

6 Scheduling

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Scheduling at Pattonville

Pattonville High School is a large (2,500 student population) middle class suburban school located in St. Louis County, Missouri. The school day has six periods of fifty-four minutes each, with optional zero and seventh hours. Our writing center began four years ago as the result of the initiative of a colleague who had become involved with the Gateway Writing Project. She was provided with one computer, one disk drive and a printer, and was scheduled a three-hour consecutive block of time in lieu of teaching classes. During this time, she trained student tutors, conferred with individual students, and gave presentations on writing in other content areas. The use of the computer allowed her to keep meticulous records of writing center activities, but conferences and presentations were always the main focus. Coincidentally, this happened at a point when our district was looking for ways to incorporate computers into our schools. Our department chair requested a lab for drill and practice, and thus we obtained nine Apple Plus computers.

With the support of the department chair and the supervising principal, the writing center was expanded to a full day of operation for the following year and moved to the room that housed the computers. The teacher who developed our program continued to have three consecutive hours in the center to direct and train new coaches. Three other teachers were assigned one-hour time slots for one semester

The first half of this chapter is composed by Barbara Brooks; the second, by Carol Lefelt.

as part of their teaching schedule. At the end of the semester, three more teachers were assigned one-hour time slots. This meant that the director taught only two classes and the other writing coaches, who had one hour each of center time, taught four classes. Since no students are assigned to the center *per se*, the coaches were free to confer with students, prepare and give presentations, learn various computer programs, and build activities files.

Admittedly, this released time from assigned classes increased the class size for everybody. Our large department of some twenty teachers made staffing the center a delicate and often fiery ordeal. Some of our colleagues saw the opening of the writing center as an opportunity to obtain a "cushy" schedule and felt that we should immediately set up a seniority-based rotating list for scheduling. Others believed that teacher training and experience in writing should be our criteria. For years, we had an elective curriculum where many teachers had not formally taught writing. For example, one teacher might teach five sections of filmmaking, or three sections of advanced reading and two sections of "Preparing for the Future," none of which focuses on the writing process. Some colleagues argued that all English teachers know how to teach writing even if they have taught five hours of the same elective each day for four years straight.

Teaching assignments are made by the department chair, who first solicits our input. Final approval of all schedules, however, is given by our supervising principal. Because of the uproar over the staffing and directing of the writing center, it soon became apparent that guidelines needed to be set and followed. The major problem centered on the disagreement about the need for actual course work in teaching writing and experience in teaching writing as a process. We never did come up with total agreement on the guidelines and probably never will.

Another problem occurred at the end of the year when our director resigned. Our solution was to once again change the staffing. Now we have two teachers serving as codirectors, who each have a two-hour consecutive block of center time for the entire year and who also teach three classes. Two other teachers have one hour each and teach four classes, with staff changing at the semester's end. Thus, four new coaches are used each year. This was also the year we added five Apple IIe computers and three printers.

Our present plan of codirectors having two hours each of center time has been very effective. Now in our third year of operation, we have a writing center equipped with nineteen computers and five printers and we service almost 200 students per month in addition to preparing and giving presentations. Although we have added respon-

sibilities because of the computer equipment, our philosophy hasn't changed. We still place a high priority on student conferences. The difference is that, now, when conferencing, a writing coach can expect to also be interrupted by the six or so students who are word processing as they need help revising and printing. Our connection with the computers has also resulted in teachers signing up their whole class for several days at a time. The disadvantage is that it is difficult for one writing coach to supervise eighteen students; the one-on-one conference time is lost. However, when whole classes come, we get several of them "hooked" on the ease of revising with computers, and they make return visits on their own so that they can get more individualized help.

Student Scheduling

To ensure an appointment, students are asked to use the sign-up sheets posted outside the center door. Separate sign-up sheets are displayed; one for a conference and one for independent work. Some of the independent work involves using various programs such as Print Shop, Newsroom, drill and practice exercises, SAT review, and word processing. The sheet provides for six hours and each hour is divided into approximately fifteen-minute time blocks for conferences. Students are allowed to sign up for the entire hour if they feel that it is necessary.

Even though the sign-up sheets are always posted a week in advance, we get a lot of drop-in business. Nevertheless, we insist that, before students arrive for their scheduled time or their drop-in visit, they report to the teacher whose class they will be missing and ask for permission to attend the center. We have passes made up for this purpose, and we always see to it that the teacher receives notification of the student's visit. Students coming for conferences are encouraged to submit rough drafts at least one day ahead of time so that the coach can be familiar with the writing. Usually, they come to the visit with assignment in hand. Bringing the necessary materials with them, such as the actual writing assignment, primary source or resource notes, and any prewriting already done in class, is very helpful.

