

## 7 Developing a Writing Center: What Can a Consultant Do?

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When teachers ask me how they might develop a writing center in their school, I usually respond with the question, "What do you mean by a writing center?" If by writing center they mean a "clinic," where poor writers are sent by their teachers to do additional workbook exercises on spelling and subject-verb agreement, then I respond that they don't need an outside consultant to do that. Such "fix-it" laboratories fit right into existing traditional writing curricula, where writing abilities are supposed to develop sequentially, from the learning of punctuation, "proper" usage, and spelling, to the constructing of sentences, then paragraphs, and finally essays. With this model of writing instruction, it's very easy for a writing laboratory to be set up because a curriculum can be easily segmented, with classroom teachers remaining in charge of paragraph development and essay organization and the lab taking charge of sentence level concerns. And this model of a writing lab doesn't take much work either: there are plenty of workbook materials that can be bought for students to fill out; no one needs any special expertise to help the students; and it doesn't take much teacher effort to maintain this laboratory situation. Teachers can just send the "remedial" students down the hall to work on their comma problems.

If, however, those teachers view writing as a central activity of any educational setting and see a writing center as the core of the curriculum, then I would respond that a consultant may be needed in order to get things started. Such an idea of a writing center challenges the conventional wisdom of most faculty, offering in place of the segmented curriculum a holistic view of writing. The writing center becomes a place where writers come (they aren't sent by teachers) to talk about their writing with readers who have not assigned the work and who will not evaluate it. It is a place where writers can find an informal context for talking and raising questions about a particular

assignment or a draft in progress, not just engage in repetitive exercises; a place where their ideas matter first and foremost, not where they mindlessly fill in the blanks or where they only go over the mistakes in "grammar" that some teacher has already marked. In this writing center, student writers find readers who will respond to the meaning the writers are attempting to convey. The goal of a writing conference is not simply to clean up a piece of writing but to develop writers by pushing them toward developing greater intellectual complexity in their work. This writing center is central to the school setting because writing is the central activity of learning, not a subordinate one where the writing is used to display what students have already learned. Redirecting faculty attitudes about writing centers from the more commonplace view of them as a remedial "fix-it" clinic means that teachers must reeducate their colleagues and administrators, showing them that a richer and more productive notion of a writing center exists.

Yet accomplishing this goal is no easy matter, for redirecting faculty's and administrators' attitudes means making institutional change. This change involves a change of attitude that entails turning teachers and administrators into writers themselves so that they experience once again the power of shaping their experiences through writing. A writing center can become the natural outgrowth of such experience, for writers know that what matters most to them is their ideas, that writers need readers, that writers need to talk about their work to people who are not there to judge them but to respond to what they are saying. Establishing a successful writing center demands, then, that teachers understand as much as the students about the complex processes involved in composing. Teachers will come to use and value a writing center, I believe, if they have had immersion in the concepts of learning to write, have reflected on that learning, and have had some time to plan and raise questions about how their teaching can enable students to become better writers. Institutional change means, then, changing teachers' minds: those who have used traditional methods in their teaching of writing must come to understand that the motive to learn how to write comes from having something to say to people who matter to the writer.

But where does one begin, faced with an entire school faculty, some of whom have never heard of the writing process, much less a writing center? Most writing centers have begun as the vision of one person who has gained some knowledge of the field of composition and who senses what an opportunity such a center can be for students. Yet, though one person must have the vision and the energy to see it through, that person will not be able to get it off the ground if trust

has not been built first among fellow teachers, so that the project doesn't seem suspicious—a way to build a power base for oneself or a means of getting out of doing some other work. It is important, too, to build trust with the administration, for they are the ones who ultimately must provide space, time, and materials for the center. Without their support there will be no center. When writing centers have failed to develop, it has been because this groundwork was not laid properly. That groundwork begins, one should remember, during those short conversations in the lunch room about teaching writing, those times when one was successful at helping students with their work, the many hours spent developing curriculum or in being a supportive colleague and an eager contributor. Those colleagues who have always worked productively and cooperatively in the past are certainly the ones to introduce first to the idea of a writing center. Perhaps, a small group of teachers could visit a writing center in the area, preferably a high school center, but if one is not nearby, a college center would do. One's own enthusiasm for the project, in my experience, becomes contagious. Once there is some general support, then it is time to think about the advantages of having an outside consultant.

