

SOUTHERN
DISCOURSE
in the CENTER

A Journal of Multiliteracy and Innovation

Articles

- Are Peer-to-Peer Writing Conferences Collaborative? An Evaluation of Peer Tutor-Student Discourse
--Prabin Lama
- Fostering Collaboration, Creativity, and Connection: Writing Center Spaces as Exhibit Areas
--Jeffrey Howard
- The Centrality of the Center (Early COVID Edition): Best Practices for Sustaining Communication Center Operations During a Global Pandemic
--Michael G. Strawser, Kimberly M. Cuny, Russell Carpenter, Kevin Dvorak, and Suzy Prentiss

Consultant Insight

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Back to the Center

- The Writing Center@Piedmont Virginia Community College
--Jenny Koster



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A Journal of Multiliteracy and Innovation

Volume 26 | Number 1 | Spring 2022

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Southern Discourse in the Center: A Journal of Multiliteracy and Innovation (SDC) is a peer-reviewed scholarly journal published twice per year by the Southeastern Writing Center Association (SWCA). As a forum for practitioners in writing centers, speaking centers, digital centers, and multiliteracy centers, SDC publishes articles from administrators, consultants, and other scholars concerned with issues related to training, consulting, labor, administration, theory, and innovative practices.

Our editorial board welcomes scholarly essays on consulting, research, administration, training, technology, and theory relevant to writing centers, speaking centers, and digital/multiliteracy centers. Article submissions may be based in theoretical and critical approaches, applied practices, or empirical research (qualitative or quantitative). Submissions are evaluated by the editors, and promising articles are sent to our national editorial board for doubleblind review. To honor the journal's historical context, future issues will include special sections that profile the work of regional associations, emerging undergraduate research, and centers across the country, providing a sustained look at regional and national concerns that centers face in the 21st century.

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Our Mission

The Southeastern Writing Center Association (SWCA) was founded in 1981 to advance literacy; to further the theoretical, practical, and political concerns of writing center professionals; and to serve as a forum for the writing concerns of students, faculty, staff, and writing professionals from both academic and nonacademic communities in the Southeastern region of the United States. A member of the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA), an NCTE Assembly, the SWCA includes in its designated region North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, Florida, Georgia, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Kentucky, Puerto Rico, and the American Virgin Islands. Membership in the SWCA is open to directors and staff of writing, speaking, and digital centers and others interested in center work from public and private secondary schools, community colleges, colleges and universities, and to individuals and institutions from beyond the Southeastern region.

The Journal

Southern Discourse in the Center: A Journal of Multiliteracy and Innovation is the journal of the Southeastern Writing Center Association. Published twice annually, this peer-reviewed journal promotes a community of writing center scholarship within the southeast and nationally while serving as a forum for innovative work across the field. Subscribe to *SDC* by becoming a member of SWCA at <http://www.iwca-swca.org>

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Southern Discourse in the Center invites articles that engage in scholarship about writing centers, speaking centers, digital centers, and multiliteracy centers. The journal welcomes a wide variety of topics, including but not limited to theoretical perspectives in the center, administration, center training, consulting and initiatives. An essay prepared for publication in SDC will address a noteworthy issue related to work in the center and will join an important dialogue that focuses on improving or celebrating center work. Please submit manuscripts to southerndiscoursejournal@gmail.com.

Article Submission Guidelines

Most articles in SDC will be between 3,000 and 5,000 words. We ask that all articles be documented in accordance with the *MLA Style Manual*, 8th Edition. Consistent with traditional writing center practice, SDC promotes a feedback model. Articles will be sent out to our national board for blind review and reviewed by our editorial team. SDC is excited to work with you. For longer articles, please send an email inquiry.

“Back to the Center” Submission Guidelines

Alongside scholarly articles, each issue of SDC will include an article of roughly 1,500 words that focuses on a specific writing center, speaking center, digital center or multiliteracy center. “Back to the Center” will share a center’s successes, goals, and hopes for improvement. By incorporating visual images, each “Back to the Center” piece should give readers an authentic sense of the ethos of the center and of the work done there. Each “Back to the Center” submission should also include a section titled “Center Insight.” In this section, we’d like to know the numbers: How many sessions are held in the center per semester? How many consultants are working in the center? How many hours a week is the center open? How does consultant recruitment occur? How long is the training process for consultants before they work in the center?

“Consultant Insight” Submission Guidelines

Consistent with the consultant-writer model of the mutual exchange of ideas, we invite consultants to provide insight into center experiences. This article of roughly 2,000 words can be research driven or can take a more narrative and personal approach that illuminates consultant experiences. SDC is interested in both struggles and achievements. The article may focus specifically on one aspect of consulting or it may provide a broader sense of center work.

Book Review Guidelines

Each issue will usually include at least one review of a book relevant to the focus of SDC. Book reviews should be approximately 750-1,500 words in length. Please contact the editors if you are interested in submitting a book review.

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From the Editors

Scott Pleasant

Devon Ralston



The full process of producing an individual issue of this (or any) academic journal starts with (and crucially depends on) gathering high-quality submissions that consider important questions in the field and which contribute to ongoing scholarly and practical conversations that scholars and practitioners are having at any given moment. As the editors of this publication, we read and consider all submissions and then send out for peer review only those submissions that clearly meet this high standard. Only at that point does the real work begin, and the ensuing journey from submission to publication can take a long time—often a year or more.

During the production of this issue, we exchanged quite a few e-mail messages with the authors collected here. Many of the messages we sent out included some sort of apology for the lengthy process, but none of them properly thanked the authors for their work in and commitment to our field of study. Looking back at those messages now, a pattern emerges. We would thank the authors for their patience (often employing a metaphor like “the gears of the scholarly publication machine turn slowly” or some similar phrasing) but not for their work and their commitment to the field at large.

Now that the issue is ready for publication, we want to correct that oversight by sincerely thanking all of the authors and reviewers not only for their patience but for the many hours of hard work that it takes to turn an idea into a publication. We think *SDC* readers will agree that all of that collective and collaborative hard work has resulted in an issue that can make a positive impact on our field.

The three peer-reviewed articles in this issue are all excellent examples of scholarship, of course, but they have more than that in common. Each one considers a different research question, but all of them work toward

the same goal: contributing to conversations that help all of us in this field understand and improve the work we do in our writing and communication centers.

The common thematic thread running through this issue is our shared commitment to active engagement and collaboration with both individuals and groups on the campuses we serve. In this first article, Prabin Lama presents results from a research study that demonstrates the collaborative nature of tutoring sessions. Lama's work shows that writing center consultations tend to be "more collaborative than hierarchical" and that collaboration can take a number of forms during a consultation. He notes that students usually view tutors as experts but without deferring entirely to the tutor. Thus, in effective tutoring sessions, the student writer usually works with the tutor rather than simply accepting advice and directions from the tutor.

Jeffrey Howard's article focuses on the generative power of various kinds of exhibits in writing center spaces. Howard argues that art, multimedia, and other kinds of exhibits can "promote engaging perspectives on language, communication, literacies, and many other topics related to the work of the center and its relationships with diverse student populations." For Howard, the ultimate purpose of providing these kinds of displays in a writing center is to foster an environment where collaboration and active engagement are not only possible but encouraged.

While both of those articles concentrate on the positive power of collaborative work, the third article is itself a product of the very kind of collaboration that Howard and Lama seek to promote. Team-written by five authors from different campuses, "The Centrality of the Center (Early Covid Edition)" identifies ten best practices that writing centers should follow when challenges such as the recent (and ongoing) COVID-19 situation require centers to move away from traditional in-person operations and toward online/distance modalities. Most of the best practices discussed in the article are designed to ensure that collaborative work is still possible—perhaps even emphasized and made easier—when centers move online.

The two features that close out this issue continue this focus on collaboration and engagement. The “Consultant Insight” piece by Nyah Mattison and Taylor Keilman, both of the Transylvania University Writing Center, explain what they learned and experienced as course-embedded consultants (CECs). The takeaway message of the piece is that, by working closely with students in CEC-designated sections of a course, writing center tutors can help to “demystify writing center practices” and “provide benefits of mentorship that extend beyond academic support.”

In the “Back to the Center” piece that closes out this issue, Jenny Koster shows how one center provides opportunities for multiple types of collaborative work, including the same kind of course-embedded tutoring that Mattison and Keilman write about. For Koster, the goal of all of these attempts to promote engagement is for the center to be a “motivator of change” that “reflects the dynamic community of the college as a whole.”

There is perhaps no better way to sum up our role as writing center professional than Koster’s phrase “motivator of change.” Whether that “change” refers to one student becoming a stronger writer or to departments, units, or even whole campuses valuing and promoting effective communication, our collective goal should always be to facilitate various kinds of positive change—and always in a spirit of collaboration that can be found throughout this issue.

We hope and believe that the articles and features collected here—all of which are the end result of a long process of healthy collaboration among authors, reviewers, and editors—help you and your centers contribute to an environment of healthy cooperation and active engagement on your campuses.

--Scott and Devon

Scott: sepleasa@coastal.edu
Devon: ralstond@winthrop.edu

Are Peer-to-Peer Writing Conferences Collaborative? An Evaluation of Peer Tutor-Student Discourse

—Prabin Lama

Abstract

This paper uses discourse analysis to examine peer-to-peer writing conferences in a writing center setting. With the aim of evaluating authority relationships and demonstrating the use of discourse analysis in evaluating writing center conferences, three such conferences were recorded and analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Evaluating authority relationships can shed light on whether writing centers are indeed positioned to promote inclusive practices that, according to Nancy Grimm’s postmodern theorizing of writing centers, value difference rather than erase it. The results of this study indicate that although the peer tutors maintained overall control, the conferences were more collaborative than hierarchical. The study also demonstrates that both quantitative and qualitative discourse analysis techniques can be used to evaluate authority relationships in writing center conferences.

Introduction

Some writing center scholars have suggested that peer-to-peer writing center conferences are more collaborative than classroom instruction mainly because a peer tutor is not responsible for grading student papers, has no formal evaluative authority over the student, and shares a common “peer” context with the student. For instance, Muriel Harris states that a tutor “inhabits a world somewhere between student and teacher” and “sits below the teacher on the academic ladder,” and as a result, “the tutor can work effectively with students in ways that teachers can not” (“Talking in the Middle” 27-28). Similarly, Kenneth Bruffee points out

that peer-tutoring is a “form of collaborative learning” in his 1984 essay titled “Collaborative Learning and the ‘Conversation of Mankind.’” However, John Trimbur argues that in practice, peer tutoring cannot facilitate a conversation between equals. Similarly, Andrea Lunsford suggests that collaboration in writing centers can be challenging because it “often masquerades as democracy when it in fact practices the same old authoritarian control” (3-4). These conflicting views among scholars tell us the idea that writing center tutorials facilitate collaborative learning is not conclusive and that more research is needed to understand the nature of collaboration in writing center tutorials.

While there can be different interpretations of collaborative learning, this study will draw mainly on Lunsford’s idea that a writing center based on collaboration “would place control, power, and authority not in the tutor or staff, not in the individual student, but in the negotiating group” (9). In essence, this view implies that both the student and tutor should have equal control, power, and authority to negotiate the goals, proceedings, and outcomes of a tutorial.

Furthermore, Lunsford states the goal of collaboration in writing center tutorials should be “not only in reaching consensus but in valuing dissensus and diversity” (9). This form of collaboration – in which power, authority, and control are negotiated to ensure that differences are valued and not erased – is, in my opinion, a crucial prerequisite for writing centers in addressing issues of equity, inclusion, and student empowerment that have been advocated by scholars such as Andrea Lunsford, Nancy Grimm, Nancy Welch, Okawa et al., and Sarah Blazer. Only when we know that we are indeed creating opportunities for students to participate as equals in writing tutorials, would it be possible for us to understand and make room for the diverse viewpoints, cultures, and modes of thinking that students bring with them to a writing center consultation. Therefore, understanding the nature of collaboration in writing center tutorials is important because it can have implications for addressing issues of inclusion and empowerment.

To address this need to learn more about the nature of collaboration in writing center tutorials, this study uses discourse analysis to examine authority relationships between peer tutors and students in one-on-one writing center conferences. While my primary purpose is to evaluate

authority relationships in peer-to-peer writing conferences using discourse analysis as a tool, it is also my aim to demonstrate how discourse analysis can be used to analyze writing center discourse.

Literature Review

The existing literature is not conclusive about whether writing center pedagogy actually facilitates collaborative learning. Highlighting the collaborative nature of writing center consultations, Muriel Harris suggests that unlike teacher-student interactions, students “don’t have to listen passively and accept what is ‘told’ to them by an authoritative speaker” when they interact with writing center tutors (“Talking in the Middle” 28). She further adds, “Articles on writing center theory in books and in publications ...all attest to the widely-accepted view that tutoring in writing is a collaborative effort in which the tutor listens, questions, and sometimes offers informed advice about all aspects of the student’s writing” (“Collaboration Is Not Collaboration” 371). In short, Harris is suggesting that writing center tutors work with students as collaborators and not as authoritarian figures.

In his 1984 article, Bruffee reasoned that collaborative learning provides “a context in which students can practice and master the normal discourse exercised in established knowledge communities in the academic world and in business, government, and the professions” (644). Based on this logic, he argued that peer tutoring facilitates collaborative learning by creating opportunities for students to converse with their tutors as equals and learn the discourse valued by the academic community. Bruffee’s article has played an instrumental role in establishing the role of collaborative learning in peer-to-peer writing center conferences.

Other scholars (Trimbur; Blau, Hall, & Strauss; Roswell; Lunsford; Carino), however, have suggested that Bruffee’s view that writing center tutorials takes place among “peers” may not be as straight forward as previously thought. In his 1987 article, “Peer Tutoring: A Contradiction in Terms,” Trimbur argues that peer tutoring cannot facilitate collaborative learning because peer tutors cannot take on the dual role of a “peer” and a “tutor” at the same time. He reasoned that as authorized writing center staff members, peer-tutors are bound to perceive

themselves as having institutional authority to tutor other students. This perception of institutional authority, according to Trimbur, can distort the “peer relationship” associated with peer-to-peer tutoring. Similarly, in their 1998 article, Blau, Hall, and Strauss have argued that the professionalization process of peer-tutors in recent years has moved tutors further away from their roles as peer collaborators. In a 1991 study, Roswell has also suggested that since peer-tutors have a preconceived notion of what an “ideal text” should be, they exercise authority by seeking compliance from student writers to these idealized versions of writing.

Along the same lines, Andrea Lunsford has suggested that the concept of collaboration in writing center tutorials needs to be carefully interrogated because “collaboration often masquerades as democracy” and “can be used to reproduce the status quo and the rigid hierarchy of teacher-student classrooms” where the “tutor is still the ‘seat of all authority’ but is simply pretending it isn’t so” (3-4). In “Power and Authority in Peer Tutoring” Peter Carino points out that due to the emphasis placed by writing centers on the “hands off” collaborative approach, peer tutors frequently face the dilemma of remaining non-directive even when there is a need for them to be directive and exercise authority. All of these scholars seem to be questioning the view that writing center tutorials take place between “peers.” The conflicting views of different scholars regarding the nature of writing conferences indicate more work is needed to understand how authority functions in these conferences.

Knowing how authority functions in writing center conferences can have implications for addressing issues of equity, inclusion, and student empowerment. Many writing center scholars (Lunsford; Grimm; Okawa et al.; Welch; Blazer) have argued that writing centers should be inclusive spaces where cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic differences are recognized instead of erased. For instance, Lunsford envisions writing centers based on collaboration to be “attuned to diversity” and suggests that the absence of such collaborative centers “can lead to the kind of homogeneity that squelches diversity, that waters down ideas to the lowest common denominator, that erases rather than values difference” (7). Similarly, drawing on postmodernism, Nancy Grimm suggests that “writing centers can be places where students can learn to negotiate and understand the contact and conflicts of differences.

Rather than helping the Other become more like us, the work of the writing center might instead include developing the ability to see ourselves as the Other” (13-14). Okawa et al. suggest empowering students in the writing process “has to do not only with the academic issue of text ownership but with our basic social and political assumptions about the student’s right to be writing in the academy” (5). According to them, tutors and teachers can empower students by developing “egalitarian rather than hierarchical relationships between ourselves and our students” and by finding “ways of maintaining cultural respect and encouraging the greatest development of student potential” (5). Lunsford, Grimm, and Okawa et al. are suggesting that students can be empowered when tutors learn to recognize and value diversity, question their own beliefs and assumptions, and develop egalitarian relationships with students.

