

2 The High School Writing Lab/Center: A Dialogue

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Farrell: In 1981 you and I met after completing a writing-across-the-curriculum course at Rutgers University. You had a functioning writing center, and I was proposing one. Could you explain how your writing center worked?

Speiser: Sure, but let me give you some background. In 1970, our school had a flexible schedule that allowed instructors to be assigned to resource centers; there were resource centers in English and all other major disciplines. The English center functioned in many ways, one of which happened to be writing conferences. It worked rather well because students had independent study time, and they could either be asked by an instructor to come to the resource center, or they could drop in. Then I participated in the Bay Area Writing Project with Dr. Robert Parker, and got more insight into the functions of writing. Parker and I had a lot in common, and he came to my school to do some research on writing across the curriculum—we wanted to find out how much and what kinds of writing went on in classrooms. We conducted research for two years and provided a series of in-house seminars on writing and thinking for interested faculty. It became obvious to us that, given the school's flexible schedule, it made sense to have a place where writing could be focused on much more intensely. Armed with the research we had gathered, I proposed that a writing center be created.

Farrell: That's when I came to Rumson and you had a notebook with each teacher's name in it. The teachers put each writing assignment in the notebook so that whoever was working with the student could see what particular assignment had been given.

Speiser: That's right.

Farrell: Describe the writing center.

Speiser: It was informally arranged. All writing assignments were jotted down so that, when students came in for help, the instructor who was available could look at that assignment and key into what was being asked. Record keeping was minimal. We were much more interested in the process and had very little to show for the good work we did with students. It was a first-year approach.

Farrell: That was about the same time that I was writing my proposal for a writing center. And we didn't even know we were working on the same goal until you saw my proposal at a writing-across-the-curriculum seminar.

Speiser: Exactly. It was an excellent proposal because you had lots of good information about how to conference with students and how to keep the necessary records most administrators want.

Farrell: Thanks. When I opened the writing center, there had been labs in the school.

Speiser: Labs? What's the difference between a "lab" and a "center"?

Farrell: The labs at Red Bank Regional High School were places where an entire class went. The English department chair plus a clerical aid were there, and the room was used for making up tests or showing audiovisual materials that could not be used in our open classrooms. An entire class moved into the lab facility. It was not geared to tutoring in any way, shape, or form. A few teachers were assigned to the lab, but they did such things as get audiovisual equipment for teachers and administer tests. I began a writing center so that students across the curriculum would have a place where writing was the focus. But unlike you, I could not use the lab facility or the assigned staff. Instead, teachers across the curriculum volunteered part of their lunch period to tutor students under the steps in the media center.

Speiser: I'll bet that that was a good start because the people who were getting involved were interested.

Farrell: Yes, they were, and that year proved there was a need for an assigned space, and that's when my administration gave me the closet upstairs in the media center.

Speiser: I remember that very well.

Farrell: All we had was a desk, file cabinet, little round table, and chairs. We did get an Osborne I portable computer without a printer. At least it came with WordStar word-processing software.

Speiser: Look how far you've gone from there. I remember visiting and looking, basically, at a closet with an Osborne! How did you get students to come to your writing center?

Farrell: I asked students who had been in my classes. Fortunately, I had had a very strong junior honors English class the year before, and I encouraged those students to come for help with their writing. They became good resources because they volunteered the next year to come up and work with students in the writing center during their lunch or study periods.

Speiser: So they were released from study halls?

Farrell: Right. They picked the days to volunteer and soon realized that they could help others, while at the same time use the writing center themselves. Some of them, like Kris Lopez and Jay Czarnecki, learned to use the computer and word processing software faster than I did. In fact, these two tutors even used their volunteer time to earn congressional awards. A nucleus of students, juniors and seniors, then brought in other students who became tutors and stayed with the writing center. I think, through the use of peer tutoring exercises in my own classes, most of these students realized they learned something about their own writing by working with the writing of someone else.

Speiser: So they internalized some of this, and they were able to say, "Gee, this makes good sense."

Farrell: Yes. Many of them were science-oriented students who planned to major in engineering in college, and they felt that they really needed help with their own writing. The best way to do that was to work with students, so they learned the importance of

collaboration. I thought that was really interesting. I would like to have had faculty members involved at that point, but there was no released time for faculty members.

Speiser: How were your ideas received by the administration when you first started working on this?

