

5 Staffing the Writing Center

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Staffing by Peer Tutors

The Oak Knoll Writing Center has been in operation for six years, but contrary to general expectations, our writing center is not staffed by our school writing experts (the teachers); instead we staff our center exclusively with students. The 250 girls who attend the Upper School may use the writing center whenever they have unscheduled time, including before and after school, lunch period, or free time. A student may sign up on the writing center door to reserve a time slot in advance, or she may take her chances and drop in when she is free. A student may be required to go to the writing center by a teacher, or she may decide on her own to go for help. A student may bring a school essay with organizational problems, a short story without a dynamic beginning, or a poem in need of an audience. Over the years, the number of students using the writing center has steadily increased. Surveyed annually, our students endorse the peer-staffed center; they feel their sessions improve their writing because of the supportive and collaborative environment.

Our decision to use students, not teachers, as tutors was based on educational and practical considerations. Philosophically, we believe that peer tutors are powerful coaches for their fellow students. When a teacher says, "You know, I'm not sure what you're saying in this

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part of your essay," often students attribute this lack of understanding to a generation gap; but when a respected fellow student gives similar feedback, the client really concentrates. Our students listen to each other. From a practical standpoint, in our small, independent school, we need our talented students because our writing teachers are too busy. Not only do the teachers moderate the newspaper and literary magazine and help direct the school plays, but they also preside over the student council and the forensics club. We could not have staffed the center with our teachers; they were simply not available.

While we were convinced that, with training, peer tutors could be powerful writing coaches, we were concerned about how we could get our most talented student writers to give up two to three periods per week of their precious, unscheduled time to staff our center. We had no money to pay them; we couldn't promise them a lightened course load; we didn't have a luxurious setting with which to tempt them. The plan we finally devised works well for us. We *require* all of our junior and senior students who wish to be part of our honors or advanced placement English programs to be writing center tutors. This makes a lot of sense to us, for the students in our college-preparatory school who would want to participate in an advanced English program would need to be students who already display competence in writing. In our communication to interested juniors and seniors, we explain clearly that, aside from the standard requirements for acceptance into our honors or advanced placement programs (such as good grades in English, outstanding teacher recommendations, high verbal SAT scores, ability to do independent work, and enthusiasm for English), students need to commit themselves to a minimum of two, fifty-minute periods per week to work in the writing center. (Those students with no unscheduled school time can work in the center before or after school or during lunch periods—food is permitted in the center). Happily, this writing center tutoring requirement has in no way affected the number of students who apply to our honors or advanced placement programs; in fact, the number of applications has increased even with the added tutoring responsibility.

We have committed ourselves to student tutors, but what makes student tutors commit themselves to us? A writing center tutor is an admired and respected person at Oak Knoll. The tutors are proud to have been selected; they like the challenge of helping their friends and classmates improve their writing. In the required writing center journals, the tutors often note their feelings of competence:

Jean came to me and asked me to go over her paper with her. It was a paper on Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. She had good ideas

but she needed a little help organizing. We also corrected some awkward sentences and punctuation and spelling mistakes. She also asked me to help her with ideas for a conclusion which I did. Her paper was good and answered the question the teacher's assignment had asked. Since Jean and I are good friends, it was fun to work with her. She listens to me and I listen to her and together we get a lot accomplished. (Debbie M.)

This trimester was a *very* busy one for me, both academically and socially. I went through a lot of heartaches coupled with happy occasions and new challenges. Writing Center has been a major part of my life these past three months. Being late for class, taking papers home and missing out on my lunches and free time were all things that came with the responsibility of being a Writing Center tutor. When I applied and was accepted into English Honors, I had no idea my life would be such a confused whirlwind, but now, I wouldn't change a minute! I got to know many students, learned from their mistakes and made many new friends while balancing my time between pizza and a paper on *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. I love having such a big commitment and responsibility and having to stick to it whether my life that day started off on the wrong foot or whether I came from an amazing party the night before. I feel so strongly about having the chance to help others while having fun and I hope I can continue doing so for more prospective Writing Center tutors in the years to come. (Carolina E.)

As an added incentive, writing center tutors are able to participate in our school service program. If they have accumulated the required number of service hours, they receive service credit that is noted on their permanent file.

The tutors are also made aware that, while they are helping other students improve their writing, their own writing improves as well. Many tutors have commented in their journals that they've noted strengths and weaknesses in their papers after they've worked with a student; in clarifying a concept for others, the coach learns it for herself:

I have tutored mainly seventh and eighth grade students this trimester. I found I enjoy tutoring this age group the most because they are the most open and least self conscious about their mistakes and problems. I've gotten to know a lot of girls through tutoring, but perhaps more importantly I have strengthened many of my skills. For example, when I discovered I had trouble explaining some of the punctuation errors students made, I decided to look the topics up in texts to clarify the rules in my mind. (Caragh N.)

In no way do writing center tutors feel that they are directive teachers imposing their will on pliant, helpless peers. What the tutors enjoy is the feeling of camaraderie and competence that the writing center

fosters. Tutor and client actively participate in the learning process. They collaborate to solve problems, make decisions, and improve writing:

When I tutor someone we usually have a set way of going about it. I first have her read her paper to me and then I ask her if she has a specific problem with it that she wants to work on. If not, we go paragraph by paragraph and discuss new ideas and errors. I haven't yet had a bad experience in Writing Center. I try my best to help the client improve her paper, but if for some reason I don't feel that she left with the best paper that she could have written, (which does sometimes happen because every paper isn't perfect) at least we made friends and she'll come back another time to try again. (Missy J.)