Similarly, drawing on Julia Kristeva’s concept of “critical exile,” Nancy Welch suggests that writing centers can be “a space of critical exile” in which students and teachers can both “reflect on and intervene in the languages, conventions, and belief systems that constitute our texts, our sense of self, our notions of what is ‘common sense’” (71). Addressing questions about how writing center staff can be oriented to linguistic diversity, Sarah Blazer states, “To deny students opportunities to use what they already know from previous and everyday experiences – including linguistic ones – in the process of learning would be a grave mistake” (22-23). For all these ideas aimed at equity, inclusion, and student empowerment to come to fruition -- whether they be attuning tutors to recognize and value diversity, to question their own beliefs and assumptions, to developing egalitarian relationships with students, to creating conditions for students to intervene in the existing language and belief systems in meaningful ways -- an important first step is to ensure that tutors indeed listen and encourage students to engage freely in the conversation, that the conversation between the tutor and student is not dominated by the tutors. Understanding the “other” and making room for their ideas, beliefs, and voices can only be possible, if we are listening and creating conditions for them to participate. In this context where scholars have highlighted the need for writing centers to address issues of equity, inclusion, and empowerment, it is important to examine how collaboration functions in writing center conferences.

This study hopes to fill this gap by using discourse analysis to evaluate authority relationships in peer-to-peer conferences. Discourse analysis has been used in the past by some scholars to evaluate both teacher-student and writing center conferences. Some studies that have used discourse analysis to examine authority relationships in teacher-student conferences suggest that active participation and negotiation on the part of the student plays an important role in these conferences (Goldstein & Conrad), that teachers control the structure of interaction as well as the interpretation of meaning (Ulichny & Watson-Gegeo), that while successful conferences focus on evaluation of student writing and articulation of criteria for success, unsuccessful conferences exclude evaluation and is dominated by tutors (Walker & Elias), and that such conferences are shaped by participants as well as the setting and contribute positively to student learning (Sperling).

With regard to tutor-student conferences, in their 1998 study, Davis et al. used discourse analysis to evaluate if “tutor/writer conferences follow “teaching or non-teaching patterns” (30) and found that “tutors were not functioning exclusively either as peers or as teachers, but as a combination of the two” (32). Two studies discussed earlier in this review section, one by Blau, Hall, & Strauss (1998) and the other by Roswell (1991), also used discourse analysis and found that tutors exercise some form of authority during writing center consultations. In her 2006 discourse analysis study that focused on politeness and face-saving strategies, Susan Murphy found that “consultants will shift positions of power with students/writers as they seek to achieve particular goals as well as collaboratively construct self-presentations for themselves and their writing centers” (63).

While these studies have made valuable contributions that shed light on authority relationships in writing tutorials through discourse analysis, Pemberton suggests that “the number and frequency of such studies are too far and too few between” (quoted in Mackiewicz and Thompson 1). In *Talk About Writing: The Tutoring Strategies of Experienced Writing Center Tutors*, Mackiewicz and Thompson agree with Pemberton’s view and add that “writing center researchers have barely begun the much-needed systematic, empirical analysis of the ways writing center tutors talk to student writers during writing conferences” (1). Furthermore, they

suggest that considering “writing center practice critically hinges on one-to-one talk,” very few studies “employing quantitative analysis” have been published (1). As a response to this need, Mackiewicz and Thompson present a coding scheme to help writing center researchers examine the discourse of writing center conferences. Their coding scheme includes three broad categories: 1) instruction, 2) cognitive scaffolding, and 3) motivational scaffolding. They define instruction as “the directive aspects of teaching and tutoring - supplying solutions or options, rather than supporting or making room for student writers to generate solutions themselves” and subcategorize it into three codes: telling, suggesting, and explaining (5). They define cognitive scaffolding as “a range of strategies that prod students to think and then help them to push their thinking further” and code eight such strategies: pumping questions, reading aloud, responding as a reader or a listener, referring to a previous topic, forcing a choice, prompting, hinting, and demonstrating (5). Finally, they define motivational scaffolding as tutoring strategies that “focus on student writers’ affect” and code five such strategies: showing concern, praising, reinforcing student writers’ ownership and control, being optimistic or using humor, and giving sympathy or empathy (5). Their book highlights the potential for discourse analysis to be used as a valuable research tool by writing center scholars.

My study responds to the calls made by Pemberton and Mackiewicz and Thompson for more systematic, empirical studies of writing center discourse. In addition, I also use one of the motivational scaffolding codes developed by Mackiewicz and Thompson – “praising” – in the qualitative analysis section of my study (see the methods section below). Furthermore, my study is also informed by Susan Murphy’s suggestion that discourse analysis can be used to corroborate writing center theory with actual practice and to examine the interplay of language, power and other socio-cultural aspects. According to Murphy, “Changes to consultant and administrator practice, encouraging reflection, and building knowledge of actual writing center practice and how it does or does not enact writing center theory are possible results of performing a discourse analysis in a writing center” (80). She further adds that tutors can be aware “of the ways in which power is enacted by language in conjunction with other social/cultural realities: gender, age, education, class, etc.” when they are “given opportunities to grow and learn more sophisticated and refined, theoretically grounded means of viewing

discourse” (79). I intend to use discourse analysis toward similar ends in my study. More specifically, my study will use discourse analysis to evaluate authority relationships in peer-to-peer conferences to address two goals: 1) to examine the extent to which writing center tutorials are collaborative; 2) to demonstrate how discourse analysis can be applied to examine authority relationships in writing center conferences.

Methodology

The primary data for my study was made up of audio recordings of three peer-to-peer writing center conferences. The recordings were made at a large public university’s writing center, and a random sampling method was used to select participants for the recordings. The participants included two female peer-tutors, one male peer-tutor, and three female students. A peer tutor is defined for the purposes of this study as either a graduate student or undergraduate student working as a tutor at this university’s writing center.

I have evaluated the recordings both quantitatively and qualitatively. For the quantitative analysis I adapted the method used in Melanie Sperling’s 1990 study titled “I Want to Talk to Each of You: Collaboration and the Teacher-Student Writing Conference,” which examined authority relationships in teacher-student writing conferences at the high-school level. I chose Sperling’s methodology because it focuses on discourse categories that can provide valuable insights into authority relationships between a tutor and student. For instance, it allows us to examine and quantify discourse categories such as topic initiation, topic ownership, and syntagmatic units to draw inferences about the nature of authority relationships between the tutor and student. Her sample included six focal students and one teacher, and her primary data included recordings of 34 teacher-student conferences. Sperling adapted the following discourse categories to code and analyze her data: topic initiation, topic ownership, types of syntagmatic units, initiation of syntagmatic units, and completion of syntagmatic units. Each of these categories is explained below.

Topic Initiation: refers to topics initiated by either participant (tutor or student) during a conference. A topic can be initiated by either raising a

new issue or by changing the subject under discussion. Whoever initiates more topics can be viewed as controlling the conversation.

Topic Ownership: while either tutor or student can initiate a topic, each topic initiated can be motivated or *owned* by either a tutor or student. For instance, a student can initiate a topic that was originally introduced (or owned) by the tutor and vice-versa. Topic ownership also determines the level of control and collaboration in a conference - whoever owns more topics controls the conversation.

Syntagmatic Relationships of Conversational Turns: Participants in a conversation construct discourse through conversational turns made up of syntagmatic units such as question-answer sequences, request-compliance sequences and the like. Sperling designated three types of syntagmatic pairs or units: 1) question-answer (QA), 2) offer-acceptance (OA), and 3) request-compliance (RC). She considered most assertions to be “offers - offers of information, ideas, or advice” and directives to be requests such as “when the teacher requests that the student re-write a sentence” (293). While the presence of OA syntagmatic pairs will indicate a collaborative tutor-student relationship, the presence of tutor initiated RC pairs will indicate a more authoritative position taken up by the tutor. Similarly, QA syntagmatic units will indicate whether a conference is collaborative or authoritative depending on who initiates most of these units.

Initiation of Syntagmatic Unit: Syntagmatic units must be initiated by either one of the interlocutors in a conversation. For instance, either the tutor or student has to initiate a QA unit by asking a question or an OA unit by making an offer. According to Sperling, “If it is always the teacher who asks the question, makes the request, extends the offer, waiting for the student to respond, then the conversation is inclined toward the teacher” (293). On the other hand, if the student also initiates such units then the control of the teacher can be reduced. Therefore, initiation of syntagmatic units can function as an important indicator of authority relationships in tutor-student conferences too.

Completion of Syntagmatic Unit: All initiated syntagmatic units may not be completed. For instance, a question may be left unanswered or a request left unattended. Sperling states that the completion rate of

syntagmatic units “points toward ways in which teacher and student mutually participate in structuring the discourse” (294). Thus, a higher completion rate of syntagmatic units indicates a higher level of participation between tutor and student in the structuring of discourse, which in turn indicates a higher level of collaboration between them.

Furthermore, I added a new category - *approval seeking questions* (ASQs) used by students in the conferences. ASQs can be described as questions that students put forward not so much as to get a real answer but to get the approval of the tutor. Therefore, ASQs show that students perceive the tutor as an expert who can judge and determine whether their work is acceptable or not. If students initiate a higher number of ASQs, then it could indicate that they are, in a way, submitting to the expertise and judgment of the tutor.

In addition to the quantitative analysis, I analyzed one of the three conference transcripts qualitatively. While the quantitative analysis demonstrates how certain aspects of conference discourse can be quantified and interpreted, the qualitative analysis demonstrates how conference transcripts can be analyzed and interpreted focusing on certain elements of discourse, such as overlapping dialogues, connected dialogues, rhetorical questions, and compliments, among others. In the qualitative analysis, I evaluated the effects of overlapping dialogues and tutor compliments on tutor-student authority relationships.

My analysis of overlapping dialogue is informed by Gilewicz and Thonus’s concept of vertical transcriptions of tutorials that take into account discourse features such as “hesitations, repetitions, timed pauses, backchannels, overlaps and paralinguistic features” (46). They explain that employing vertical transcriptions can provide “more defined criteria for the analysis of tutorials, which in turn will help us operationalize such categories as collaboration, facilitation of response...to reveal how and how effectively they are constructed in tutorial conversation (46). Defining overlap as “any simultaneous speech in which a conversational participant takes the floor before the first speaker has relinquished it” they identify three types of overlap from the literature on discourse analysis: interruption, joint production, and main channel overlap (35). According to them, interruption is “the initiation of a contribution by a second party before the first has finished” and as a result, “[f]loors are

taken and relinquished with each utterance” (35). Main channel overlap takes place when “the person overlapping does not take or is not permitted to take the floor” (36). They explain that main channel overlaps are associated with “uncooperative attempts to seize the floor.” On the other hand, joint production takes place when “speakers complete each other’s utterances” (36). They also point out that “joint productions, more than interruptions or main channel overlaps, represent a movement toward greater solidarity and collaboration (36). In my analysis, I draw on these concepts and definitions to demonstrate how an evaluation of overlapping dialogue can provide insights into the nature of collaboration between a tutor and student in a writing conference.

My analysis of compliments is informed by Mackiewicz and Thompson’s concept of motivational scaffolding strategies. As mentioned in the above literature review section, they defined these scaffolding strategies as tutoring strategies that “focus on student writers’ affect” and coded five such strategies: showing concern, praising, reinforcing student writers’ ownership and control, being optimistic or using humor, and giving sympathy or empathy (5). Furthermore, they claim that “motivational scaffolding can speed up the rate with which two people build up a connection and a sense of goodwill” (121). My analysis of compliments will examine how one of their motivational scaffolding codes – praise – functions to build a sense of goodwill between the tutor and student. In their coding scheme, Mackiewicz and Thompson define praise as instances when “[t]utors pointed to student writers’ successes with positive feedback and verbal rewards”(43). Finally, in my qualitative analysis, I also follow Steven Corbett’s suggestion of providing as much contextual information about the conference as possible, in addition to my analysis of overlapping dialogue and compliments, so that readers are in a position to “readily and freely draw some of their own interpretations and conclusions as well” (58-59).

Quantitative Analysis Findings

Topic Initiation. Table 1 shows the percentage of topics initiated by tutors and students in their respective conferences. The distribution of topic initiation between tutors and students seems to be almost balanced. While the percentage of student-initiated topics is slightly less than tutor-initiated topics in conference one, the percentage is higher for the student

than the tutor in conference three. Conference two, on the other hand, has an equal number of topic initiations between tutor and student. While these results indicate variation across the three conferences in terms of topic initiation, the fact that the percentage difference of tutor-initiated and student-initiated topics is minimal in all three conferences suggests that these conferences were more or less collaborative in terms of topic initiation.

Table 1: Percentage of Tutor-Initiated and Student-Initiated Topics

	Conference One (n=29)	Conference Two (n=4)	Conference Three (n=17)
Tutor Initiated	58.6	50	47.1
Student Initiated	41.4	50	52.9

Topic Ownership. Table 2 shows the percentage of topics owned by tutors and students during their respective conferences. While the tutor owned most of the topics in conference two and three, the student owned more topics in conference one. This finding indicates that in terms of topic ownership, the tutors had more control over the session. However, considering that the student owned 68.9% of the topics in conference one, and the student in conference three was quite close to the tutor with 41.2% topic ownership, we can rationalize that the students also played quite a significant role in owning topics or introducing their concerns.

Table 2: Percentage of Tutor-Owned and Student-Owned Topics

	Conference One (n=29)	Conference Two (n=4)	Conference Three (n=17)
Tutor Owned Topics	31.1	75	58.8
Student Owned Topics	68.9	25	41.2

Types of Syntagmatic Units. Table 3 shows the percentage breakdown of the syntagmatic units – QA, OA, RA - for each of the three student conferences. It shows, for example, that there were 68 syntagmatic units in conference one, 50% of which was made up of QA units, 42.6% of OA units, and 7.4% of RC units. Table 3 illustrates that while conference one and two have higher QA units, conference three has higher OA units. We can also see that the percentage of RC units is lowest for all three conferences. Because RC units represent directives or instructions and their compliance, the low percentage of such units show that these conferences were more collaborative than instructional.

Table 3: Percentage of Question-Answer, Request-Compliance, and Offer-Acceptance Units

	Conference One (n=68)	Conference Two (n=10)	Conference Three (n=34)
Question-Answer	50	50	47.1
Offer-Acceptance	42.6	30	50
Request-Compliance	7.4	20	2.9

Initiation of Syntagmatic Units. Table 4 shows the percentage of syntagmatic units (QA, RC, and OA) initiated by the tutors and students as well as the breakdown of the types of units initiated by them. In other words, out of the total syntagmatic units for conference one (i.e., 68), 58.8% was initiated by the tutor and 41.2 % by the student. In addition, the table also shows that of the 58.8% units initiated by the tutor, 42.5% were QA units, 45% OA units, and 12.5% RC units. Table 4 reveals tutors initiated more syntagmatic units than students in all three conferences. This finding indicates that in terms of initiation of syntagmatic units, the tutors played a dominant role. However, Table 4 also shows all three tutors initiated OA units the most. This suggests that

even though the tutors dominated the initiation of syntagmatic units, the nature of these conferences were more collaborative than instructional because OA units signify a collaborative relationship. Further, Table 4 reveals that RC units were initiated only by the tutors, but the percentage of RC units introduced was the lowest for all three tutors compared to the other units initiated by them. Since RC units represent the issuance of instructions/directives and their compliance, the low percentage of RC units for all three tutors suggests that although there was some type of instruction going on, the conferences were not dominated by instructional talk alone.

Another notable observation from Table 4 is that while all tutors initiated OA units more often than students, all the students initiated QA units more often than tutors. This trend in the data can mean that the tutors were involved mostly in offering advice, information, and suggestions in response to the questions put forth by the students. Therefore, this trend suggests that these conferences were participatory and collaborative since the students participated by raising questions and tutors responded by offering advice and suggestions.