Farrell: Dr. Nogueira, our principal, encouraged them because he knew that some of us on the faculty were interested in writing across the curriculum, and he wanted to reinforce that concept.

Speiser: What qualities did you say Dr. Nogueira possessed to make all this to happen? I know that people who will be reading this are going to say, "All right. If I want to start a writing center, what kinds of things do I have to look for?" Without administrative support, you're just not going to have a writing center.

Farrell: I've shared the following with Dr. Nogueira. When you and I were working on the NCTE workshop in Denver, and the year before when I presented in Washington, I had said, "In order to get a writing center started, you have to make your administration realize that what you are going to do is going to make them look good, too." The fact is that whatever is done in the school that makes the school look good also makes the administration look good. You want things that are effective, things that do encourage student and faculty growth and. . . .

Speiser: Learning.

Farrell: Yes, learning itself. I think that the key ingredient I found with our particular principal is that he is a reader. He keeps up with everything that is going on in education, so when I proposed the writing center, he was well aware of the fact that the future was heading towards improvement in writing skills. He was well aware of writing across the curriculum and how the writing center could function in that capacity. I think that those characteristics really helped him see the importance of the writing center within the scheme of the whole school.

Speiser: It's so important because, again, you were fortunate to work with someone who was aware of current research in writing. In fact, that's step one—writing center directors must get relevant information to the appropriate administrators. It may take a year or two to feed the information to them—get them fully aware of current research—so that when a proposal for

a writing center comes around, they know something about it. It's not a shot in the dark; it counters the difficulties that occur, for example, the cost effectiveness of the writing center.

Farrell: Right. I think that the advantage people starting out today have is, hopefully, the material in this book, plus articles written in the *English Journal* and *Writing Lab Newsletter* on high school writing centers. When you and I started our programs, there just weren't articles or periodicals that spoke about high school writing centers. Nobody knew much about them. The first writing center that I found from my survey was one started in 1976, an isolated case that nobody else knew about. Today, there are over one hundred high school writing centers that people are aware of, ones that you can go visit. Heck, when we started, there weren't any to visit. If you went to see a college writing center, it was a whole different ball game. It was in a separate building; there weren't any bells ringing; students could stay until they finished something; they could come in the evening or the daytime; the time factor was entirely different; the staffing was different; and staff was dealing with mature students. It was hard to relate to what we had to do because we had to get material on college writing centers and adapt it.

Speiser: That's right.

Farrell: Now it's easier to start one, and I think the other thing is that you can always find *in the directory in the back of this book* names of existing high school writing centers. If you live in Ohio, for instance, there are three or four people that you can contact; that's going to save you hours and hours of time that we had to spend on just trying to figure out how the heck we were going to make a writing center work.

Speiser: I think the structure of the traditional American high school causes more difficulty than anything else. It makes the separation between a college writing center and a high school one obvious. Colleges provide more flexibility for their students. They aren't interested in whether a student is in a study hall or not.

Farrell: You need to write ten passes!

Speiser: That atmosphere! All of the paperwork that's involved in a high school that is not involved in a college makes it more difficult to make a high school writing center work. Initially,

Rumson-Fair Haven functioned like a college campus. There were no study halls.

Farrell: Right, you had all that unstructured time.

Speiser: Lots of unstructured time, so it lent itself to a writing center. Since that time, structure has been imposed, and that has caused difficulties.

Farrell: Yes, tell me about them.

Speiser: After a year of operation, our writing center was eliminated. However, the next year a group came in to evaluate the English department, and they asked, "What happened to the writing center?" Like magic, the writing center was resurrected under a new name: "writing lab." Then, after a year of operation, that, too. . . .

Farrell: Wait a minute. Let's back up a second. You had been given a summer grant to do research on setting up the writing lab, correct? The school invested money during the summer for you to open something new?

Speiser: Reopen.

Farrell: Reopen only under the name of writing lab, and then, after a year, it disappeared?

Speiser: Yes. Let me put things into perspective. After having a writing center for a year, I was learning, as I still am, about how writing centers work. What I saw was a nice, informal place for people to come to talk about their writing assignments and find out what they could do to improve their writing. My year-end goal was to evaluate where we were, do some more research, and then talk to the administration about expanding the writing center into one with a cross-curricular focus and interdisciplinary staff. Well, that didn't occur because there was a change in administration, and the new educational hierarchy felt that four classes plus the writing center was not acceptable. They felt that the students would be better served if the teacher were in the classroom teaching—"teaching," as James Britton would humorously describe it, being the art of dispensing knowledge "from the jug to the mug, pouring knowledge into students' heads." So, goodbye writing center.