Teachers may urge a student to use the writing center, but the final decision is always with the student.

Teacher Scheduling

We keep a master plan book in the writing center to record teacher requests for classroom presentation and for word-processing instruction. We prefer to have at least one week's notice on presentations,

especially if they involve lesson designing with the teacher (see chapter 20.) Teachers may also sign up their entire class for a visit. We have several story starter programs that we use to introduce students to word processing. Frequently, a teacher sends half the class on one day, and the other half the following day.

This year, the teachers of the junior/senior writing class used word processing to teach revision. Since there are ten sections of this class and the average class size is twenty-eight students, with some classes having as many as thirty-four, they needed to block out three weeks of time just to accommodate the large numbers. In the future, we intend to schedule these classes for no more than one week at a time, with a week off to allow for conferences, which are still our highest priority.

The growth of our writing center in just three years has been phenomenal. We still struggle with the view of some colleagues that we have an easy schedule, but we continually see an increase in the number of other content area teachers who realize the value of our assistance in designing writing assignments to suit their needs. We also have the enthusiastic support of teachers allowing students to visit the center during their class time, even if the assignment is not for their class. And nothing compares with the warm feeling that comes when a student stops by to say, "I just wanted to tell you I got an 'A' on that paper you helped me with. Thanks for your help. I'll be back here with the next paper."

Scheduling at Highland Park

Highland Park High School is a small New Jersey suburban school of about 700 students ranging from grades 8–12. Our writing center, which is staffed by students from grades 10–12, started operation in 1984 in a tiny windowless room in the school library, where the librarians function as supervisors of a sort—because of insurance requirements and because, as writing center advisor, I also teach four periods per day and am not always in the library. We have since moved out of the airless cubicle and occupy a larger space in the rear of the library, near the large windows overlooking the athletic fields.

Students are trained to be peer tutors in a class called "Writing and Responding," which meets three times per week during the school day and counts for three credits. The course requires that tutors spend at least one period per week staffing the writing center. Scheduling time for these tutors to be in the writing center and making sure they are indeed there at those times are two of my biggest headaches at the start of the school year.

There are always two groups of tutors in September: those trained the previous year, who are ready to open the writing center and begin tutoring around October 1, and those newly enrolled in Writing and Responding, who will be ready to start tutoring sometime after Thanksgiving. (Last year we started with nine tutors and added nine more on January 6. This year we started with nine tutors and added fifteen on December 1.)

Experienced Tutors

I require the experienced tutors to meet with me as a group twice per month—and here is my first scheduling problem. It has become clear after long hassles that the only workable solution is to meet from 4:00 to 6:00 or 5:00 to 7:00 on a particular weekday night, every other week. Otherwise, we could never find a time after school when everyone would be available, for these students not only participate in every other imaginable school activity, but also have after-school jobs or other commitments. To my surprise, each year the tutors readily agree to the late hour and rarely miss meetings. In fact, these evening meetings are quite productive and fun, probably because they occur outside the school day. Sometimes we bring in snacks or supper and stay later when necessary without worrying about running into the time reserved for other activities.

I usually wait to publish a writing center schedule until the end of September, when students' individual schedules are fairly set; at this time they know when they have band practice, rotating choir, student council, yearbook, science labs, and so on and so forth. (We have lots of discussions about the possibility of "over-commitment.")

I call our first evening session sometime in early September, maybe during the second week of school. At this time I do the following:

1. Distribute independent study forms that students must submit to the guidance department and a list of requirements they must fulfill in order to receive independent study credit. Students rarely tutor just to receive these one or two independent study credits (they receive one credit per year for each period per week they spend tutoring for the whole year). I insist on this arrangement so that I have some visible evidence of their commitment and so that their involvement in the writing center will appear on their report cards.
2. Explain that, by our next meeting, students *will know how many periods* per week they are willing to staff the center, and *which periods* those will be. I am very firm about the need for certainty.

They *must* arrange all other aspects of their lives so that the schedule, once distributed, will not have to be changed repeatedly. It never matters how firm I am, however, and each September I have to distribute two to three revisions from October until the new tutors join. Inevitably, tutors belatedly decide to join a capella choir or find they need to add a class or whatever. But at least they don't make such changes lightly, and they quiver a bit before informing me they are not available to tutor when they swore they would be.