Table 4: Percentage of Tutor-Initiated and Student-Initiated Syntagmatic Units

	Conference One (n=68)		Conference Two (n=10)		Conference Three (n=34)	
Tutor-Initiated Units	58.8	QA 42.5	70	QA 28.6	73.5	QA 36
		OA 45		OA 42.8		OA 60
		RC 12.5		RC 28.6		RC 4
Student-Initiated Units	41.2	QA 60.7	30	QA 100	26.5	QA 77.9
		OA 39.3		OA 0		OA 22.1
		RC 0		RC 0		RC 0

Initiation of Approval Seeking Questions. Table 5 shows the percentage of approval seeking questions (ASQs) initiated by students. For instance, Table 5 shows that ASQs made up 52.9% of the 17 QA units introduced by the student in conference one. According to Table 5, more than 50% of the student-initiated QA units in conference one and three were ASQs, while in conference two ASQs made up 33.33% of the QA units introduced by the student. ASQs are questions that seek reassurance and as such signify that the student is submitting to or relying on the expert approval of the tutor. The rather high percentage of ASQs in Table 5 for two of the three students suggests that these students perceived their tutors as experts and readily submitted to their tutors' expertise. However, it is also possible that students initiated ASQs because of the fact they were comfortable in seeking the reassurance of the tutor.

Table 5: Percentage of Student-Initiated Approval Seeking Questions (ASQs)

	Conference One (n=17)	Conference Two (n=3)	Conference Three (n=7)
Student-Initiated ASQs	52.9	33.33	57.14

Completion of Syntagmatic Units. Table 6 shows the percentage of syntagmatic units completed by the students and tutors. It shows the tutors completed all the units initiated by the students in conference two and three, and 97.5% of the units in conference one. On the other hand, while the student completed all the units initiated by the tutor in conference three, students in conference one and two completed 97.5% and 85.7% of tutor-initiated units respectively. This trend in the data means that while the completion rates of the tutors were better than the students, the students were not too far behind. Completion rates indicate mutual participation in structuring a discourse. Therefore, the overall high completion rates for both tutors and students indicate that both participated in structuring the discourse of the conference. Higher rates for tutors indicate that they played a more active role in responding to students' questions and concerns.

Table 6: Percentage of Tutor-Initiated Units Completed by the Student and Student-Initiated Units Completed by the Tutor

	Conference One	Conference Two	Conference Three
Tutor-Initiated Units	(n=40)	(n=7)	(n=25)
% Completed by Student	97.5	85.7	100
Student-Initiated Units	(n=28)	(n=3)	(n=9)
% Completed by Tutor	97.5	100	100

Qualitative Analysis Findings

This qualitative analysis seeks to demonstrate how conference transcripts can be analyzed to draw inferences about the nature of writing center tutorials. I analyzed the transcript of *Conference One* to examine the impact of compliments as well as connected and overlapping dialogue on collaboration between the tutor and student. While the first transcript analysis examines the function of compliments, the second analysis examines the function of connected and overlapping dialogue.

In *Conference One*, the student was working with the tutor on a personal statement for an academic program for occupational therapists in response to this prompt: Please compose a one-page essay, no more than 600 words, that focuses on your unique qualities and life experiences, aside from your academic record, that will contribute to the next generation of occupational therapists. In this fifty-minute conference, the student brought in a 520-word draft and expressed concerns about finding the right words to talk about herself and explain how she could add value to the program. She also expressed concerns about incorporating relevant examples into the statement to support her claims. After discussing her concerns, the student read the paper aloud.

The first exchange evaluated below took place around five minutes into the session. At this point, the tutor and student were discussing the student's reactions to the draft after she had finished reading it aloud.

Just before this exchange, the student had expressed concern of not being sure what type of “value” the committee was looking for in her personal statement. In response, the tutor was trying to explain how the student might focus on what she valued personally rather than try to second-guess the committee. The tutor then proceeded to compliment the student, explaining that the student had done a good job highlighting her personal value in the current draft.

Evaluating the function of compliments

In the exchange below we can see how the tutor compliments the student’s work and thus establishes a friendly, positive, and supportive environment.

T: Umm but, so what that means is that, what’s important is what you personally value. And I think that you’ve done that throughout. Don’t you think?=
 S: = Yeah=
 T: =And I feel like you are pulling the pieces, like (1) you know, (1) you really talked about umm (2) you really talked about the places that you didn’t like or the places that were bad and the places that were good, and you were really doing that. And so there were several places that I really really, there were different, like, statements and stuff that you made in here that I really really liked. Like for example (1) this last statement (1) it makes me really happy – “my experiences are my own but they will add value to those around me in the classroom, and to my future clients as I help to enrich their lives and aim for better futures.”
 Like this is a really (1) yeah (1) makes me really happy =

S: = Yeah=

T: =And I feel like you are pulling the pieces, like (1) you know, (1) you really talked about umm (2) you really talked about the places that you didn’t like or the places that were bad and the places that were good, and you were really doing that. And so there were several places that I really really, there were different, like, statements and stuff that you made in here that I really really liked. Like for example (1) this last statement (1) it makes me really happy – “my experiences are my own but they will add value to those around me in the classroom, and to my future clients as I help to enrich their lives and aim for better futures.”

Like this is a really (1) yeah (1) makes me really happy =

S: = {student laughs}=¹

We can see the tutor using praise, one of Mackiewicz and Thompson’s motivational scaffolding codes, by pointing to the student’s “successes

¹ Transcription Key:

- = no pause between dialogues but no overlap
- () length of pause in seconds
- [] overlap between speakers
- { } contextual detail added by transcriber

with positive feedback and verbal rewards” (43). The tutor praises the student by emphasizing how she “really really liked” certain ideas and sentences in the paper. By using “really” twice the tutor seems to be amplifying her compliment. Similarly, by pointing out to the student’s last statement and saying that it “makes me really happy,” the tutor seems to be suggesting that she is invested in and cares about the student’s work. The effect this has on the student is also clear - as soon as the tutor finishes her compliment, the student chuckles in satisfaction. In this particular instance, the tutor’s compliment seems to be functioning, as suggested by Mackiewicz and Thompson, to build a friendly, supportive, and caring relationship between the tutor and student. This analysis demonstrates how insight into the nature of tutor-student relationships can be gained by analyzing tutor compliments.

Evaluating the function of connected and overlapping dialogue

The second exchange from *Conference One*, presented below, takes place at around the eleven-minute mark. After the first exchange, the tutor and student proceeded to review and color code each sentence in the draft - yellow for sentences that need some revision and pink for sentences that looked good. They followed this approach throughout the session from this point onward. In line 1 below, the student was referring to this sentence: “I have been fortunate enough to be visiting nursing homes from a young age.” The student had already identified a few choppy sentences before this exchange, so she categorized this sentence as being like one of those earlier short ones. After this second exchange, the student deleted this sentence from its original place and integrated parts of it into another sentence in the draft, as described in lines 4 and 6 below.

Conference One had many instances of connected and overlapping dialogue occurring between the tutor and student. Connected dialogue (denoted by “=”) occurs when there is no pause between dialogues. Overlapping dialogue (denoted by “[]”) occurs when two speakers speak simultaneously. In terms of the three types of overlaps – joint production, interruption, and main channel overlap – described by Gilewicz and Thonus, connected dialogue in the transcript below (=) can be interpreted as constituting joint production when “speakers complete each other’s utterances.” Overlapping dialogue in the transcript below ([]) could be

made up of either joint production, interruption, or main channel overlap. In the exchange below we can observe multiple instances of connected dialogue as well as some instances of overlapping dialogue.

- 1) S: {after reading another sentence} That's again one of the (1.5) [like short ones]
- 2) T: [yeah, yellow]
- 3) T: I think that sentence may say something different than you want it to=
- 4) S: =yeah (4) it maybe one of the ones we can just (1) cut out and (1) like (2) put it down here=
- 5) T: = [okay]
- 6) S: [with] I started with visiting family and progressive volunteering and observing so like (1.5) maybe I could say I started visiting family at a young age=
- 7) T: =yeah=

The student and tutor's words overlap toward the end of the student's first statement (lines 1 & 2). Here, the tutor seems to understand that the student was talking about a concern related to short sentences even before the student completes her statement. This is an instance of joint production because the tutor and student are completing each other's utterances. This interpretation seems likely because they had discussed the student's concern about short sentences earlier on in the session. The tutor's response, "yeah yellow," means that the student should mark that sentence yellow, a color code indicating that the sentence needs to be revised. In this instance, the presence of overlapping speech suggests that the tutor and student understand each other well. They are not using interruption or main channel overlap to cut out the other person; instead, they are using joint production to move toward "greater solidarity and collaboration," as suggested by Gilewicz and Thonus. Even in the case of the second overlapping dialogue in lines 5 and 6, the student and tutor are not cutting out each other. Instead, the student is continuing her explanation while the tutor is simultaneously affirming the student's suggestions. In other words, they are using joint production to create solidarity.

Furthermore, the student is able to promptly process the tutor's observation in line 3 and come up with a solution in line 4. The use of

connected dialogue in this instance shows, again, that the tutor and student are using joint production by completing each other's utterances, which indicates that the tutor and student share a collaborative relationship. The tutor's affirmations in line 5 and 7, which are both connected to the student's preceding statements in line 4 and 6 respectively, provide further evidence of this collaborative relationship.

What we can see happening within these inter-connected and overlapping dialogues is that the tutor and student are collaborating closely to revise a sentence. The impetus for the revision comes from the tutor's observation. This impetus is sustained by the student's acknowledgement and positive response to the tutor's observation, which is followed through by the tutor's affirmations. In all of these exchanges, the tutor and student connect, overlap, and complete each other's utterances. This type of interactive conversation shows that the tutor and tutee share a collaborative relationship. Furthermore, this analysis suggests that by evaluating connected and overlapping dialogue, we can gain insights into the nature of collaboration between a tutor and client.

Discussion

Overall, my quantitative findings suggest that even though peer tutors maintained overall control in the three writing center conferences examined in this study, these conferences took place in a collaborative environment. Tutors maintained control in terms of owning more topics and initiating more syntagmatic units than students. Furthermore, the high percentage of ASQs initiated by the students, which suggests they viewed the tutors as experts, potentially contributed to the tutor's control of the sessions. Since the students viewed the tutors as experts, it is possible that they relied on the tutors to determine topics and initiate syntagmatic units. As a result, the tutors were able to maintain overall control over the session. These observations align with the views of Trimbur and Blau, Hall, and Strauss, who suggest that it is difficult for peer tutors and students to maintain a peer relationship in writing center conferences due to the institutional "tutor" designation given to tutors.

At the same time, the quantitative findings also reveal many collaborative qualities in these conferences. For instance, the lower RC units for tutors compared to the higher OA units initiated by them in all

three conferences suggest that these conferences were more collaborative than instructional. Since RC units represent directives and instructions and OA units represent suggestions and advice, the lower RC and higher OA percentages in the data indicate that the tutors offered suggestions and advice instead of issuing directiveness or instructions to students. Furthermore, the high percentage of student-initiated QA units and balanced topic initiation between tutors and students suggest that the students played an active role in raising questions and discussing the topics originally introduced by tutors. In addition, the relatively higher completion rates across all three types of syntagmatic units also tell us that both tutors and students played an active role in structuring the discourse (i.e., by responding to the questions, offers, and requests initiated by each party) in their conferences. Therefore, we can infer that even though the tutors maintained control by owning more topics and initiating more syntagmatic units, the students participated actively in the tutorial conversation.

The results of my study align with Muriel Harris's observation that peer tutors are a "hybrid creation - neither a teacher nor a peer" ("Collaboration is Not Collaboration" 371). They also align with Davis et al.'s finding that tutors do not function "exclusively either as peers or as teachers, but as a combination of the two" (32). My findings show that tutors acted as teachers in terms of topic ownership (i.e., introducing topics to be discussed) and initiating syntagmatic units (i.e., initiating the conversation). However, as discussed above, the tutors also created ample room for students to participate in the conversation. The students participated actively by asking questions, discussing topics originally introduced by the tutors, and by completing the syntagmatic units introduced by tutors. The results of my qualitative analysis further substantiate the collaborative nature of these conferences. They show that the tutor used compliments to establish a friendly and supportive working environment, as suggested by Mackiewicz and Thomson. Similarly, the tutor and student used overlapping dialogue as "joint production" to create "solidarity and collaboration," as suggested by Gilewicz and Thonus. Together, my quantitative and qualitative findings suggest that even while the tutors controlled the session in some ways, these conferences were still more collaborative than hierarchical.

While it is important for tutors to occasionally take on a teacherly role to guide and instruct students, it is equally important that they also create opportunities for students to participate as peers in the conversation. At a time when many writing center scholars (Lunsford; Grimm; Okawa et al.; Welch; Blazer) have been highlighting the need to address issues of equity, inclusion, and student empowerment, it is important that we understand how collaboration functions in writing center conferences. We need to ensure that our tutors are building collaborative relationships with students, creating spaces for students to be heard, and not dominating the sessions. Only then can we be confident in our ability to acknowledge and value difference (Lunsford), to step into the shoes of the “other” (Grimm), to provide “a space of critical exile” where students can intervene and question established conventions and beliefs (Welch), and to empower students by building egalitarian rather than hierarchical relationships (Okawa et al.). In other words, an important first step toward creating inclusive and empowering spaces is to ensure our tutors participate as peers in their conversations with students. The three conferences evaluated in my study look promising in this regard. However, considering the small sample size of my study and the important implications that collaboration can have for writing centers in addressing issues of equity and inclusion, it would be worthwhile to have more studies that examine collaboration in writing center conferences. If we can determine that we are creating spaces where students are heard, then we will know that we are creating conditions necessary for inclusive practices aimed at empowering students.

My quantitative and qualitative analyses also demonstrate the value of discourse analysis in understanding the nature of collaboration in writing center conferences. My qualitative analysis demonstrates how overlapping dialogue and compliments can provide insights into the relationship shared by a tutor and student in a writing conference. It shows that overlapping dialogue showed up in places where the tutor and student were affirming or reinforcing each other’s statements instead of cutting each other out, suggesting that the tutor and student shared a strong collaborative relationship. My qualitative analysis also shows that a tutor’s compliments and positive feedback can strengthen the tutor-student relationship by establishing a friendly and supportive working environment. The data from this study suggest that a detailed qualitative analysis of a tutor’s compliments and positive feedback can provide

valuable insights into the nature of tutor-student relationships. Similarly, my quantitative analysis demonstrates how certain discourse categories, such as topic initiation, topic ownership, syntagmatic units, and approval seeking questions, can be quantified to draw conclusions about the nature of authority relationships in peer-to-peer writing center conferences. While my study points to the valuable role of discourse analysis in evaluating collaboration in writing center conferences, considering the limited sample size of my study, the limited number of discourse analysis studies focused on writing centers in the past (Mackiewicz and Thompson; Pemberton), the attestation by scholars regarding the value of discourse analysis in evaluating collaboration (Murphy; Pemberton; Mackiewicz and Thomson; Gilewicz and Thonus), and the implications of collaboration on inclusive practices in writing centers, more studies that examine the discourse of writing center conferences would be a valuable contribution.

Conclusion

Lunsford states that when democracy masquerades as power, existing hierarchies are reinforced. I believe that for writing centers to practice Nancy Grimm's postmodern theorization that asks us to interrogate our own beliefs, to put ourselves in the shoes of the "other," and to acknowledge difference rather than erase it, it is important for us to ensure that traditional hierarchies are not enacted in writing centers in the name of collaboration, as suggested by Lunsford. Examining the nature of collaboration in writing center conferences, therefore, becomes an important goal in our effort to provide an inclusive and empowering space for students. Discourse analysis, as demonstrated in this study, can be a useful method for writing center scholars to tune into the conversations taking place in writing centers and understand whether we are creating opportunities for students to collaborate in writing center conferences. If we can determine that we are indeed moving toward Andrea Lunsford's conceptualization of collaboration – in which power, control, and authority rest with the negotiating group, not with the tutor or the student - then we can be confident in our ability to create spaces where differences are acknowledged instead of being erased.