While Oak Knoll students (both tutors and clients) have benefited from the peer-staffed writing center, there are, of course, problems that arise when students provide the services. First, there is the concern about the nonempathetic tutor. Because we require all honors and advanced placement English students to tutor, we occasionally find a talented English student who, initially, may not possess the interpersonal skills necessary to be a sensitive tutor. This student needs additional attention during the training sessions, careful monitoring during her first writing center conferences, and continual feedback from the supervisor during the year. In fact, the training sessions and the monthly meetings for all tutors should focus, in part, on the importance of making students feel welcome in a nonauthoritarian, collaborative environment. Tutors should be encouraged to discuss the personal dimensions of their session, not just the problems they uncovered with deep structure and surface errors.

In addition to the nonempathetic peer tutor, there is the annoying problem of the no-show tutor. It is disappointing and frustrating for a student to arrive at the writing center for her appointment and find no one available to help her. When tutors know in advance that they are going to be absent, they are required to find another tutor to fill their time slot. This system usually works quite well. Occasionally a tutor will leave school ill and be unable to arrange for a substitute. This is when the supervisor, if available, substitutes for the absent tutor. Other supportive teachers can be called in at the last moment, as well. The best solution to the absent tutor problem is to schedule two or more tutors for the same time slot. This not only allows coverage when one tutor doesn't show up, but it also enables several students to receive tutoring at the same time.

Finally, there is the problem of the authoritarian tutor. Sometimes we discover that a tutor is acting as a directive teacher, pencil in hand,

correcting mistakes for a client. We teach our tutors never to put a mark on a student's paper. Any changes agreed upon should be made by the tutee, who is, after all, learning not only how to revise this particular paper, but also how to revise, eventually on her own, any paper she writes. Tutors help students become their own best editors.

Since the tutors are admonished against doing the work for the client, why have one or more teachers report to the supervisor that they have suspected that a particular student's paper was more the effort of the tutor than the effort of the student? Peer pressure is the answer. Once in a while, a tutor finds it difficult to resist the entreaties of a student who claims she will fail her course if her paper (which she has put off until the last minute) is not superb. Couldn't the tutor, her friend, take the paper home and write some suggestions? Left unsolved, this problem could undermine the faculty's belief that, when a student uses the writing center, she collaborates on her writing, but she doesn't have her work done for her. The best way to combat this problem is to address it from the start during training sessions and to role-play face-saving techniques so that the tutors can firmly but gracefully extricate themselves from an uncomfortable (and dishonest) situation.

Knowing the problems in advance can help create a successful student-staffed writing center. Talented honors and advanced placement English students, well trained and well monitored, can make an excellent staff for a high school writing center. They are enthusiastic, responsible, and sensitive; they are eager to learn and to help their peers. Not too long ago, the English department chairperson of another independent school asked me how I could, in good conscience, sanction the idea of a center where students would do little else than pass on mistakes from one to another. I assured him that, while, on occasion, a surface error might not be spotted and ferreted out, on the whole, Oak Knoll's writing center fostered interaction between students in a supportive, nurturing environment where students came away with a positive attitude about work, while feeling they had improved the quantity and quality of their writing.

Staffing by Faculty

Many schools insist that the only way to staff an effective writing lab/center is by using trained professionals. Although I do not have that luxury, I more than agree that, if your administration permits, trained writing instructors should be released from class assignments to staff a writing lab/center. In the sections describing the training of such

staff, directors discuss the advantages of using professionals in the writing facility. Naturally, the professionals staffing the facility must have a common philosophy and similar training in the teaching of writing. Nothing proves more ineffective than a group of professionals giving mixed instructions or directions to student writers. Therefore, staffing by professionals must include an isolated training program before the facility opens.

Many of the existing high school writing labs/centers have developed programs that have worked in conjunction with college facilities. Some, such as West High School, Central High School, and Kirkwood High School, have modeled their training of staff after nearby college or university writing centers. Others have staffed their facilities with teachers who have participated in a national writing project course. Hazelwood West High School and J. P. McCaskey High School are examples. Finally, several schools have worked out collaborative projects with colleges and universities. For instance, Logan High School and Utah State University exchange faculty as part of their writing lab/center work, and Kenmore High School and Akron University use student teachers as well as instructors in their collaboration.

From my survey, 31 percent of the high school writing labs/centers are staffed entirely by professionals. Though more are staffed by student tutors (41 percent), many (27 percent) function with a combination of professional and student tutors. The reason for the lack of full-time professional staff, on the basis of the survey, seems to be a lack of commitment on the part of the administration: most schools are not willing to give up one teacher per period to staff a writing lab/center because that would equal the salary of one full-time teacher. However, there are schools (31 percent) from the survey who have hired full-time writing lab/center directors, indicating that staffing by professionals is important to the success of the writing labs/centers in those schools.

How do these writing labs/centers function when staffed by professionals? In most cases, teachers are assigned to the facility in place of a classroom or extra duty. They help students in different ways, depending on the purpose of the individual facility. In 99 percent of the cases, the teachers do not grade the students on their work in the writing lab/center, nor do they correct papers for other teachers. They are there to function as readers/listeners, conference guides, coaches, counselors. With the correct training and philosophy to meet the goals of an individual writing lab/center, professional tutors offer students an opportunity to work with teachers in a much more pleasant, less threatening environment to encourage the improvement of student writing.