At our second evening meeting toward the end of September, I distribute to the tutors a blank copy of our school's weekly nine-period-per-day schedule. Classes meet for eight forty-five-minute periods; after school is a shorter activity period of about thirty-five minutes. Each tutor tells the group when he or she will be available, and we fill out the weekly schedule, smoothing out conflicts as we talk. I have found that students are most agreeable and readily willing to accommodate each other's problems. For example, if both Claire and Beth can tutor only during period six on the same day, then one volunteers to come during period nine instead or decides that she can switch the time she meets with a teacher for another independent study.

The first year, each tutor volunteered to staff the center three times per week during free periods. The second year, the number of periods per week per tutor was reduced to two, so we still covered 18 out of 45 possible class periods, or a total of 40 percent.

Once the schedule is established (or so it seems) all tutors and interested teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators receive a copy with the names of the tutors written in the block of time or period for which they have volunteered. Around the school, however, we post schedules with an "X" marked in each period covered by a tutor, so that prospective clients will not be influenced by tutor personalities and other personal considerations or prejudices. Any client with a real concern may always see me or another teacher to find out who is tutoring during any given period. (We have learned, for example, that some eighth-grade and freshman girls are extremely nervous about being tutored by senior boys; while we recognize and try to capitalize on the social interactions that occur in the writing center, some are just too anxiety producing and, therefore, counterproductive.)

New Tutors

Sometime between December 1 and January 1, the new tutors join the original tutors, so I must prepare a different schedule. So far this has

not been too difficult; I show the new tutors the existing schedule and they try to fill in during unassigned periods. If a conflict arises, the tutors who are involved usually work it out together. These students must tutor at least once a week as part of the requirements for the Writing and Responding class, though sometimes a new tutor volunteers for another period as well. In that case, I try to arrange independent study credit. By January, tutors cover about 28 out of 45 periods, or 62 percent.

Once they begin tutoring, I urge the new tutors to attend our bimonthly evening meetings in order to achieve some group cohesiveness and sense of camaraderie, but I do not require attendance. All the tutors meet informally at our Christmas party and end-of-the-year barbecue where the only "task" is poster making, usually a riotous and very creative affair. (Our school walls are usually decorated with tutor-made writing center posters characterized by varying degrees of inventiveness or absurdity.)

Student Writers

Highland Park High School students may use the writing center in two ways: they may drop in or make an appointment in advance. If students wish to make an appointment, they go to the writing center in the library where they find one of the "X" marked schedules posted on the bulletin board. They sign their names over the "X" in the space for the periods during which they wish to see a tutor. When arriving at the writing center, the tutor looks to see if anyone has signed up for that period. If indeed someone has an appointment, the tutor waits for that student for the first five to eight minutes of that period, explaining to any drop-in clients that someone else is expected but that there may be free time after the middle of the period or even in a few minutes if the appointment isn't kept. Otherwise, students do not need appointments, but may drop in for tutoring any time a tutor is available.

Usually this system works pretty smoothly (except for some specific problems that I will discuss later) unless we are inundated with whole classes assigned by a teacher to visit the writing center. These students must sign up in advance, or the tutors will always be busy with another client when they drop in. Even with appointments, we have difficulty accommodating everyone because no more than one tutor is available per period (though frequently a tutor who happens to be in the library will offer to help an overburdened fellow tutor). However, teachers cooperate by extending deadlines so that all their students have the opportunity to visit the writing center. This is not a typical

situation; most of the year we suffer from the opposite problem—*not enough clients*—so we definitely encourage teachers to require visits to the writing center as part of an assignment. We then plaster the school halls with more posters urging writers to make appointments well in advance of the date their assignments are due.

Scheduling Problems

It would be wonderful if the establishment of the “final” schedule signaled the end of administrative problems. In fact, we have encountered several problems that continue to plague us in varying degrees and for which we have devised various solutions.