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Fostering Collaboration, Creativity, and Connection: Writing Center Spaces as Exhibit Areas

–Jeffrey Howard

Keywords: exhibits, space, collaboration, creativity, display

Writing centers exist as spaces in which consultants and clients engage in linguistic activities ultimately intended to help clients improve as communicators (North 438). The spaces in which these interactions occur can be physical, like the “unused classrooms, old barracks, and basements...on the fringes of the academy” that Warnock and Warnock mention (23) and that have in many instances housed writing centers in the past. They can also include writing centers with more resources,



Directed by Dr. Patrick Ellis and Dr. Jeff Howard

Figure 1. A marketing poster from the CommLab's exhibit on cinematic history and optical toys.

prestige, and administrative control because of greater “institutional status and power” (Singh-Corcoran and Emika). Writing centers can also exist as digital spaces in which consultants and clients meet synchronously or asynchronously via email, chatrooms, Skype, Google Hangouts, BlueJeans, or Piazza. Because of our evolving practices and mindsets and the accessibility afforded by technologies (as well as our heavy reliance upon such technologies during the COVID-19 pandemic), consulting in digital environments continues to influence critical conversations about writing centers as spaces. The scope of this article, however, deals primarily with the

writing center as a physical space and the ways we interact with and utilize that space to perform the essential work of supporting student success. To that end, I ask how we can reimagine, modify, or “revise” a space to advance our organizational goals and mission. In other words, in our hands what can a space become and what else can we make it do? In this article, I will demonstrate how writing center administrators and their consultants can use exhibits, curation, and collaboration to reimagine a space that serves client’ needs, contributes to the professionalization of our consultants, and promotes engaging perspectives on language, communication, literacies, and many other topics related to the work of the center and its relationships with diverse student populations.

Background

The writing center, whether physical or digital, is a repository that houses resources, like humans, handouts, and technology, but the space itself can also serve as a resource. Spatial components like structure, layout, and interior design have a great capacity for influencing the individuals who inhabit spaces. Spaces promote states of being through color or décor, and layout, furnishings, or technology can cultivate optimal conditions for creativity and community-building. Space and its effects have been and should be a key concern in the design of an educational space like a writing center, but the actual task of creating a space that facilitates learning in the most effective way can be daunting. While it is natural to have more questions than answers at the outset of any such project, for many administrators, finding the right questions to ask might itself be the first and greatest challenge to overcome. Leslie Hadfield et al. writes, “Learning can take place anywhere, from storefront buildings of a tribal college to a grassy quad during the springtime,” but “if the opportunity presents itself to enhance or build an ideal learning space—in this case, an ideal writing center—what are the considerations? What are the needed resources? To whom do we turn for consultation?” (167) These are just some of the questions one might have in conceptualizing and making material a welcoming learning space with a unified purpose and identity.

Fortunately, many campuses possess the resources to craft effective learning spaces by drawing on the expertise of “campus planners, support staff, and design faculty” (Hadfield et al. 167). When

approaching the monumental task of creating or optimizing a learning space, writing center administrators, whose expertise lies in specialized communication research and methodologies—not structural design or feng shui—should feel free to partner with architectural, engineering, and design experts. Such professionals may be able to sketch out a rough blueprint in seconds or calculate, force, mass, and volume, but knowing little to nothing of the writing center’s mission or praxis, they require some consultation. Together these experts can work with writing center administrators to produce a physical space that fits with what is known about learning optimization and writing center best practices within the context of specific student population needs and university culture.

In “Designing Multiliteracy Centers: A Zoning Approach,” however, James A. Inman provides a word of caution regarding the way some administrators approach the design of a writing center, saying, “Many centers appear to have been designed around furnishings and technologies, rather than what clients will actually be doing. This approach poses a problem because any center exists to provide effective services for clients, not to have the grandest furnishing and technologies” (20). Inman’s critique illustrates a valuable principle. In designing or configuring a writing center space, form should follow function. A student- and service-oriented design that facilitates client learning should be a priority. A writing center is more than things to sit on and work at and on. The most important part of a writing center are the conversations consultants have with clients, and they just happen to have these interactions in a room beneath a ceiling while sitting on chairs at tables while looking at computers, tablets, or smart boards. While furniture matters a great deal for our comfort, writing center spaces are more about relationships than furniture. Human interaction and idea exchange are a large part of what make the writing center a space at all. Exhibits, as will be discussed later, are a simple means for promoting productive interactions and idea exchange by exposing students to interesting artifacts, hands-on activities, and spatial arrangements that are conducive to conversation.

The human element is a powerful component of the form, identity, and meaning of a space. Because of the fluidity of space, even if we are not a part of a team that originally conceives the space or contributes directly to its materialization (“I want this wall over here, my office goes here, the front desk should go here, and we need tables all around...”), as

inhabitants of the space we can still contribute to its evolution at any point. In fact, evolution is one of the constants of space, as Ann Gardiner writes, “Space itself, I have come to realize, is always a work in progress” (“Democratizing Space in the Writing Center”). The writing center changes depending on who comes into it and how they use it. For example, some clients act like serious professionals when they come in, put their backpacks on the floor, pull out their laptops, and prepare for a session; other clients might pull up a comfortable bean bag chair in the corner and lie back for a minute or three. These sets of actions are both allowable within the versatile center, but they are very different actions that represent very different attitudes in the way they approach and give meaning to the space. With the number of clients who use our services and the amount of consultant turnover that most writing centers experience, our spaces undergo constant change or adaptation in the way the space is used, what it can do, and what it can mean to those who use it. The center in the fall will be different from the center in the spring. For administrators, who generally are more permanent than peer consultants and clients, embracing the space as a perpetual “work in progress” is a real opportunity to use space to impact the lives of consultants and clients.

There are as many ways of reimagining or revising a space to attain this level of impact as there are people who enter the writing center’s doors. In the Naugle CommLab at Georgia Tech, one initiative we have undertaken involves the repurposing of underutilized space in the center for the construction and display of communication-themed, multimodal, and interactive exhibits to create a space that aligns with the educational and social needs of students and staff members. Like many centers, the Naugle CommLab is a space intentionally designed around the needs of student communicators and the concept of communication as a process. According to a 2011 Georgia Tech news bulletin, the CommLab, which includes meeting areas, computer workstations and rehearsal studios....is designed for different types of work or project phases, with faculty available to advise students each step of the way....It is equipped to take students from conception to completion of a project, enabling them to draft, edit, revise and compose written or other types of work all in one room (“Communication Center Opens”).

This intentional design has been a part of the center since its conception. As mentioned previously, however, spaces are dynamic “works in progress,” constantly changing to meet the needs and reflect the personalities, goals, and cultures of the people who inhabit them. The Naugle CommLab already functions well at what it was designed to do, namely helping our students foster their own communication skills and their understanding of communication as a process. Surveying the space, however, I had to ask myself: What else could the space become and do, and how could I and my colleagues influence the space and increase its impact on those who inhabit it? As I asked myself that question, I noticed one part of the CommLab that was being used for nothing except piling bean bag chairs. It had plenty of wall surface and a TV that was rarely on. For the next year, that space would become our exhibit area.



Figure 2. The layout of the CommLab's multimodal exhibit on comics and literacy.

Exhibits in the Writing Center

Writing centers have great potential to become exhibit areas, and our center is not the first to incorporate exhibits into their space. According to Margaret J. Marshall, writing centers in general are spaces “for intellectual projects involving literacy, discourse practices, teacher education, and institutional policy, to name but a few of the possibilities” (Marshall 75). Exhibits are a rigorous form of intellectual work that require the designers to find a central question or theme and curate artifacts that connect to and complicate that question or theme. Geoffrey Middlebrook, for example, writes about a collaborative art display project he undertook in 2015 to commission original student art for display in USC’s writing center. The purpose of this project was to create a space that was more welcoming to the students the writing center is

supposed to serve. Middlebrook writes, “If...centers prudently pursue collaborative campus relationships and wisely leverage their assets, the outcome may well be a combination of refined appearance, raised profile, increased traffic and, most significantly, improved service to students” (“Writing Center Topographies”). Essentially, Middlebrook is claiming that the aesthetics of space and the function of space are deeply connected, and exhibit areas, whether they involve walls, pedestals, tables, cases, or all of the above, can capitalize on that intersection in ways that directly support the center’s mission.

Middlebrook also suggests that exhibits are not just about affecting people once they are in our space; properly leveraged or publicized, they also possess the potential for drawing into the space people who might not otherwise seek out our services or even know who we are and what we do. Megan Lotts agrees with that sentiment and describes how the art exhibit spaces at Rutgers University could function as a means for publicizing the library as a space and a resource and thereby draw people in (“Building Bridges”). However, using exhibits to draw people into the writing center space depends greatly on the reliability and reach of the systems of publicity (email, social media, digital and physical signage, etc.) being deployed. For our center, social media as a means of publicizing exhibits and events is not always as far-reaching as we hope it will be, and digital signage can easily be ignored. Mass emails sent through Institute Communications channels have a wide circulation, but, like digital signage, such messages are also easy to dismiss. Once such challenges are addressed, using exhibits to bring people into the space can be much more likely.

When I arrived at Georgia Tech in 2019, I, a former Special Collections archivist with experience in exhibit-building, found that exhibits were already a popular part of the academic culture of the university, particular in the Writing and Communication Program. Many English 1101 and 1102 instructors at Georgia Tech had been assigning their students the task of creating exhibits in the various permanent exhibit spaces on campus, the presence of these exhibit spaces themselves attesting to the place exhibits held in the institutional culture. In my first week of orientation at Georgia Tech, two different postdoctoral fellows described exhibit assignments, one on comics and civic engagement, the other on media archeology, their students had done recently. In the same orientation, I heard a story about Professor Hugh Crawford who had his

literature students build a replica of Henry David Thoreau's cabin, which was later exhibited in the library (Maddux 18). Finally, during that same

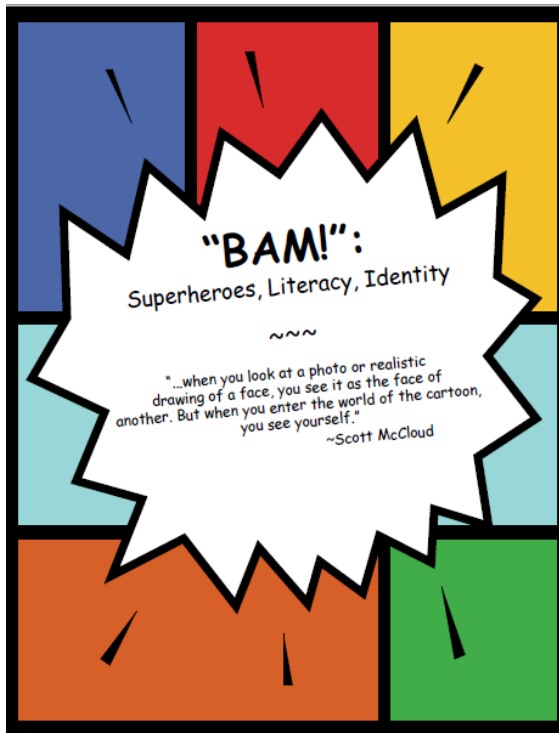


Figure 3. A marketing poster from the CommLab's exhibit on comics and literacy.

semester, I taught in the basement of the Clough Undergraduate Learning Commons where every day I passed, not without interest, a Harry Potter-themed book arts exhibit built by students in a previous English 1102 course. In the Naugle CommLab, I felt that the principles of exhibit-making that I had developed as an archivist could continue to find application in the fluidity of a writing center space. These exhibits were never intended to turn the writing center into a museum, but rather to create a more vibrant, engaging, and welcoming atmosphere for clients and staff members, promoting conversation and connections among those who entered our space seeking assistance and feedback from our consultants.

At the same time, exhibit-building is not just for our clients, but is also for our consultants and other staff members who inhabit the writing center space. As an exercise, exhibit creation requires many of the same intellectual moves as trying to construct a literature review or research paper, though in addition to finding relationships between opinions or ideas, an exhibit also re-imagines the relationships between configurations of material objects. This work requires designers to rethink what they know and learn new things, and that is a valuable activity for our consultants. As Anne Ellen Geller et al. writes, "Even working from the basic premise that students attending our schools are

built by students in a previous English 1102 course. In the Naugle CommLab, I felt that the principles of exhibit-making that I had developed as an archivist could continue to find application in the fluidity of a writing center space. These exhibits were never intended to turn the writing center into a museum, but rather to create a more vibrant, engaging, and welcoming atmosphere for clients and staff members, promoting conversation and connections among those who entered our space seeking assistance and feedback from our consultants.

learners, we have to account for the kind of learning, the learning culture, if you will, that a writing center can provide” (48). “We,” of course refers to administrators, who are not simply hiring consultants, but should also be investing in them by providing them with opportunities to develop or acquire new skills and capabilities. Geller et al adds,

Writing centers can be sites for learning cultures that recognize and honor the multiple ways we work not just from what we already know, but from what we are learning in the moment. . . . In trying to devise ways to support these goals through our staff education, we want to design activities and intellectual challenges that get tutors to look at their everyday experiences differently. We want our tutors to step around or step outside of how they usually see. We want them to see connections. (48)

Exhibit building, I would argue, can cultivate the kind of learning culture Geller writes about. Even though it does not directly involve consultants tutoring clients, some of our consultants in the Naugle CommLab have suggested that building an exhibit helped them re-examine communication as an idea and create cohesive narrative connections and arguments based on their re-imagining. According to Rocio Soto, who has worked in the CommLab as a center assistant and peer consultant for nearly four years, collaborating on exhibits with her fellow consultants proved useful in multiple ways. She says, “Working on these exhibits made me think critically about communication and how we define it and utilize that identity within the center. However, it also helped to create community among all of us. We had to work on the project together and that took learning what everybody’s strengths and areas of improvement [were]. And that was super helpful for understanding team dynamics, etc.” Such explorations can certainly affect their philosophy on consulting and approaches to communication more generally. Practically, exhibit-building provides opportunities to practice collaborative strategies and enrich relationships, learn or develop facility with new tools and technologies, and build community as we realize our ideas materially.

Exhibits as Collaborative Opportunities

Exhibits provide ample opportunities for pursuing collaborative relationships and projects. Megan Lotts talks about exhibit spaces in terms of interpersonal connection and collaboration, calling them a means to “connect with the overall campus community” and “a way to promote cross-disciplinary collaboration” and build partnerships. All of the exhibits that have appeared in the Naugle CommLab have provided opportunities for collaboration and partnership as we sought to materialize our ideas. For the first exhibit we constructed in the Naugle CommLab, I collaborated with Dr. Chelsea Murdock, then assistant director of the CommLab, to produce an exhibit on the material and



Figure 4. The exhibit case for the CommLab's exhibit on cinematic history and optical toys.

digital lives of poetry. I secured artifacts and created a slide show that showed the different ways poetry exists digitally, in digital archives, online magazines, and even as e-poetry. Dr. Murdock coordinated the setup for the physical space and the technology to support this hybrid exhibit. We partnered with the Georgia Tech Special Collections and Archives who lent us a display case, and Kirk Henderson, who works in

Special Collections and Archives, helped us to set up the space and personally saw to the layout of the artifacts, complete with book cradles and Mylar wrappings. For our third exhibit, on optical toys and early cinema, we were able to revisit that partnership and joined forces with retroTECH, a division of Special Collections and Archives, who lent us antique optical toys, including a kaleidoscope and camera obscura, for the display.

While collaboration has prevailed in some form during each of these exhibits, it has not always involved campus partners. Sometimes it is simply people in the CommLab who want to contribute, and the collaboration takes place among people already in the center instead of people across units. For example, in our second exhibit, during the summer of 2019, we chose to display comic books, such as an early 1980s Frank Miller *Daredevil* issue, a reprint of *Superman #1*, and an anthology of Ms. Marvel comics, while showing superhero films on the television. Once again, I supplied the material artifacts for the display case, which is the part I like the most, but our former CommLab director, Dr. Brandy Blake, brought a number of films to show throughout the summer, lent her PlayStation so we could actually show the films, and even created a viewing schedule to post on the door so passing students knew what we were showing and at what time. Because it was summer, we wanted an exhibit that would engage people, create a relaxing atmosphere, and pull people into the center. While we had no formal assessment program for tracking the number of people the exhibits brought in, we did have multiple students who were able to sit in the exhibit area and enjoy the artifacts and media while they waited for their appointments, and the center did give away numerous bookmarks featuring information about the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) on one side and the CommLab's hours of operation on the other.

The most successful collaborations I have had in creating exhibits, though, have come by working with the CommLab's peer consultants. In the most recent exhibit in CommLab, "The Evolution of Expression," which examined intersections between language, genre, and technology, I observed as three peer consultants learned about and relied on individual strengths to support each other in working toward their shared goals for the exhibit (Soto). They all volunteered to work on the exhibit because they found the initiative interesting and inspiring and different. Once we began to work together, they essentially selected their own roles

and carried out the obligations and duties associated with those roles. Rocio was the primary logistical person in our first and second meetings, taking notes, making lists, and even budgeting and price-checking the items we wanted the CommLab to purchase for the exhibit. Another consultant, Elizabeth, was the main “idea person” in the group, producing a lot of material for us to consider and weigh in our meetings, both in terms of content and overall structure. Many of these ideas eventually became bone and flesh of the exhibit. Finally, the third peer consultant in our group, Sophia, was also adept at sharing ideas, as was particularly willing to take on the tasks that needed to be done most urgently. Over the course of putting this exhibit together, we practiced productive communication and collaboration strategies as we met in physical and digital spaces, divided tasks and set deadlines for ourselves, and finally came together for the assembly. Together, our collaboration provided plenty of opportunities for each of us to work on transferable professional skills (Soto).