Now, the group that I mentioned earlier, who came to evaluate the school, recommended that the writing center be

reinstated. They had done their homework, and they saw that it was a significant asset. Well, armed with their report and a summer grant to work out the mechanics, our writing center was born again. Although the summer grant only involved one of the instructors, it certainly helped because the philosophy and the processes, the nuts and bolts of the new writing center, were established. In September, the writing center was reinstated under a new name, "the writing lab." I was directed to call it a lab.

Farrell: This is a good point at which to bring up the distinction that you found between the terms "center" and "lab."

Speiser: A writing center is a place where writing is honored. It's a center for thinking and learning with all the connotations of humanism and inquiry. A lab conjures up visions of a Frankensteinian place where people are dissected and SRA kits come out to be drilled and redrilled ad nauseam. It reminds me of a Band-Aid station, as you would say, Pam, for folks having problems, a remedial place. I'm not sure, but I think that's what some might have envisioned.

Farrell: Do you think the introduction of the high school proficiency test with a writing sample had something to do with the name change?

Speiser: I'm sure it did. The administration might have reasoned, "We've got to make sure we do very well on this state testing, and to do that, we are going to have this lab." If this was what the administration was thinking, however, it was never realized, for the writing lab turned out to be something quite different. Philosophically, the new lab was a place where students wrote as a way of learning to write; where there was a commitment to individualized instruction through conference teaching and tutoring; where there was a commitment to teach writing as a process; and where there was a major commitment to foster a confidence by focusing on learning rather than grading. The lab put the teaching of writing, the control of writing, and the responsibility for writing back into the hands of students by giving them a place and some space to talk about ideas, and to engage in the trial and error process of composing.

Farrell: So what happened?

Speiser: In essence, what happened was that, at the end of the school year, the administration decided there would no longer be a

writing lab. This is something that will have to be faced by people who are going to put together writing labs/centers. A writing lab/center will be eliminated if administrators and Boards of Education are not convinced that it's okay for an instructor to tutor one to three students per class period. A writing lab/center will be eliminated if administrators and Boards of Education are not convinced that tutorials are the finest way to effect the improvement of thinking and writing.

Farrell: Now that you have mentioned the administration again, I have to bring up another point. At the time we started our programs years ago, you were supervisor of English while I was a classroom English teacher with five sections of English to teach each day. I had very little support from my supervisor, but I did have a very supportive principal. I set up the writing center as a writing-across-the-curriculum facility. I know there will be many people reading this book who will say, "I don't know anyone who will support me. What am I going to do?" Well, we both found that outside consultants coming to the school help because, first of all, we all know that anyone within the school itself cannot be an expert. You bring in paid consultants who live at least twenty-five miles away and they know something; that's a reality. But realistically, a consultant can present the research that you already know and make others aware and supportive of your ideas. That can make a big difference. [*The directory in the back of this book will help someone starting a writing lab/center find consultants to explain how their labs/centers work.*]

Speiser: Now Teacher Farrell has done the research, has read this and other works on writing centers, is convinced that a writing center is essential, but is having problems getting started. Teacher Farrell gets a consultant to talk about writing centers to the administration and the English department.

Farrell: And the consultant does such a good job that the administration is convinced.

Speiser: That's one way to do it. What about the administrators who are not in favor of a writing center? We've got to get them literature to read.

Farrell: Another thing to do—I know we've both done it—is make a point of gathering papers that students have worked on with

writing center assistance and present those materials to the Board of Education. The students and I posted winning essays, entries in contests, college application essays, poetry and writing projects across the curriculum. We also gave demonstrations on the use of the word processors for writing, as part of the inservice programs. In other words, we have tried to keep the Board of Education and staff aware of what we're doing. As you mentioned before, if they and the community know what's going on, they're going to support it. I was very fortunate one year to have a parent who had just moved into the area volunteer one hour per week of her time. She didn't work with many students, but she read every book on writing that I had in the writing center. She also spoke to other parents about the writing center, and she was there at the board meetings. That was very positive.

Speiser: Maybe that's the best approach. First, do your homework, read this book, read other books, understand more about the composing process, and then get started. There must be some time during the school day that can be sacrificed so that you can start a writing lab/center. Do you have a study hall or professional period? Guess what—all you need is a peaceful place and public relations to get started.