One problem involves food. Our librarians categorically refuse to allow any food in the library because of mice, smells, rubbish, and so on. So what do we do when some tutors’ only free periods are also their only lunch periods? Well, tutors usually run to the cafeteria and gobble a hamburger and then run to the library to tutor. Too often, however, a client who finds the writing center empty upon arrival will scurry away in relief. A better solution has been for tutors to get the vice-principal’s permission to eat lunch in a regular class on the days when they must tutor. This arrangement is not possible, however, for the student writers who want to visit the writing center during their lunch periods. Another complication was the rule that students would not be admitted into the library after the first ten minutes of a period. After a powwow including our librarian, building principal, and myself at the beginning of the last school year, that rule was changed to the first twenty minutes of a period, thereby allowing students a bit more time to eat lunch first. This change has helped, but it still severely limits the time for a tutoring session and really does not encourage visits. Aside from scheduling issues, I believe that allowing students to eat in the writing center would also establish a friendlier, more comfortable environment, so I continue to lobby fruitlessly (pun intended).

Another problem is that once in a while the tutor is not in the writing center when he or she has promised to be there. This rarely occurs with new tutors fresh out of Writing and Responding class, who are incredibly optimistic and enthusiastic; rather, it occurs when experienced tutors have spent a few boring periods reading newspapers or doodling in their notebooks waiting in vain for a client. I have tried to convince them of the inevitable *axiom of the high school writing center: if a tutor is not in the writing center, a client will most assuredly appear*. Though I don’t like reacting so strongly with students who have volunteered to tutor during their free time (especially when they

sit so often without a client), I have arranged with the vice-principal to send a "cut slip" if I discover a tutor's absence. Some absences are unavoidable: if, for example, a tutor attends a field trip or must see a teacher or guidance counselor in an emergency, I request that the tutor post a sign announcing the absence on the writing center bulletin board or inform one of the librarians. Otherwise, if tutors are not legally absent from school, they are charged with a "cut" and must see the vice-principal. After three cuts, the student can no longer tutor. I have stressed the importance of faithful attendance, and tutors understand what happens if a frustrated student finds the writing center empty when the schedule indicates a tutor's presence. Bad publicity travels very quickly, to faculty as well as to other students.

This situation leads to another difficulty that I've hinted at already: our interactions with the librarians, for they are the most visible faculty and inevitably the most involved. Though I check the writing center during most of my free periods (and pull tutors away from their pizzas and french fries in the cafeteria), the librarians answer most of the student questions about the writing center and know better than anyone else if a client is searching for an absent tutor. Therefore, maintaining friendly relations is crucial—but difficult—when the librarians see the writing center encroaching on their territory or creating new problems and more work. What do I do, for example, when the librarians insist that the tutors are just socializing and not working? When they complain that the sessions are too noisy or that a tutor has been rude or uncooperative? Though I might handle a situation very differently, understanding the tutor's tendency to bristle at so many arbitrary rules, I still must sympathize with the librarians' difficulties and support their positions. It seems that my most effective response when confronted with an angry librarian is to listen very carefully and promise to discuss the problem with the tutor, without attacking the librarian or defending the tutor. Only when I believe an issue is of major importance to the functioning of the writing center do I protest enough to cause a conflict. For example, when the librarians were opening the library at 7:30 a.m. and closing it at 2:30 p.m., before ninth period, I convinced our principal to insist that the library be available to students after school. I think that, over the past two years, the librarians have become more comfortable with the writing center, as their roles have become more clearly defined. I also try to encourage the tutors to understand the librarians' importance, and to cooperate by being patient and polite, by returning dictionaries and magazines, by keeping their voices down and not socializing, and, most of all, by not eating.

At first glance, our biggest problem doesn't seem to relate to scheduling: it is involving teachers successfully on a continuing basis. We do have a strong core of support: one special education teacher regularly attends writing center meetings and helps with administrative problems and tutor training, as well as with special activities; my department chairperson is always an important mentor and vocal advocate of the writing center; and at least two other English teachers periodically require that their student writers receive a response from a writing center tutor. Most teachers, however, remain generally indifferent, skeptical, and even, at times, hostile. This situation significantly affects our daily functioning: if teachers would more actively and continually encourage their students to visit the writing center so that we didn't have alternating floods and droughts, morale would improve and tutors would use their tutoring skills more regularly and subsequently strengthen them. As a consequence, tutors would take their commitment to the writing center more seriously and many of our scheduling difficulties would disappear.

I frequently listen with great pleasure to enthusiastic tutors describing successful tutoring sessions; I see tutors meeting with student writers when they are not scheduled to be tutoring. I know they even tutor in the evenings on the phone. That's why I continue to talk at faculty meetings, to meet with teachers during free periods, to stuff fliers and letters in teachers' mailboxes, to print items about the writing center in district newsletters, and to make sure that teachers are notified when their students visit the writing center. I hope that scheduling arrangements can become more productive in exploiting the possibilities for collaborative learning.