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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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