The Value of Interactivity

Exhibits are not just an opportunity for us to make things; we also want to provide opportunities for visitors to make things. Interactivity as a concept is akin to a makerspace mentality, which we have sought to emphasize in some of our exhibits. Laura Fleming defines the makerspace a place in which to explore and “learn to use tools and materials, both physical and virtual. It should be envisaged and implemented as a concept that can adapt to a wide variety of uses, shaped not only by educational purposes defined by teachers or the school or the wider curriculum but also by students’ own creative goals and interests” (5). In other words, makerspaces have enough resources to facilitate creativity, but not so much structure that they inhibit creativity. That is not to say they are devoid of structure or constraint, as constraint can itself be as much a facilitator of creativity as is the freedom to discover.

While makerspaces and exhibits are not the same thing, there can certainly be overlap between them. For example, in a 1987 article, Bitgood and Patterson argue that, predictably, interactive exhibit elements increase engagement (4). We want exhibits that not only educate, “nurture respect for cultural differences and foster dialogue between groups,” to borrow a phrase from Simona Bodo regarding museum spaces (181), but also engage visitors by giving them both

something to do and something to look at. For example, in our poetry exhibit in 2019, we installed what we called an interactive “poetry wall.” We taped paper to the wall nearest the display case and put up a sign that invited people to write original poetry or their favorite poems by other people on the wall. By the time we took the exhibit down, the paper was covered with poetry, including excerpts from Mark Strand and Seamus Heaney and anonymous original haikus or limericks.

For Admin Professionals Day

Though I’m not an Atlantean [sic] native
 I’m both professional and administrative
 They gave me a day
 And had so much to say
 Because they’re all trying to be so creative.

In the CommLab’s “The Evolution of Expression” exhibit,” the three peer consultants who headed up the project decided that it would be essential to have interactive components in the display. The dynamism and evolution of communication over time is one of the core themes of the exhibit, as suggested by the title “The Evolution of Expression,” so they decided that magnetic poetry, which is as dynamic as it is ephemeral, created the kind of effect we wanted to evoke. Another interactive component of the exhibit is a dot wall, inspired by “The Obliteration Room” art installation by Yayoi Kusama, whose work appeared in the High Museum of Art in Atlanta in 2018–19. The idea was that CommLab clients would be invited to stick a single dot, selected from a range of available colors, on the papered wall after their appointments. However, because we provided no written direction, people began putting as many stickers as they felt like on the wall, even arranging them in patterns like flowers and spirals. The exhibit also ended up featuring a third interactive component, a space for displaying erasure poetry written by our peer and professional consultants. That element came together spontaneously after I had made my students do erasure poems as an in-class writing activity. When I came back to the CommLab with extra pages taken from *Consumer Reports*, *National Geographic*, *The Nation*, and *Rolling Stone*, multiple consultants asked if they could try their hand at writing erasure poems. Here are a couple of examples (shown with permission):

On Mars, Of Jupiter (from Consumer Reports)

...

Charlie Brown, Mars is genuine.

Starliner, Space X, Crew Dragon--future of human.

|

Still, let's return to Earth.

Paine said we could.

Believed lunar vacations, lifetime, no question, cost, air.

|

Today? Certainly possible;

Will come true, with this Space age 2.0.

|

Musk--who says--someday--he's pegged to land on Martian soil.

Projection wildly. Recklessly. Optimistic.

|

Government, man.

~ Maria Chappell

*

*

*

The Nation (from The Nation)

"More than one in 16 women were raped the first time they had sex"

- Molly Minta

A thought flitted

across my mind while I was

waiting late on the American side. A big, jovial, plantation man was discussing

ordinary things. "Such fun, dancing on graves!"

I am legally owned by others— the carnal issue of a legal fiction. My mind drags.

This narrative protected, insulated, cautioned. They might own your body.

They can never own you.

I am safest.

I discipline myself.

It is a kind of magic,

raised both within and without to see oneself seeing.

The distance to surveil oneself from afar—

The man and his companion seemed like good people—happy and racially swaddled in bubble bliss, however radioactive.

~ Leah Misemer

Truly, this exhibit did not just display creative productions; it also invited and evoked creative productions such as these from the individuals who came into and used our space, transforming the space in the process. Furthermore, this creative collaboration mirrors the work we do in our appointments with clients as we ask questions and engage in conversations that invite them to envision/re-envision and revise their projects.

Building an Exhibit

If writing center administrators, like Middlebrook, have a space that “suffers” from bare-white-wall syndrome, and they want the space to become more welcoming, more interesting, and more engaging, building an exhibit area, regardless of its size or method of display, can certainly contribute to that kind of desirable environment. In the following paragraphs, I will provide a list of questions that administrators and consultants can ask themselves as they begin thinking about what they can do to assemble an exhibit in their space.

What stories do you want to tell? How does that theme connect to your university and writing center context? Exhibits display configurations of artifacts that tell a story. These stories should have some bearing on the immediate context of the exhibit. Part of that context is the writing center and its mission, so making sure the exhibit has something to do with the center, the people who work there, and the work they do is critical. The answer to the question, “Why is this exhibit here?” should be made clear. In our exhibits, we always tried to connect the theme of the exhibit writing, communication, genre, literacy, or some other associated theme. The other consideration is the university context. The students are a part of that, as are university departments, schools, or colleges. In reference to makerspaces, Fleming writes, “Understanding the needs, wants, and interests of your students and wider school community is an integral part in planning your space and ensures it will be a unique learning environment that will best serve your learners” (13). The same ideas

apply to exhibit-building in a writing center space. What do students need to know from us? That we are specialists in communication, with the skills to reach across disciplinary boundaries and help them improve, and that we care about their success. The stories our exhibits communicate can act as bridges between the writing center and other segments of the university. To achieve this objective, one method might be to build exhibits about the topics that many communication specialists care about, at least the ones coming from the humanities, social sciences, or liberal arts: people, literature, pop culture, art, cinema, international affairs, history, and so on. This approach celebrates us and shares that with the clients who come into the space.

Here is another idea: at a STEM-oriented institution like Georgia Tech, for example, finding ways to connect communication to the sciences is certainly another way to achieve connection and build a university network, so creating exhibits that incorporate STEM-related topics can also be effective. Let us say, for example, that you decide to assemble an exhibit, with purpose of attracting more engineers to the center so you can foster stronger relationships with that part of the institution. You really could choose any number of topics because there are so many kinds of engineers: biomedical, electrical, civil, mechanical, etc. Finally, after much deliberation you choose to focus your exhibit on aerospace engineering, specifically the history of aviation and its representations with an orientation toward communication.

What resources do you have? What's your budget? What can you buy? What can you make? What do you need to tell the story you want to tell? First, you need a space for display. Any space will do. If you have walls, you have enough space to curate even a small exhibit. If you have a hallway outside of the center, you might even be able to set up a display table. If you have access to a television or computer, you can further increase the possibilities for hybrid multimodal display by using the affordances of video or PowerPoint.

Second, you need exhibit components or artifacts, and you do not need to go very far outside of your budget to make something engaging. The amount of space you have will impact the number of artifacts you can display. Do you want artifacts that are authentic or rare or have an aura? How will you procure those? Are you content with copies or can you make facsimiles that maintain some of the aura of the original? When I

designed an exhibit about *Frankenstein* at a previous institution, my collaborator had his mind set on finding an early edition of *Frankenstein* to add to the display. Our library did not own one. In some cases, given enough time and planning, both of which were in short supply, one can borrow such materials from other libraries. Given the time constraints, I printed copies of pages from a digitized first edition in the database *Nineteenth Century Collections Online*, cut them to the size of a book



Figure 5. An artifact from the CommLab exhibit, "The Evolution of Expression."

page, and aged them using black tea and my wife's hair dryer. It was not the same as a book, but it was convenient and cheap, both of which were important considerations, and in the end, its appearance still achieved the goal of the exhibit. In our most recent exhibit in the CommLab, some of the artifacts in the case were a handwritten letter from John Keats to Fanny Brawne, an inkpot, and a quill. None of these artifacts was authentic, but Pinterest helped us achieve the appearance we wanted.

In the hypothetical case of the exhibit on the history and representations of aviation, we will

hypothesize that there is only enough room for three artifacts or artifacts sets that you will connect to the theme in different ways. For example, you might want a photograph of the Wright Brothers' and a diagram of their plane; can you talk about aviation and not mention them? Both of those artifacts can be found on the Internet, so you just need to print them off yourself on regular copy paper or you can use photo paper, which gives it a little nicer appearance. You decide to pair a model of a WWII biplane with a Peanuts comic book or strip featuring Snoopy "flying," the sides of his doghouse peppered with bullet holes courtesy of the Red

Baron. Once again, these artifacts are easy to find for free or cheaply online. Third, the history of aviation is not all about success and whimsy; it also involves its fair share of tragedy. To introduce this aspect into the exhibit, you display a magazine cover featuring the World Trade Center or the Boeing MAX 737. As you curate these artifacts with information cards, you being to construct a narrative that ties ideas about communication, media, and representation with the history of the safest way to travel, and you will have done it creatively and without spending a fortune. With our communication exhibit, I and a peer consultant both wrote text cards, which we then shared with each other to refine the language in preparation for the display.

Who can you partner with? How can you use it to promote the writing center? As I mentioned previously, cross-disciplinary partnerships can provide access to materials and expertise that might not otherwise be available for your exhibit. Libraries, too, and Special Collections make great partners. By seeking out partnerships for your exhibit, but also in general, you extend the reach of the center and its ability to help students who might not ordinarily come.

For our hypothetical aviation and communication exhibit, potential partnerships and connections might also originate within the center itself. For example, do you have a peer consultant who is interested in or is majoring in aerospace engineering? Do they personally know or know of a professor or researcher on campus who might be a good source of information as you assemble the exhibit? Perhaps they would have some ideas or perhaps even artifacts you might incorporate into the display. You might even consider holding a special event in the center in which you invite that person to speak on the theme of the exhibit, which in turn might attract students into the writing center space who might never have entered. Perhaps you could also supply a handout or pamphlet that talks about the value of communication in aerospace engineering and common genres that future professionals can expect to encounter in their careers. Make these available near the exhibit display as well, so that even people who do not attend the event can take one and be informed.

How can you make an exhibit interactive? I have nothing against exhibits that only provide a gallery of things to look at and read. Many exhibits achieve positive outcomes in this manner. I would reiterate what Bitgood and Patterson say about interactivity. Exhibits that encourage visitors to

interact with the exhibit extend and deepen their level of engagement. Engagement in turn leads to greater likelihood of learning something new or least creating a more lasting impression of the space. For our aviation and communication exhibit, you want to make sure it is properly engaging, so you could create an interactive component: a paper airplane building station. You know that many people know how to build a paper airplane, so you leave a stack of regular copy paper or card stock on the table with a sign that invites passing students to build an airplane. Next to the stack, you place a book you checked out from the library with numerous different designs and instructions. This book is for those who have never learned to make an airplane but will now use this opportunity to learn. After they build their airplanes, they can do whatever they want with them. The builders can take them away, and that will be the end of their engagement, or they can name their plane and turn it in at the writing center for a prize; they leave with their prize, and the writing center adds the plane to the display. At the end of the month, the peer consultants take the airplanes to the top floor of the building and fly them off the roof; the plane that flies the farthest will then be featured on social media. This is just one way of many to make an exhibit interactive, a true makerspace, and I have already shared some examples of how some of our exhibits have attempted this.

How will this activity impact consultant development? When we ask consultants to do projects, as mentioned previously, we ought to try to make sure they are getting something out of it, in addition to compensation. The kinds of skills our consultant Rocio identified as being developed by the project are exactly the kinds of skills that are not only useful in the context of working with students in one-on-one sessions and communication workshops, but also in the professional contexts that our consultants will find themselves in following graduation.

There are numerous questions and considerations to account for when building an exhibit, and these are just a few of the ones I believe to be among the most important to raise and consider. In the end, an exhibit should be a space for creative and collaborative story-telling that invokes a response from the audience. The questions we ask will determine how well we can tell the story and establish connections with and affect our intended audiences in a physical space.

Embracing the “Work in Progress”

I would like to return to what I wrote earlier about the evolution or fluidity of space. If in the future, even the near future, CommLab’s exhibit area is no longer needed or becomes less effective and some other project or initiative better is better suited to client or staff needs, I can accept that. If it is no longer doing what is designed for, then it should certainly be replaced by whatever will make our space what it needs to be for the individuals we serve. That, too, is part of embracing the fluidity of our spaces, regardless of how we might feel about our personal or pet projects.

As someone who has been a part of this exhibit initiative from its outset, I hope it continues as long as it can remain efficacious because I believe in the power that exhibits can have in influencing the educational spaces we work in and impacting the consultants and clients we work with. Randell writes, “If we want anything from a long-term participation programme (as distinct from a shorter-term, one-off project)...we want it to keep working, to keep attracting citizens as contributors to the process...to be self-organizing and adaptive to changing external conditions” (146). How might this be achieved? First, involving multiple people to contribute to or participate in the construction of individual exhibits can help to entrench this initiative in the CommLab’s culture so it has a chance to remain. Second, consistently coming up with new ideas for engaging displays can also help to ensure its permanence.

For example, in the near future, I am hoping to collaborate with our peer consultants and faculty members in Georgia Tech’s School of Literature, Media, and Communication to assemble a literary exhibit called “Jane Austen Today.” This exhibit would focus on Austen’s influence on popular media and contemporary culture. We might want to show film adaptations of her novels and contemporary responses to her work, such as *The Jane Austen Book Club* by Karen Joy Fowler, *Longbourn* by Jo Baker, and *Death Comes to Pemberley* by P.D. James. The exhibit might also feature nonliterary artifacts such as Dierdre Le Faye’s and Maggie Black’s *The Jane Austen Cookbook*, Jane Austen-themed coloring books, and ten-pound notes from the United Kingdom featuring Austen’s likeness. We could have games of whist, commerce, loo, and speculation in our conversation social for English language learners or hold a social media giveaway involving Jane Austen memorabilia. Additionally,

knowing how deeply some of our consultants and our current center director feel about Jane Austen, I fully expect more ideas to arise from my future collaboration with them. My hope is that by continuing to work with peer consultants and faculty members outside of the center on interesting exhibit projects like this one, we can perpetuate the exhibit area as long as possible as part of the CommLab's space and continue to impact students' lives by creating a welcoming and engaging educational space that invites conversations and connections between our staff members and the students on our campus.

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The *Centrality* of the Center (Early COVID Edition): Best Practices for Sustaining Communication Center Operations During a Global Pandemic

--Michael G. Strawser, Kimberly M. Cuny, Russell Carpenter,
Kevin Dvorak, and Suzy Prentiss

Abstract

Like other student services on college campuses, communication centers have not been immune to challenges surrounding COVID-19. Traditionally a primarily face-to-face operation on campus, the communication center tends to thrive on high-touch interaction between students and consultants as well as amongst the center staff. During COVID-19, communication centers have had to adapt their operations. To determine how center operations changed because of COVID and what challenges COVID-19 presented to communication centers, 59 ($N=59$) center stakeholders were surveyed. The authors, all communication center directors or staff, then provide ten best practices to overcome these unique communication center obstacles.

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Students are concerned about COVID-forced online education and asking for refunds (Whistle), there is a forever changing landscape of the university (Metz), declining enrollment numbers across the board (Hartocollis & Levin), the death of collegiate athletics (Kilgore), and the complete upheaval of private institutions (Hobson & Hagan). We need to pay attention to the thread behind these reports—college is changing.

At the risk of blasphemous hyperbole, though, there are some potentially positive benefits that may arise as we survive, then thrive, in our world. Specifically, we believe university communication centers have an

opportunity to reassess our value to our institutions, community, country, and world. As communication scholars, we can provide context for crisis, dialogue in the midst of difference, and overarching narratives of hope. We can also provide a necessary skillset for students. However, achieving these goals requires discernment and diligence. Identifying center needs, in the midst of such a unique time, requires feedback from communication center stakeholders. As such, this article explores challenges experienced by communication centers as a result of COVID-related ordeals and provides best practices for overcoming those trials.

