scott welcomed her and they sat down at one of the round tables near the window. He wrote down her intake information and then told her that many people benefitted from having their papers read to them. She nodded, he asked her to stop him if she heard something that sounded weird, and then proceed to read the paper out loud to her. As he did this, they both listened for any obvious errors.

All seemed to be going well until the conversation turned to how to write dialogue. From her body language, it was clear that Rebecca was struggling to understand. Scott continued to give her more suggestions of how to make the paper flow better. He talked about MLA and how to list works cited at the end of the paper and how they needed to be in alphabetical order. Scott told Rebecca to think about where it sounded like the paper should have paragraph breaks. When Rebecca did not respond to this, Scott offered suggestions. Rebecca's eyes began to water and she lay her arm stretched out and then rested her head on it. It looked as though she was about to give up, but then she stopped Scott and pointed to where something needed a correction. It seemed that Rebecca felt more at ease when she was given the opportunity to explain the idea behind her paper. When she did this, she appeared to be much more comfortable and confident.

Scott asked Rebecca if she liked the way her paper sounded. He told her that some of her sentences should really be worked out, that the sentence structure was all wrong. He gave her further suggestions on making it more readable and how to better connect with her intended audience. By this time, Rebecca had become visibly upset. It was unclear to me whether Scott was aware of Rebecca's physical cues or whether he simply did not know what to do. It was, after all, an understandably awkward situation.

From where I was sitting, it was easy to see that reading the paper out loud was not an effective means of helping this woman. It was also clear that a staff member of the Writing Center telling a student that her sentence structure was all wrong was a clear violation of the non-directive approach. The effect it had on Rebecca was obvious. By the time she left the Center, her hands were shaking and she was crying heavily.

In addition to the frustration I felt from watching this scenario play out, I also found myself wondering what could have been done differently. Instead of having the paper read out loud to her, what would have been helpful for this writer? Well, in an ideal world, it would be wonderful if we could help students learn how to identify what works for them and to speak up if something isn't. I felt that Rebecca would have benefited greatly from the Center if she had visited at the beginning of her assignment. Waiting until the day before a paper is due is never a good idea, but for people with writing apprehension, anxiety levels magnify with such procrastination.

How do we get students to realize this for themselves? How do we get them to seek assistance before they think they need it? Is this something that can even be taught, or does it have to be self-initiated in order to be effective? While the answers to these questions are not simple ones, it is clear that, if a Center has a non-directive approach, that this must be adhered to by everyone employed there. Scott's insensitivity and failure to follow the Plymouth State Writing Center's stated philosophy exacerbated the problem in this situation which, in turn, caused Rebecca's anxiety level to escalate.

In an effort to help alleviate student anxiety, the freshman writing program at the University of Southern California is now being evaluated using a portfolio grading system. This has proven to be very successful because it allows for students to revise more (Clark 515-524). Nancy Welch, director of the University of Vermont Writing Center says that more research needs to be done on ways to introduce different types of writing to students. The more familiar they are with different genres, the more comfortable they will become. She also stresses the importance of seeing each student as an individual and to remember that writing apprehension is a very real thing (51-69).

In a Harvard study that attempted to explore the role that the freshman year of college plays in the developing writer. The researchers conducted surveys and field interviews. They came to the conclusion that the freshman year is about students' first steps toward academic writing and an opportunity for them to begin to participate in the world of thoughts and ideas (Sommers & Saltz 124-149). Because of this, it seems even more critical for the writing centers and university faculty to become better educational partners.

Writing centers are places where students can feel encouraged to become independent writers and thinkers (Stanley as qtd. in Boquet 467). They are designed to be comfortable environments where students can get help working through their writing apprehension in an effort to find their voices and become better acclimated to the academic community.

While the Plymouth State University Writing Center is clearly not a panacea for all things poorly written, I do believe it is a place we can turn to see a technique that works. From what I have observed, it is a place where visitors feel welcome. There are citation manuals, writing guides, worksheets (see appendix) and sample papers available. Upon entering there is a comfortable couch and chairs. There are also tables and a large picture window that gives the illusion of the area being much larger than it is. The atmosphere is so comfortable, in fact, that it is where I chose to write up this paper.

When students visit the Writing Center, they are often stressed. For those who have never visited before and who have writing anxiety, it is a vulnerable situation. By welcoming people in the manner in which they do, and by placing the writer in the driver's seat during the conferences, most staff members empower the student. Once

these students visit and experience the act of putting a paper together in a relaxed environment, it goes a long way to easing their overall anxiety toward writing in general. Many visitors come back for further consultations. In fact, according to the Center's director Jane Weber, the most recent statistics indicate that 54% of the visits are by returning writers (Personal interview).

The unsuccessful conference that I observed emphasizes how useful the Writing Center's state philosophy, when adhered to really is. The non-directive method works to empower writers, because it puts them in the driver's seat, allowing them complete ownership over the process. When consultants turn instead to telling the writers what to do, anxiety is increased to levels that are increased, sometimes to unhealthy levels. In a sense, the exception in this case, proves the rule and illustrates the need for thorough and ongoing training for all members of the Center's staff.

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