Farrell: Let's add one thing. You've got to have a writing lab/center philosophy so clear in your own mind that you believe it down to the tips of your toes. I refer to it as being clearly embedded in my soul because, if it hadn't been, every wall I had run into along the way would have just destroyed me. The writing center never would have gotten off the ground.

Speiser: Give me an example of a wall.

Farrell: Okay. "We don't have anybody for released time. We can't let you work in the writing center." That's why I began to use peer tutors; I didn't have another body to put in the area. When I got a room the second year, I needed people to be in the room other than during my lunch period. I couldn't ask teachers to give up their lunch periods.

Speiser: You were able to get some students. . . .

Farrell: Because teachers were covering cafeteria supervision, library supervision, hall duty, study hall duty, whatever—there were no extra people. I was given writing center duty instead of

cafeteria duty, so I was assigned there one period out of a full eight-period day. That's why being in the media center helped; there was a teacher assigned there every period, plus a librarian. That meant that students could be in the writing center because it was located within a larger room, the media center, which was already supervised.

Speiser: That's how we overcame some of our walls. Many high schools thrive on body counts; someone says students must be somewhere every second of the school day. This kind of makes me boil a little bit because physical accountability (hall passes, library passes, late passes) takes precedence over teaching and learning.

Farrell: It's another reality.

Speiser: A sad reality, sometimes.

Farrell: Yes, so for insurance purposes, the area had to be supervised, and I had to find a way to staff the writing center.

Speiser: What you're saying is whoever is going to read this book will do whatever it takes to get the lab/center going. We're not talking about where it is located (although that's a consideration, too), but we are talking about using the available resources. In your case, the available resources were students because there were no other resources available. At one point, I was fortunate enough to have teachers work there. That was great. Maybe, in a third school, there might be students who won't be available; teachers won't be available. Maybe they'll use community people. Whatever the situation, you need somebody—somebody who's trained—somebody who understands the writing process and is willing and able to operate as a tutor.

Farrell: You've got to know that you're going to run into brick walls. There's no way of getting around them. You were closed down, you started back up. You were closed down again. . . .

Speiser: And we'll start up again.

Farrell: Remember the Shmoo in *Li'l Abner*? You knock it over, it bounces back up. Donald Murray, Peter Elbow—you know the people I'm talking about—strongly influenced our thinking in setting up our writing centers. Without their ideas and that reinforcement, we probably wouldn't have done it.

What we can say to people who are trying to start a writing center is, "Okay, what do you do? You have this great philosophy

of your own, you work with your own situation, but you also prepare yourself." Every state has some kind of a writing project course to attend that prepares you to teach writing. There are wonderful summer writing institutes at Bread Loaf or Northeastern University at Martha's Vineyard. Programs like these are available throughout the country for teachers who are interested in learning more about teaching writing. Those teachers are important for one very essential reason, and that is to provide you with a built-in support group to help you get your own program off the ground. Also, as one of my friends told me, she needed the arm of our Martha's Vineyard group because no one else in her own school system understood what she was trying to do. She just needed some positive reinforcement from one of the members of the network. That's what happens; you need it, and it's important. You can prepare yourself, and once you open your lab/center, you don't stop doing these things. You never stop. I mean, you and I have gone to how many conferences and presentations since 1981 and we still have problems with our labs/centers that we want to ameliorate. We're not going to get the problems resolved if we don't keep going to conferences and listening. I need a dose of some kind of writing workshop every six months just to keep up on what's going on and to try new methods. That's really important.

There's one other element that we haven't emphasized enough. It's the students. If it weren't for them, forget it.

Speiser: You're right, because that's why we're there in the first place, and they're the ones that make a writing center work because they come back with the information that says, "Guess what? I think I understand a little bit more about how I write, and I like this. I want to return. I want to come back and see you and talk to you about writing."

Farrell: After they graduate, too. That's what is interesting. They come back and, whether they've gone to college, vocational school, or work, these kids return and talk to you about the importance of the writing center.

Speiser: That's certainly proof enough for us, but it is even more important that "schools"—administrators, teachers, parents—see that writing is important. And one way to make schools aware is through a schoolwide study of writing.

Farrell: Yes, that's what we did. In both of our schoolwide writing-across-the-curriculum surveys, we studied the kinds of writing our students were doing in their classes. We learned that there needed to be a center, a place that could be the focus of writing.