Methods

To develop a list of concerns facing communication center staff in a post-COVID context, a short survey was distributed to communication center stakeholders ($N = 59$). We obtained approval for this study from the university institutional review board. Stakeholders included student staff, professional staff, and directors. Specifically, 35 center administrators, 11 student center employees, 4 professional center employees, 5 participants identified as ‘other’, while 5 did not respond. The survey was brief and contained only two open-ended questions: 1) *How have center operations changed because of COVID?* and 2) *What challenges has COVID-19 presented to your center?*

To analyze the data, trained researchers employed a multi-stage approach. In the first stage, the coders gained familiarity with the data. In the second stage, the coders employed the constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss) to identify themes or clusters of words that, when taken together, refer to an underlying, unified idea (Weber). This was a repetitive process, with coders going through the transcripts multiple times refining categories, determining thematic connections, and looking for exceptions (LeCompte & Schensul). In the third stage, the first author reviewed the themes and subthemes identified by the coders.

Results

Data analysis revealed several themes and sub-themes represented in the tables below. Table 1 displays themes related to changing center operations. Sample quotes are included. Major themes include consultation modality, budget, and physical space design.

Table 1. *How have your center operations changed because of COVID-19?*

Operations Themes	Operations Examples
Consultation Modality	“We moved to entirely remote consultations (at first) and then to mostly remote consultations after campus reopened.”
Budget	“It has affected our budget and forced us to cut down on hours.”
Physical Space Design	“Our consultations are both in-person (in larger rooms for distancing) and virtual (this was not the case before COVID).”

Table 2 addresses challenges COVID-19 presented to the communication center. In the table, overall themes are included as well as subthemes when appropriate. Major theme one was operations, with attendance, budget, procedures, physical space design, and virtual meetings serving as subthemes. Major theme two was staff management with mental health/team bonding and training serving as subthemes. Major theme three was faculty outreach with messaging and advocacy serving as subthemes. Finally, major theme four was technology/equitability with tutor equipment as the primary subtheme. Example quotes are provided in Table 2, which begins on the next page and continues onto the following page.

Table 2. *What challenges has COVID-19 presented to your center?*

Challenge Themes	Challenge Subthemes	Challenge Examples
Operations	Attendance	“Biggest concern-loss of attendance to the center.”
	Budget	“Budgets cuts are looming because of Covid and will be an ongoing challenge.”
	Procedures	“Coordination and establishment of effective workflow.”
	Physical Space Design	“I do not know how to do a lot of the physical actions and placement of things in the center.”
	Virtual Meetings	“Entirely remote based meetings.”
Staff Management	Mental Health/Team Bonding	“Challenges include the uncertainty of the mental and emotional state of employees since they can no longer drop in the office to talk and I can’t see them physically to tell if something is going on. Additionally, the challenge of keeping the spirits and morale high is hard to do.”
	Training	“Finalizing a remote, synchronous tutoring procedure in just a week was very difficult, but we did it with long hours, experimentation, and trial/error.”

Faculty Outreach	Messaging	“Advertising our services-getting the word out.”
	Advocacy	“Getting professors to remember to advocate for our services.”
Technology/Equity ability	Tutor Equipment	“Many of our student staff needed us to supply them with hardware to telework. Wi-Fi boosters were game changing, we also supplied Chromebook to some and others needed cell phone stands or headphones. One needed a webcam. Managing a 100% teleworking student staff was a big shift.”

Best Practices for Overcoming COVID Communication Center Challenges

Best Practice #1: Overcoming Poor Attendance During a Crisis Event

Few were expecting a global pandemic when 2019 ended. As the pandemic shuttered campuses and technology took over the higher education landscape, centers changed. Some center administrators, including those at Mary Washington and Hamilton College, were early adopters, shifting to 100% online consultation and teleworking in March 2020. For these two centers, this was a brave choice, as neither had ever offered online nor teleworking. Some institutions made the difficult decision to close for the remainder of the semester. Others had experiences similar to Havenford College, where administration concluded that communication center work could not be accomplished online, thus the opportunity to do so was never presented. In the end, it makes no real sense to compare one center to another, as each is subject to the unique history, politics, and needs of their campus (Emery), as well as their administrators. Regardless of what happened in March 2020, patron usage changed as the online pivot affected center operations.

One way to respond to this change in usage is to adjust expectations. During a global pandemic, numbers should change. Administrators could embrace the slower pace by considering a shift in focus. For example, moving from meeting the need in terms of a large volume of patrons to meeting the mental health and professional development needs of student consultants. This shift in focus could produce measurable outcomes that can be reported to administration and justify payroll expenses. Student consultants identify communication centers as a prime location for their own professional development (Brown; LaGrone & Mills). Center administrators might seek out online training modules that consultants can complete together or alone during or in place of a shift. One example is *The Safe Zone Project* (<https://thesafezoneproject.com/>).

Another way to address usage challenges is to change the way the work is done. Moving online is not the only change for administrators to consider. After going online with teleworkers for the first time in spring 2020, Hamilton College made the courageous fall semester pivot to offer both online and face-to-face sessions. As a result they are supporting students who might otherwise not show up in person. For those who remained face-to-face in the spring or returned to that modality in the fall, Nejezchleb's pre-pandemic research points to the need for administrators to add telephone consultations, as these have a positive impact on students who are otherwise not being reached.

Overcoming poor usage numbers can happen if administrators are open to changing the work being done. In the end, without faculty support, no student should be expected to seek out support from a communication center (King & Atkins- Sayer; Stewart et al). What does a pandemic faculty member teaching oral communication across campus need from the communication center? They need help and they need the center to step up and do some of the heavy lifting. For instance, when one center had classroom instructional workshop requests drop drastically, resources were used instead to develop oral communication content for faculty teaching online. Early creations included podcasts and micro-learning videos hosted on the web. Later, a LinkedIn blog for faculty teaching oral communication was launched. Soon after, the center began developing Canvas modules, with center consultations/visits as assessment of learning for faculty to import into their courses. While faculty started to request instructional workshops again in 2021,

instructional support continues to be about doing the heavy lifting for faculty. This particular center will not go back to offering only workshops as instructional support efforts.

Best Practice #2: Stretching the Center Budget

The need to do the same work with fewer resources is not new to communication centers. What has changed is the insensitivity of the budget crisis. Facing budget shortfalls and possible elimination, some center administrators need to lean heavily into scholarship. Fortunately, they will find many provide evidence-based proof that communication centers make a difference in retention (Yook), aid student-patrons in their competency development (Benedict, Shields, Wieland, & Hall), lead to higher presentation grades (Davis, Jacobs & Linvill) higher overall course grades and attendance for patrons (Stewart, Broeckelman-Post, & Rossheim), reach those who have not utilized services in innovative ways (Nejezchleb; McCall, Harrison, & Murphy), and provide important professional development for the student consultants themselves (Brown; LaGrone & Mills; Wilson). Everyone will need to find alternative ways to stretch their budget allocations while supporting their missions for the foreseeable future.

One way to stretch the communication center budget is to reallocate funds. With less funding, administrators need to find creative ways to get the work completed. One way to accomplish this, for those with graduate students on assistantship, is by reworking graduate student responsibilities. Administrators should seek to identify what from their own responsibilities can be moved to the graduate students. This will be especially important if staff positions have been lost or furloughed. For example, one center moved the responsibilities of coordinating their undergraduate student-tutor presentations at the Excellence at the Center conference to a graduate assistant. Another way to stretch the budget is to hire one fewer graduate assistant so that the remaining funding can be allocated differently. That might mean more funds for undergraduate wages. Administrators should also look at what responsibilities can be moved from graduate students to the undergraduate student consultants.

Outside resources should be considered as a valuable way to stretch the budget. While each campus is different, this might involve looking more closely at any endowments a particular center has. Can funds be used to

help the center engage in meaningful work aligning with the center's mission? Another option is to increase undergraduate student hires with Federal Work Study (FWS) awards. This move provided one center with 43 thousand additional undergraduate dollars for payroll. This FWS conversation starts with financial aid offices.

Some communication centers have robust faculty-fellows programming. These appointments allow the center to provide additional opportunities to support and extend their mission while keeping the center's work relevant locally and nationally. One example is to appoint a fellow from the sciences to support/extend/start scientific communication efforts. Other ideas can include a fellow for undergraduate research, new faculty mentorship, the basic communication course. Regardless of the focus, fellows need to do work that is meaningful to them and advances or supports the mission of the center.

Continued stretching of the technology budget is likely here to stay. One center argued that since the students who work in the center included those enrolled in the center's credit-bearing theory and practice and internship courses, the center is actually a classroom space. As a result, most of the technology in the physical spaces are repaired and replaced by Instructional Technology Services (ITS). Opportunities for different funding can be leveraged as well. A center might sell apparel via social media or have a bake sale in the lobby to fuel discretionary spending. Alumni staff of the center will likely be interested in providing support. Could the creation of an Alumni Corps provide a rich support group of volunteers doing online consultations?

Many campuses offer internal grants. In one example, a center received a grant from a campus program designed to create opportunities for students to increase their sense of belonging. Public university systems also offer grants that may be applicable. In one fall 2020 example, an academic department chair was asked by campus administration if they had an interest in joining a group applying for system-wide funds to support virtual student learning. As the speaking center was 100% online, this type of funding was a good fit, and funds were awarded. This change was only possible because the department chair is seen as a stakeholder in the speaking center and was kept abreast of what the center was doing.

Best Practice #3: Developing New Center Practices

Communication centers around the country had to adapt procedures, including new ways of working, coordinating, and providing related programming and services for their institutional communities, including faculty and student collaborators. Developing new center procedures connects several interrelated areas including the following: flexibility, adaptation, increased access, focus on students, hybrid, expanded hours, rethinking appointments and access to consultations, and moving workspace online (chat, video, and virtual desk).

Centers had to adopt and adapt new and more flexible modes of operation. Centers moved toward more flexible procedures, which included 1) allowing plans for consultants to offer services from home and 2) adapting flexible schedules to best fit consultants' workflows and preferences (in some cases, offering early morning hours or late night availabilities outside of the previous, normal schedule or "on time"). In addition, centers created more flexible channels by and through which students could request services (normally individual or small-group consultations) but also to include access to valuable interactive workshops. Centers offered these in flexible formats, including synchronous and asynchronous opportunities for student engagement, and to ensure equitable access to all students, considering bandwidth and socioeconomic concerns. Centers designed these flexible access points, on-ramps, or pathways for students by leading (and designing) with empathy for students. Whereas in many cases, traditional access options had been somewhat limited to some students, centers employed flexible options that varied (and, in many ways, deepened) the range of options students had to choose from.

Centers adapted programs and services to best suit student needs. Consultations, the dominant service for many centers, were adapted to multiple formats, including in-person (at a social distance), synchronous (real-time) virtual, asynchronous (occurring at different times, often via Google Drive or email), and, in some cases, using audio-only, phone, or various chat options as a process of adapting the consultation as a service. Communication centers are complex spaces and programs, too, and, for many centers, the front line is a reception, welcome, or check-in desk, and these had to be adapted as well to best fit the online, hybrid, or

socially-distanced configuration. Centers adapted to new forms and operations for the “welcome” service that helps to route students, provide information about the center’s services, and guide students in confidently seeking the information, help, resources, and the experience they need.

Centers adapted the ways in which they provided access not only through the process of moving more options to virtual spaces and platforms but also by expanding hours of operation. Through the process of adjusting operations to an expanded set of hours, centers were able to offer more students options for consultations that aligned with their ever-changing schedules (for school, homework, work, health concerns, and increased needs with family and in their personal lives).

Best Practice #4: Redesigning the Center’s Physical Space

The physical space of the communication center also changed rapidly and drastically as a result of safety precautions put into place amid the COVID-19 pandemic. While much research and planning has gone into many communication center spaces, with thoughtful arrangements of furniture, including arrangements of monitors and dedicated areas for collaboration, practice, and rehearsal, communication centers were forced largely to revise their physical spaces.

Redesigned spaces, for centers offering on-ground consultations and even workshops, had to be carefully envisioned, mapped, and implemented. Many center leaders worked closely with institutional COVID-19 planning and public health teams to 1) arrange furniture to meet socially-distanced regulations, 2) secure and implement safety features, such as panels, 3) reduce areas that were previously used for close collaboration (such as benches and comfortable seating), and 4) put into place guidelines for use of technology, such as monitors, keyboards, and mice.

Communication center spaces were mapped with precision to allocate spaces for specified activity, and many established ingress and egress parameters that would give students and all visitors safe entry and exit of the facility, usually with minimal need to touch doors or handles. Floor signage marked appropriate and pre-designated paths students would use to flow into and out of the space, while ensuring that traffic would be manageable.

Importantly, physical spaces also became hybrid. As many communication centers redesigned physical spaces, areas that would usually be staffed heavily with consultants or technical support staff were now monitored differently. Communication centers implemented technologies such as chat features, scannable “virtual help desks,” and help channels that were staffed remotely to support student use of the space while access was drastically limited and social distancing measures were in place. This design allowed access to the spaces (and resources) while helping to ensure that students could use related communication spaces to practice and hone communication design using reliable, professional spaces often provided by the communication center. Physical spaces became hybrid spaces, with long-standing in-person practices remediated by virtual ones to ensure safety.

Communication centers increased communication and signage to reach students and faculty, balancing the care needed to ensure social distancing and safety for all while allowing access to important resources. Signage needed to be more specific, guided, and clear through the COVID-19 pandemic to balance safety with access to communication center physical spaces, which in many cases is viewed as a “service” offered to students and members of various institutional communities.

Best Practice #5: Virtual Meetings

Zoom fatigue and burnout are real (Robinson). Whether face-to-face or virtual with groups large or small, many of the time-tested tips for managing meetings efficiently and effectively hold true. Three important suggestions are especially helpful for center directors working with student staff: have purpose, set an agenda, and honor time.

To be productive and successful, meetings must have a clearly-stated, shared purpose and goals (Baker & Murphy; Egts; Phillips). Also, it is wise to consider if there is a more efficient way to communicate, such as through a targeted email, or a more effective way to collaborate, such as with Google Docs or a Doodle, than to schedule a meeting. Finally, if there is no need for the meeting, cancel it (Baker & Murphy; Egts).

Setting an agenda is critical to meeting success and efficiency. The agenda should be shared prior to the meeting for planning and

preparation purposes (Baker & Murphy). Other helpful suggestions include setting expectations for active and engaged listening (Phillips) with people asking questions, offering suggestions, and making connections, involving everyone (Bryant), and managing the meeting while supporting conversation (Bryant). Another empowering suggestion is to “make meetings more inclusive” (Phillips). Though all people invited to a meeting should have a clear reason for being there, often other people may appreciate being invited to share their perspectives and add new ideas, and foster collaboration and innovation. Make sure to leave time at the end of the meeting to develop action items for the next meeting and collaboratively identify those people who will take the lead on each task. A meeting agenda that allows time for future planning helps create buy-in, allows people to “step up” and contribute in ways that are meaningful and engaging, and, ideally, supports a more even distribution of task and responsibilities.

To respect everyone involved, attendees can be honored by beginning and ending on time. Also, meetings should be short, whenever possible, no more than 40-45 minutes (Baker & Murphy). Brevity and clarity are effective communication tools in all situations, especially in meetings.

Best Practice #6: Tutor and Staff Mental Health

The pandemic increased stressors, producing physical, chemical, and mental responses internally for everyone. Those responsible for administering communication centers face a significant need to attend to these challenges among their consultants and staff. Without mental health training themselves, administrators need to lean on outside resources. Campus resources already available are also attending to an increase in student concerns. This reality makes it all the more important that administrators, facing the need to provide more and more support for the mental health of their staff, add to their own resources and practices.

One strategy for supporting this increase is finding ways to develop emotional intelligence across all staff at the communication center. Emotional intelligence is the ability to identify and manage one's own emotions, empathize with and relate to others, and resolve conflict. Attaining emotional intelligence starts with increasing self-awareness

(recognize and observe emotions within oneself) and cultivating self-management (regulate emotions and take appropriate actions). Helping staff increase their self-awareness directly involves asking two important questions. The first seeks to have them identify when they are most frustrated, and the second to identify what is working. Prior to the global pandemic one communication center had a tradition of meeting face-to-face with every student employee to ascertain the climate of the organization. The questions asked were rooted in increasing self-awareness. Student employees were asked first to identify what was not working in the organization by talking about the times that they found most frustrating at work. Next they were asked to identify what was going well for them at work. During the pandemic the same center might use this strategy to take the pulse of the student employee mental health. Questions could be altered to get to the bottom of any college-life stressor. The best questions are ones that are framed in a way that students can use them again later. So instead of asking what is working for you, the students should be taught to ask (themselves) what is working for me. Examples of pandemic stressors include online learning, living at home, being isolated, teleworking, and the likes. For example, when are you most frustrated when teleworking or what about teleworking works for you?

After helping a student employee increase self-awareness around a stressor, the next step is to cultivate self-management of that stressor. Questions are at the root of this strategy as well. Extending the teleworking stressor, a good first question might be what is within my control in the teleworking experience? That would be followed with what is one idea I could implement to improve my teleworking experience? Consultants should be encouraged to use these same four questions during consultations.

Additional resources for administrators to tap include Mental Health First Aid's monthly newsletter and web page (<https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/>) organized around identify, understand, and respond. Organizations like The Kellin Foundation provide free yoga classes via Facebook and other platforms for those experiencing mental health stressors. Yoga could make a great group-cohesion experience for staff. Meditation videos like the ones produced by *The On Being Project* abound on the internet. These can be used at the start of center shifts. Administrators on campuses with a license for the Question Persuade

Refer (QPR) Suicide Prevention Program should seek to have staff complete that training as well. Alternatively, the evidence-based book associated with QPR can be downloaded for free (<https://qprinstitute.com/>). Finally, the invitation to move communication centers to intentionally support mental health including neurodiversity (Prentiss) is likely the right shift to be considering.

Best Practice #7: Training Staff for Virtual Operations

Communication center consultants need to be trained to conduct consultations in a variety of formats in order to meet students' needs across the board, from students who have easy access to in-person consultations to students whose lives do not afford such easy access to physically visiting an on-site location. To meet the specific needs of the latter, consultants should be trained to aid both synchronously and asynchronously, even though some may prefer to shy away from that second option. Of course, directors should determine the best ways to train their consultants based on their institutional context. Making these decisions can involve asking the staff of their needs, but there are some additional considerations as well.

First, use hybrid training options if possible. If consultants work onsite at a communication center, they may benefit from being trained both on-site, where a good deal of hands-on, one-on-one, and small-group conversations can occur, and online, where they can directly experience what happens when they are learning remotely. This logistical change will help them develop an understanding of how both contexts work so they are prepared to facilitate sessions in either format.

Second, expose staff to multiple technologies and ensure they have capable technology. The increased reliance on technology has proven that our staff members need to be proficient using a variety of platforms, especially since technology can often be imperfect. Wi-Fi can be lost, video-conferencing tools can go down for periods of time, and emails can be lost. Consultants should be trained to have back-up plans in case they or their student writer have technology issues. In addition, to supporting their work, centers should focus efforts on ensuring consultants have appropriate technology to facilitate such sessions. Higher education has experienced even more significant inequity since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, and ensuring that consultants

can effectively perform their jobs—without the persistent concern of having their technology cause complications—may mean shifting funds, if available, to obtaining and caring for better equipment. It may even mean requesting more funds from the institution.

Third, consider including practices from corporate training on remote work. This is especially significant since consultants will benefit from developing professional skills necessary for future hybrid and remote work. These skills go beyond just facilitating consultations online. They include staying motivated while working afar; being more mindful of time management; knowing how to stay connected to colleagues, especially during their shifts; and understanding how to project a professional image, particularly when working synchronously via web conference platforms (think background images and noise).

Fourth, consider using a learning management system (LMS) to engage in virtual education and training. Having training materials and modules in an LMS can prove to be quite effective when onboarding consultants at different points of a year (Greer et al), and they are great for storing supporting materials, such as handouts, syllabi, and notes about working with particular disciplines or assignments. An LMS also provides a platform for ongoing discussions among staff members.

Fifth, assessments can help center personnel determine greater effectiveness. Directors need to be conducting regular assessments of how well the consultants are performing from the perspective of both consultants and students. Assessments should be conducted to determine consultants' proficiency with various technologies, as well as how effectively they use them. In addition to asking students to evaluate the quality of the assistance they received, they should be asked questions about how well consultants utilize technology during online consultations. An LMS, again, can be beneficial for obtaining and storing such assessments.

Best Practice #8: Enhancing the Message of Our Value to Faculty

It is frustrating when our colleagues and greater campus community do not know what we do in our centers or fail to see our value. We should be one of the first places faculty turn for resources, such as including instructional support like workshops and serving as guest speakers, and

for collaboration on topics including communication across the curriculum, oral communication, competency, and multi-disciplinary communication projects. We must have a seat at the table and use our voice to advocate for our work and the positive impact we can make. As students lack intrinsic motivation to visit our centers (Stewart et al), faculty sending them to us is imperative (King & Atkins-Sayer). The value of centers is well supported in the literature, including edited works and the *National Association of Communication Centers Journal*, and we can make a consistent and compelling impact (Stewart; Davis; McCall). Three specific ways we can share our value across campus include reinforcing retention efforts, showcasing soft skills, and highlighting empowerment and agency.

Across campuses big and small, retention was an important focus before the pandemic (Strikwerda), often serving as a benchmark for many institutions. With enrollment figures falling during the pandemic (Burt; June), it is and will continue to be a high priority for the foreseeable future. Communication centers can and do improve retention rates (Yook) and are ready to lead in many of the areas being recognized as key to higher education's post-pandemic strategy, such as being flexible and proactive, rather than reactive, preparing students to be agents of change, and focusing on "wellness and inclusion" as practice (Lake & Buelo). Furthermore, the keys to retention that existed pre-pandemic are already in the Communication Center wheelhouse, such as strengthening individualized instruction, supporting introductory and high-impact courses, sharing information, and building partnerships and collaborations across campus (Strikwerda).

More than just a place for students enrolled in public speaking class or for students needing help with a speech, communication centers can provide resources, support, and skill development in multiple areas of communication (Atkins-Sayre). In fact, centers can help students effectively develop many of the soft skills in demand by employers, such as active listening, resilience, ability to engage in Q & A, self-awareness, and confidence to make suggestions and offer feedback (Forbes). In addition to those skills, consultants can further enhance their own soft-skills training by improving their emotional intelligence, developing creative problem-solving, and establishing empathy (Forbes).

For many students enrolled in basic communication courses, this is often their first class in public speaking. They may feel overwhelmed, disenfranchised, and unprepared, especially if they are first generation or minority students. Uniquely equipped to offer that personal connection and content expertise, communication centers can provide resources, support, and a place to develop and share their voice while intentionally crafting a safe, welcoming, and inclusive space (Pensoneau-Conway & Romerhouse; Villano). By helping our students reduce their speech anxiety (Cuny; Radecki), promote their engagement (Strawser et al.), and manage their health and wellness, we not only help students excel on our campus but thrive as integral and contributing members of our campus communities to the benefit of all.

Best Practice #9: Advocating for the Center

While the college experience changes rapidly, the need to develop students' communication skills will remain a top priority. To that end, communication centers should continue to play a significant role in assisting students; however, due to the potential for increased budget cuts, directors need to become even stronger advocates for their centers. Such advocacy can take many forms and involve many people, so it may help to craft a strategic communication plan designed to reach three key audiences: administration, faculty, and students.

As part of that strategic communication plan, it can be useful to narrow down each of the groups. For example, who are the key administrators or decision-makers regarding the center? What messages can you provide them? How often? Which faculty are recognized as influencers, and how do you share your center's mission with them? Which faculty are willing to establish partnerships with the center? What student groups, clubs, and organizations are most popular? Do staff members belong to any of them, and can they help share the center's message?

Our key audiences are flooded with information every day. Therefore, staff should work together to clarify and simplify the center's message—that “we are here to help”—and make sure that message is recognized widely by constituents. The message should be conveyed in print and electronic formats and can include basics such as short reports to administration, email reminders to faculty, and social media posts or hard copy posters and fliers for students. In addition, centers can invite

faculty to post reminders in their course learning management systems, on assignment sheets, and even in syllabi.

Remember to be present, even if the center is online/remote. The pandemic has increased the popularity of remote work, which can make it more difficult for directors or consultants to be “seen” around campus. The informal moments—seeing a colleague while walking across campus and having a short conversation—have become limited, which means directors should focus more attention on designing and maintaining intentional communications across campus.

Continue to build connections with courses and programs across the institution. A deeper sense of advocacy can begin by building connections between the center and programs across the university, academic and non-academic. For students, the communication center experience should be built into the fabric of their academic experience; it should not be a tangential, one-time requirement or suggestion. Providing course-embedded consultants to programs promotes the work of the center, and it has a positive impact on student learning and engagement. Students and faculty who are happy with these programs do not want them taken away.

Conduct assessment and use it to enact change. When conducting assessment, ask for assistance and collaboration from offices that can help with such endeavors (for example, an office of institutional effectiveness). These partnerships can often produce more robust data, especially since directors have limited access to student information. Directors should collect feedback from students as well, which can be easily done through post-consultation surveys. The information that is collected should be used to make data-driven and student-driven changes to the center in order to stay current and meet the ever-changing demands the institution faces. These efforts and changes should be shared with leadership.

Best Practice #10: Encouraging Equitable Technology

As the feedback from center stakeholders shows, equitable use of technology and equitable provision of technology were important considerations during the pandemic. Center staff and directors would do well to provide hardware when appropriate and within the confines of the budget. In this particular case, even encouraging staff to use personal

devices, assuming a valid software, could be helpful. In many cases, providing Wi-Fi boosters, laptops, cell-phone stands, webcams, or headphones can provide staff with an equitable and manageable experience. While we may not be able to solve access issues for our students, we should strive to create an equitable experience for consultants when we can. Surveying staff to determine their needs while simultaneously establishing clear expectations and guidelines for software and hardware use can facilitate a positive remote working environment.

Conclusion

Communication centers must remain an integral part of the campus landscape. To ensure our long-term validity and sustainability, centers must address the concerns mentioned above as well as issues and challenges that are still on the horizon. While not an exhaustive list, we believe the best practices mentioned here can help center staff and directors continue to move forward in a pandemic-ravaged workspace. Ironically, the move to remote operations may provide a wonderful opportunity for our centers to reach even more students through virtual engagements. However, the shift will not be without continued concerns.

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Consultant Insight

Course-Embedded Peer Writing Support as Mentorship: A Reflection and Exploration

--Nyah Mattison and Taylor Kielman

Course-embedded peer writing support (often referred to as “writing fellows” or “writing associates” programming) allows for creative, collaborative, and sustained relationships between specific classrooms and writing centers. On many campuses, classroom and writing center geographies are seen as distinct, situating teaching and tutoring within different pedagogical landscapes. Classrooms are often viewed as the spaces where writing instruction takes place, while writing centers are spaces where writers receive assistance, not instruction. Course-embedded tutoring programs attempt to bridge these distinct locations and, when done well, transport the intellectual work of the writing center to the classroom space by assigning select tutors to select classes. As course-embedded consultants (CECs) navigate classroom environments, they develop relationships—the forging of a “diplomatic partnership between the center and the instructors” as Teagan Decker explains (18).

In this article, we reflect on how our experiences as course-embedded peer writing consultants, serving first-year seminar classes at a traditional liberal arts college during AY 2020-21, at height of the pandemic, speak to two key threads in scholarship concerning creative partnerships between specific classes and writing center support: demystifying writing center practices, and providing benefits of mentorship that extend beyond academic support for process writing and other writing tasks. Just over half of our sections of first-year seminar and first year research seminar (two required classes for first year

students, all taught online during this moment in the pandemic) were supported by course-embedded peer tutors. We also note how such threads were amplified, given the stresses of the pandemic and the expectations of students at a college where in-person learning is a core part of the landscape. Although we had similar experiences as peer consultants and as writers, we note sections below with our own names in order to showcase our distinct understandings of the strengths and challenges that come with course-embedded work.

Taylor: Writing center staffers commonly take on tasks such as decoding, deciphering, and demystifying collaborative practices -- perhaps without even realizing it. As course-embedded consultants working with first-years whose education had been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, we found the aforementioned tasks to be more important than ever before. Thankfully, our jobs as decoders were made easier by something Severino and Knight dub ‘dual citizenship’: “...fellows as ambassadors have the advantage of dual citizenship: they are simultaneously members of the undergraduate student community and of the teaching community (26).” Our experience as students is what aided us and our tutees the most during this process. In other words, we can take what we learn through our own experiences as both staffers and as students and use it to guide others in seeing the benefits of collaborative learning, especially in difficult times.

Underscoring this idea of writing center tutors as decoders is David Bartholomae’s findings in “Inventing the University.” He argues, “To speak with authority student writers have to not only to speak in another’s voice but through another’s “code”; and they not only have to do this, they have to speak in the voice and through the codes of those of us with power and wisdom; and they not only have to do this, they have to do it before they know what they are doing, before they have a project to participate in and before, at least in terms of our disciplines, they have anything to say (17).” Our role as course-embedded consultants made this phenomenon much easier to manage for the first-years we assisted. As opposed to other staffer duties such as one-off sessions, we had key understandings of syllabi, assignments, and rubrics of the first-year seminar classes that we were assigned to. Furthermore, we each had the experience as students in such classes just a few years before; as course-embedded consultants, we could draw upon such strengths to help students see how certain rhetorical moves are valued in academic

argument. In other words, we understand the code of academia from a student perspective and can communicate that knowledge.

Nyah: As Bartholomae further explains, endemic in academia are “set phrases, rituals, gestures, habits of mind, tricks of persuasion, obligatory conclusions, and necessary connections that determine the ‘what might be said’ and constitute knowledge within the various branches of our academic community” (11). This is a language and series of skills that first-year students must to learn to be able to credibly produce knowledge within the sphere of academia, and it is often one that serves as a barrier to entry. While some students may be better equipped to speak it than others, there are also those students with little to no fluency, who struggle to meet the, sometimes implicit, expectations of academic writing. As tutors and CECs, our firsthand experience becomes vital in allowing us to translate the code of academia for our patrons so that they have the necessary tools to figure out, as Bartholomae puts it, what they want to say.

Taylor: In my experience as a course-embedded consultant within a first-year seminar course, the most helpful question I could ask during a session was, “What are you doing?” The typical response was for the patron to simply hand me the assignment outline given to them by their professor. I would try again to prompt them to articulate their own understanding of the writing task they had been given, but most of the time they were unable to. This lapse in understanding was perhaps due to a range of factors, such as the challenge of new literacies, the stress of the pandemic, and/or the adjustment to online learning. Asking this simple question is how I easily determined where in our session we should begin. If the student did not fully grasp the assignment, then we could not jump right into brainstorming or outlining. There was some decoding to do first, whether that meant translating the intensely academic vocabulary of the professor or explaining what an analytical paper consists of. It was always very gratifying to see the puzzle pieces come together in their minds. The act of decoding within the context of the writing center is more than just translation; it is empowerment.

Nyah: Similarly to Taylor, there is a question that I always ask students before beginning a session: “What do you think that this assignment is asking you to do?” It’s one that sometimes catches students off-guard, that instead of telling them what an assignment is or what their professor

wants from them, I turn the attention to their perception of how an assignment should be done. Doing so allows me to gauge not only how much a student already understands about the language of academic writing, but also allows me to center our session in a way that foregrounds the experience that a student already has in practicing the rhetorical moves of a genre. For some students, they may have an extensive understanding of summary and analysis, but less understanding of synthesis and how to connect their main argument, evidence, and sub-claims. Before making assumptions about the knowledge a student may or may not have, I listen instead, and individualize the work that needs to be done with and for that student, based on that. As Bartholomae argues, students must learn academic ways “to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community.” This process starts in the Writing Center by scaffolding their prior experiences with peer support.

Taylor: Our work in the writing center, particularly as course-embedded peer consultants for first-year students, went far beyond academic support. As Bruland, Henry, and Sano-Franchini explore in “Course-embedded Mentoring for First-year Students: Melding Academic Subject Support with Role Modeling, Psycho-social Support, and Goal Setting” we often functioned as mentors and role-models to our tutees. They note, “Mentors can coach students through learning processes, attending to matters that faculty might not have the time for at the individual learner level (15).” Whereas students may usually feel inclined to look to their professors for mentorship, our role as course-embedded staffers gave us the opportunity to provide students with a second option for mentorship: us. We were in a unique position where we were able to dedicate substantial time to our assigned students, something professors often do not have the ability to do. For many students, we also served as a bridge between the academic and the personal. Not only were we guiding the students through the complexities of the writing process, but we were also, either directly or indirectly, showing them how to be a college student. Through our language and the stories we told, we were teaching our patrons about campus life and culture. Additionally, within the context of a global pandemic, our role as a support system for students became more pertinent as they struggled with issues of online classes and isolation.