Speiser: That's true. My survey indicated that the purposes, kinds, and amounts of writing were much too dependent upon individual teachers. I also inferred that optimum writing came from classrooms conducted by teachers who were trained to teach writing. They were more aware of the functions of writing and how writing could be used as a tool to learn, as well as a means of evaluation. It was clear that one way to improve schoolwide writing was to create a center and staff it with trained *writing* teachers.

Farrell: We were both looking at Britton's transactional, expressive, and poetic modes of writing in our surveys. Because most of the writing fell into only one of those categories, we became aware of the need for more variety of writing in order to think, to know, and to learn.

Speiser: Right. Maybe that's another way to get a writing center started. Be a little manipulative. Think, "I want a writing center. I'll take a survey and find out something that I suspect anyway—that there is insufficient writing in the transactional mode or in the expressive mode or there is insufficient writing across the curriculum." I'm going to meet some opposition, so I'll get some other people who are interested in writing and tell others, "I want to find out what kinds of things students write about now." Use trade-offs: "If you let me know what kinds of writing are going on, let me see the actual pieces, then I'll try to help you with a concern you have."

Farrell: You said "manipulative," and I'm sitting here saying to myself, "Well, I was manipulative; there's nothing wrong with that." My proposal was part of my M.A. in writing at Northeastern University. I proposed the writing center for one of my courses. That made it easier to say to my principal, "I'm doing this for a course." Sometimes that helps. By conducting surveys or researching for courses, or writing projects, you may get the administrative support you need.

Speiser: And how about computers? They were hot items, right? Do you remember when every student was going to become

computer literate, and there was a shark frenzy of purchase orders to get more computers than the neighboring district?

Farrell: Sure. Then people realized that computer literacy wasn't what they thought it was. Many of the students had computers at home or didn't need all this training in computer programming.

Speiser: And as a result, there was a barrel of rotting Apples—too bad! This is a great situation if you want to start a writing center. I guess it's our moral sense that makes us shy away from the word "manipulative" because we don't like it.

Farrell: But a writing center is something positive that can't do anything but help the school. If you have to manipulate, do so. And remember, some districts are lucky. An Ohio superintendent has publicly stated that by next year, he wants all the high schools in the district to have writing centers.

Speiser: That's an enviable circumstance, but I know that there are districts oblivious to the need for a writing center. Either way, be sure to do your homework first. Don't use a writing center as a Band-Aid for a problem an administrator has. For example, if the statewide writing test scores are not high enough, the administration might say, "Next year's educational objectives will include the implementation of a new learning facility to enhance written communication skills."

Farrell: Translation—"We've got to bring up the scores on the statewide writing tests fast. We'll create a space where the failures will get remedial help. We'll let Speiser buy a couple of drill-and-kill software packages and tell him to solve the problem!"

Speiser: That's what they'll do. And they'll tell me to transform these students, who are totally turned off to writing and learning for a lot of other reasons, into scholars within a year. I'll accept this absurd challenge but then manipulate it. I'll turn the writing lab around so that it meets the needs of the students.

Farrell: And meeting the needs of students means creating a low-risk, positive environment that encourages dialogue or collaboration. No matter why students come to the writing lab or writing center, they need to know that it's okay to talk about their writing and talk about what they might be planning to write. We never had that in high school or college; we didn't have anyone to listen to what we were writing about during the

writing process. It's very important for all of us to have that. Professional writers have other writers that they send their work to or call to ask, "How does this sound?" They know that collaboration is important. They know it's important to have another listener, another voice, involved in the whole writing process. We all need those listeners and those questions to help keep us on task and to help keep us moving forward.

Speiser: You're absolutely right. And one more thing. Don't forget evaluation. Be wise and set up approved evaluation tools before the center opens so that you won't be expected to do the impossible.

Farrell: Like tutor fifty students per day when you only have staff to handle sixteen.

Speiser: Exactly. And be sure to include a survey that measures attitudinal changes toward writing. In all cases, your evaluation should involve something besides a head count or points on statewide writing tests.

Farrell: I agree.

Speiser: And there's something else. A writing lab/center should not be a people dump. It should not be a place where Ms. Nevabend can send Butch Doe, her classroom nemesis. Don't buy that one. And don't let it become a proofreading service or a place where tutors write papers for students. A sound and clearly disseminated writing lab/center philosophy should mitigate these traps.

Farrell: Right. Finally, it should be a reinforcement of what's going on in the classrooms throughout the high school.