Nyah: As Writing Center staffers and CECs, our mentorship was often characterized by the same proponents that Bruland, Henry, and Sano-Franchini put forth, where “academic subject knowledge support or psychological/emotional support at times blended with advice about succeeding at the university” (7). In guiding the same students through the process of writing over an extended period of time, we were able to build relationships beyond surface-level, and initiate “conversations about navigating the university” (7), not only because of our visible positions as leaders on our campus, but also because of the shared cultural experience of having gone through the same process of being a first-year student at Transylvania.

Nyah: Open responses from the Fall and Winter Semesters of the 2020-2021 academic year showed the real impact of not only relationship-building between students and CECs, but the importance of the Writing Center in demystifying the coded language of academia also. This was indicated in student feedback such as: “Our CEC was extremely helpful over the duration of the course. In meetings she was objective, professional, helpful, and provided great critiques and feedback. Having a CEC is great because there's no pressure since she is a fellow student, it's almost like more of a peer review- but with the most well informed peer ever.” And “...it's good to talk to someone with the same experience as me,” as well as, “I felt aimless before.” This feedback from students demonstrates that we were able to both provide necessary guidance to students when they needed it but also connect on a student, and human, level. The experience of ongoing and regular meetings with CECs, allowed "reluctant students..a taste of what the Writing Center offers" (Severino and Knight 27) not just in regards to academic support but emotional support also, by allowing for a space where many students could not only dissolve their "all-too-common fears of the writing process and concerns about their own abilities [but be reassured] that there is merit to their work" (Severino and Knight 29).

Nyah: Over the course of my time as a Writing Center tutor, and as a CEC, the moments I have felt I had the most impact on students, were often those that had little to do with writing at all. Whether it was advising students about classes they might be interested in based on their research topics, comforting students who received grades they didn't expect on writing assignments, or simply reassuring them that they could

make it through their four years here at Transylvania, my most vivid memories of being a tutor are not those where I guided a student through improving their thesis or proofing their grammar. Connecting with students on a human level, particularly during these two years of isolation and uncertainty, has invaluable and differentiated Writing Center work.

Taylor: For me, being a course-embedded consultant emphasized the importance of writing, not as an individual task, but as a collaborative one. Students felt supported by us both academically and emotionally because they were not alone during one of the most difficult transitions in their lives. As a tutor, I became more empathetic and strived to make genuine connections with patrons because I experienced firsthand the importance of having a support system. There were many experiences I had with students that reaffirmed the value of what I was doing. For example, at the end of all my meetings, I always asked if what we did was helpful. There was one occasion where I posed this question to a student who was struggling with a particular assignment. In response, they breathed a sigh of relief and responded with a very confident, “yes.” That’s when I felt most proud as a CEC, knowing I not only helped this student break down a difficult assignment but I also took some weight off their shoulders. My life as a student was influenced by this endeavor as well. I no longer struggle to ask for help when I need it because I recognize the value of learning with others. The benefits of course-embedded consultant work simply cannot be overstated.

Transylvania University Writing Center has had various forms of course-embedded programming for the past eight years. The stress and anxiety of life in a pandemic -- including the time since this study began -- has allowed us to see the benefits of such creative collaboration even more clearly. During this time, many students have felt incredibly isolated, and making a human and empathetic connection with students can be some of the best support as they navigate new forms of academic writing, often for the first time. The impacts of CEC work have not only been felt by students but also us, as Writing Center staffers and as writers.

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Back to the Center

The Writing Center@Piedmont Virginia Community College

--Jenny Koster

About PVCC

Piedmont Virginia Community College is located in Charlottesville, Virginia and is one of 23 colleges in the Virginia Community College

**The
Writing
Center
@PVCC**

System (VCCS). The college is committed to providing access to a college education for all who can benefit, an opportunity for each student to reach their potential, and excellence in all programs and services. In addition to the City of Charlottesville and Albemarle County, which surrounds it, PVCC serves four additional, primarily rural, counties. In 2020-2021, the college

enrolled approximately 2700 full-time equivalent students [6700 headcount], an enrollment decline of about 10% from pre-pandemic years.

Over the last 20 years, the VCCS has developed guaranteed admission agreements with all state institutions, allowing students who complete their associate's degree with an articulated program of courses and who earn a specific GPA established by each transfer institution to receive guaranteed admission to that institution. Not surprisingly, because PVCC is located in Charlottesville, home to the University of Virginia, and in view of Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, many PVCC students have hopes of one day attending "the University," and the college enjoys a strong relationship with its four-year neighbor. Students transfer to

other state institutions as well: Virginia Tech, Virginia Commonwealth University, James Madison University, among others, and many students complete certificate or degree programs that prepare them for immediate employment.

About the Writing Center

The Writing Center@PVCC was established in 2006 and has been coordinated by Jenny Koster, a full-time faculty member in the English department who was hired to build the center. In the 16 years since the center's founding, the Writing Center has contributed to the college and student success in three key ways: writing-specific tutoring; course-embedded writing tutoring in composition support classes; and through research, innovation, and the promotion of writing at the college.

In 2021-2022, the college, including the Writing Center, returned to campus for the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic forced it almost completely online in March 2020. The center had its highest number of sessions ever, with 2456 visits. This increase is attributed to our commitment to accessibility. We strive to be available to students by drop in or by appointment so that our most vulnerable students, those most likely to not make appointments, have access to our services. The successful establishment of a Virtual Writing Center during the pandemic, a Zoom room where students could “drop-in” for tutoring during open hours or talk with our desk staff to schedule an appointment, is a reflection of that commitment.

The Writing Center has retained the drop-in Zoom room since its return to campus, offering sessions synchronously in Zoom or in person. [The Writing Center uses the national tutoring vendor Brainfuse for asynchronous tutoring. In 2021-22, there were 347 Writing “Lab” sessions.] This format seems to work well for students on a commuter campus, allowing them to access tutoring on days they don't have classes. Student usage of the centers was evenly split this past year, with 50.2% of sessions in person and 49.8% via Zoom. Thus, the Virtual Center will remain an integral part of our work.

Eighty-nine percent of usage in the Writing Center@PVCC is for humanities courses, with our highest usage for College Composition 1 and 2, but we also tutor writing for STEM subjects, like biology,

microbiology, math and anatomy and physiology, as well for business and IT courses. In addition, we offer tutoring for public speaking courses and support English Language Learners both through writing tutoring and through conversational English practice. We know that students who have two or more tutoring sessions are more likely to pass their courses [10 to 15%], and students who attend three or more sessions are even more likely [20 to 25%, sometimes even more] to successfully complete their courses. We understand this is correlation, not causation, but it is a point we like to make to students in Writing Center presentations, that success is not just about ability, but effort. Students who make the effort to get feedback are more likely to pass their courses.

In our end-of-session surveys, 97% of students said their session helped them to develop their assignment or improve their coursework. In the annual PVCC Survey of Student Satisfaction, the Writing Center receives a satisfaction rating in the high 90th-percentile and has achieved a 100% satisfaction rating three times. In August 2019, The Writing Center@PVCC received the SWCA's CARE Certification.

Course-Embedded Tutoring

The Writing Center created a course-embedded tutoring program in 2008. The goal of the program was to integrate Writing Center supports into non-credit developmental writing courses. Since a redesign of the developmental courses in 2012, PVCC has embedded tutors in a co-requisite, non-credit bearing course attached to College Composition and in standalone “developmental classes.” By embedding tutors into these courses, students have built-in experiences with writing tutors, making it more comfortable for them to seek Writing Center services outside of class. The embedded tutor also supports instructors in differentiating instruction to meet students' needs.

Initially, writing tutors attended developmental support classes just once per week, working with students one-on-one or in groups and modeling student behavior in class. However, in fall 2020, PVCC participated in the VCCS Direct Enrollment Project which sought to enroll students into credit-bearing courses more quickly and thereby bolster completion. PVCC, one of the only colleges in the VCCS with a course-embedded tutoring program at the time, had already been enjoying success in our developmental writing courses, but the Writing Center seized the

opportunity to build the program, even further, embedding tutors into the entirety of the three-hour per week developmental support course.

While embedded tutoring once comprised 10% of the Writing Center budget, it now comprises 20 to 25% of the budget. However, PVCC's corequisite courses, and the new standalone three-credit developmental writing course, enjoy high rates of success with 71% of students in the co-requisite course passing College Composition and 93% of students passing the developmental course. Additionally, 92% of students in both courses say embedded tutors helped them to be successful in their course in Spring 2022. 67% used the WC outside of class, and 67% said working with embedded tutor increased their confidence in their writing. Thus, the embedded tutoring program is bolstering student success in critical first-year writing courses.

Research, Innovation, and the Promotion of Writing

Finally, The Writing Center@PVCC contributes to the college beyond working with students. Writing tutors engage in research in the field of writing center studies and develop materials to support students and faculty. They present at conferences and write tutor education modules. They run our social media feed, lead English Conversation Circle, and promote the Writing Center in classes and at campus events

Writing Center engagement with the research led to two significant events at the college this year. In January, Professor Jay Dolmage delivered a talk to all college faculty and staff entitled, "Ableism and its Alternatives." The talk and resources provided by Dolmage has led to awareness and actions to support students' mental and emotional health. Writing Center staff presented a talk entitled "Towards an Antiracist Writing Center," sharing our research, questions we've been asking, and steps we've been taking in the Writing Center to ensure equity in our work. These presentations have been conversation starters and have sparked interest and action in others.

The Writing Center also promotes student writing across campus. Each fall, the Center sponsors an English 111 [College Composition] Personal Narrative Contest, as personal narratives are a requirement of every English 111 at the college. Tutors advertise, read, and judge the contest. We select four winners, who each receive \$25. We also select "staff

picks,” favorite essays that didn’t make it into our top four. We view this as a way to celebrate the writing from the course which constitutes the largest number of Writing Center visits. We publish the winning essays on a website.

In October 2020, the Writing Center@PVCC hosted Virginia’s first annual statewide writing tutor conference, TuColla-VA. Though the pandemic necessitated TuColla-VA occur in Zoom, the conference attracted tutors from 16 Virginia colleges and universities. PVCC tutors presented on strategies for promoting the voices of English language learners, Universal Design in educational materials, and connections between activist and Writing Center work. In October 2021, PVCC hosted the second TuColla-VA, once again in Zoom, with tutors attending from 19 schools, including two high schools and four out-of-state colleges and universities. PVCC Writing Center tutors presented on disability and the Writing Center and on using social media platforms to promote linguistic justice. TuColla-VA will continue next year, with the Writing Center@PVCC providing support to the conference’s next host.

This engagement with research, and with colleagues within the system, state, and region, helps to strengthen our work in the Writing Center, but also in the English department, and in the college. We bring back what we learn to the college, and it makes its way to the English department through our coordinator and to the college via staff-run presentations, infusing curriculum across the college.

Continuing to Grow

While we are proud of the work we have done, we are also asking “What’s next?” For many years, because of the way general tutoring is structured at PVCC, writing tutors have also supported students with subject-tutoring related to the humanities. With a new tutoring center in design, the Writing Center will likely evolve into a Writing, Speech and Communications Center focused on supporting students with writing, public speaking and presentations.

Further development of course-embedded tutoring is also being explored. We know students who pass College Composition 1 with a C or below are less likely to be successful in College Composition 2. We are looking at opportunities to embed tutors in these courses as well. We

are also looking to recruit students who've worked with embedded tutors in their courses to become embedded tutors themselves.

As part of our equity work, we are continuing to explore ways to support linguistic diversity and to ensure policies and procedures in the Writing Center are inclusive. It is our goal that the Writing Center be a motivator of change and that it reflects the dynamic community of the college as a whole.



Figure 1. The Writing Center@PVCC



Figure 2. The entrance chalkboard wall in The Writing Center@PVCC

Contributors



Article 1: Are Peer-to-Peer Writing Conferences Collaborative? An Evaluation of Peer Tutor-Student Discourse

Prabin Lama is an Assistant Professor of English and Director of the Writing Resource Center at Bemidji State University. He earned a doctorate degree in Rhetoric and Writing from Virginia Tech in 2018. His research interests include writing center pedagogy and assessment.



Article 2: Fostering Collaboration, Creativity, and Connection: Writing Center Spaces as Exhibit Areas

Jeffrey Howard is a postdoctoral fellow and the Assistant Director of the Naugle Communication Center at Georgia Tech. His scholarship has appeared in *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, *The Writing Lab Newsletter*, and *Beyond the Frontier: Innovations in First-Year Composition: Vol. II*. He is also the founding editor of *World Englishes: Linguistic Variety, Global Society* and director of the NARWOL (Narratives of Reading, Writing, and Other Literacies) archive project. In August 2022, Jeffrey will join the faculty at Converse University as an Assistant Professor of English and the Director of the Writing Center.

Article 3: The Centrality of the Center (Early COVID Edition): Best Practices for Sustaining Communication Center Operations During a Global Pandemic

- **Michael G. Strawser**, Assistant Professor and Deputy Assistant Director of Communication Programs, University of Central Florida
- **Kimberly M. Cuny**, Senior Academic Professional and Director of Speaking Center, University of North Carolina at Greensboro
- **Russell Carpenter**, Assistant Provost and Professor of English, Eastern Kentucky University
- **Kevin Dvorak**, Executive Director of the Write from the Start Writing and Communication Center, NOVA Southeastern University
- **Suzy Prentiss**, Distinguished Lecturer in the School of Communication Studies, University of Tennessee-Knoxville

Consultant Insight: Course-Embedded Peer Writing Support as Mentorship: A Reflection and Exploration



Nyah Mattison is a senior writing center consultant at Transylvania University in Lexington, KY. Nyah studies Computer Science, Digital Arts and Media, and Classics. In 2021, Nyah was a winner of the Southeastern Writing Center Association/Christine Cozzens Research and Initiative Award. After graduation, she will be attending the University of California, Berkeley to complete a Masters in Information Management and Systems.

Taylor Kielman is a senior writing center consultant at Transylvania University in Lexington, KY. She studies International Affairs with minors in Chinese and Asian Studies. In 2021, Taylor was a winner of the Southeastern Writing Center Association/Christine Cozzens Research and Initiative Award. In the fall, she will be attending the University of California, Los Angeles to pursue an MA in East Asian Studies with a focus on Chinese culture and politics.



Back to the Center: The Writing Center@Piedmont Virginia Community College

As English Professor and Writing Center Coordinator at PVCC, Jenny Koster supports students in developing their voices so that they advocate for themselves and their communities. A founder of the Virginia Community College System's Learning Assistance Professionals Peer

Group and active member of the Southeastern Writing Center Association, Jenny has worked to elevate tutoring across the state and region.

Call for Submissions

SDC Fall 2022—SWCA Conference Retrospective

We are pleased to invite submissions from anyone who presented at or attended the 2022 SWCA Conference, which was held online via Zoom. In addition to transcripts of conference addresses, we hope to feature in this issue scholarly articles that grow from sessions at the conference. If you gave a presentation or sit on a panel—or even if you are just inspired by a session you attended at the conference—you are strongly encouraged to “write up” your work and send it in for editorial and peer review.

Please note: If space allows, the Fall 2022 may also include a book review, a Back to the Center piece, and a Consultant Insight article. Submission for these types of manuscripts do not necessarily have to be connected to the 2022 SWCA Conference.

Deadline for submissions: 1 September 2022.

SDC Spring 2023

To encourage a wide variety of scholarly activity, the Spring 2023 issue will not have a specific thematic focus. Please consider submitting your work on the tutoring or teaching of academic writing, WC administration, WC assessment, tutor training, or any other topic related to the focus of the journal that you feel would be of interest to readers.

Deadline for submissions: 1 March 2021.

Articles can be theoretical or practical in focus (or a combination thereof) and should incorporate outside sources in MLA format according to the guidelines available on the *SDC* website at the link below:

<https://southeasternwritingcenter.wildapricot.org/southerndiscourse>

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact the editors at southerndiscoursejournal@gmail.com

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ISSN 2472-2537



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