Often once the groundwork is laid for a writing center, those on the supportive team have gained enough knowledge, motivation, and expertise to develop and sustain the center on their own. Yet these qualities are often not enough when facing the political realities in schools. One such reality is that academics tend to look to "experts" for advice. Equally true is that they seldom see their fellow colleagues as those experts. An outside consultant can supply the same knowledge, experience, and drive as those who have laid the groundwork for the writing center, and they can provide the often needed "expertise" that only an outsider can bring. The way that faculty interact with one another also creates another political problem. Faculty look to their colleagues for support; they view each other as equals. A faculty reeducation program such as one demanded by the development of a writing center changes that normal dynamic if a fellow teacher is in charge. It would be difficult, I am sure, for a colleague to raise a question about another colleague's teaching or to challenge an administrator. An advantage of having an outside consultant is that the consultant can point out problems and offer constructive criticism without being seen as destructive or as being a self-promotor. Finally, an outside consultant can assist in designing inservice workshops and faculty development programs to work within the political realities of schools. In a project I was involved in on Long Island, for example, the teachers knew that, if the high school English department was not

squarely behind the center, the center would fail because the rest of the faculty looked to the department for direction in how they should use writing in their classrooms. Not all the twenty-five English teachers, however, knew about innovations in the teaching of writing over the last two decades, so an inservice course that would train all the English department faculty on methods of teaching writing and would build a writing center as the core of such a program seemed entirely appropriate. Yet in another high school where I was a consultant in New Jersey, the faculty faced a different problem: their center needed the support of faculty across the curriculum, particularly the science and social studies teachers. Because the district was small, faculty had little time during or after school to devote to developing a writing center and at that time they had no language arts supervisor who might serve as a central leader, devoting some of his or her time to the project. A writing-across-the-curriculum-project seemed like a reasonable starting point, and a writing center as an outgrowth of that experience, a likely outcome.

Selecting a consultant, though, takes time, for it is crucial to find the right person with whom to work. I think faculty should talk to a variety of consultants before choosing the one that seems best for the school. In order to develop that initial list of consultants to interview, teachers need to talk to other districts and ask who has worked with them on their writing program. One should not rule out as a consultant those whose published work teachers enjoy; often if they cannot work with a school because of travel distance or prior commitments, they can recommend knowledgeable and flexible people in the area. As teachers interview possible consultants, they should beware of the prepackaged programs or all-purpose inservice models. For a writing center to be an outgrowth of an inservice educational experience, that inservice program needs to be tailor-made to fit the needs, relationships, and commitments of a particular school. I think that working with one consultant or a consultant team is the best: they design the program with the faculty, attend every inservice session, observe the classroom, set up the center. There is continuity and a consistent point of view represented. I have, however, seen schools work with multiple consultants, each one bringing particular expertise to bear on the training of faculty and the development of the center. This model works best if the person or faculty team in charge of designing the center has the ability to provide the necessary continuity—that is, is able to build bridges for the faculty from one consultant's workshop to another's and to provide consistency in the development of the center.

Inservice programs, in general, and those focusing on writing centers, in particular, need to be designed to accommodate the special needs and requirements of each individual school. Yet there are some principles I would suggest groups follow if they decide to work with an outside consultant. First, *when* to have an inservice program is almost as crucial a decision as whether or not to have one at all. Inservice programs, I believe, whenever possible should be designed to take place during the school day or, where districts have them, on days set aside for teacher education. Workshops after school or on Saturdays, while they do attract the most dedicated of teachers, nonetheless, "capture" them either when they are the most tired (after school) or when they should be at home with their families. I have found when schools or districts are supportive of such programs, they will find substitutes for teachers so that they can attend workshops. As a consultant, I have had to be flexible in designing workshops: working with half of the teachers for the first half of the day and the second half the other half of the day so that fewer substitutes needed to be hired. And I have brought with me graduate students from my university, many of whom are high school teachers on leave or former high school teachers, to serve as substitutes and teaching models for faculty. I have also offered summer institutes for faculty on the teaching of writing where writing centers were the focal point and natural outgrowth of the workshops. Where the summer programs have been the most successful has been in those schools that provided some follow-up for those teachers during the school year. Follow-up should include both workshops for the entire group and individual conferences for teachers and writing center staff.

Second, a workshop format is, I think, the best model for learning. Besides experiencing materials and trying out the new methods for teaching writing, teachers need to write themselves, share their writing with colleagues, and hear responses to their work. Faculty can profit from trying out various ways of responding to each other's work and revising their initial drafts to meet expectations of their readers. Engaging in such activity demonstrates how writers need readers and how writers can profit from hearing readers' questions. All the mystery of what might happen in a writing center diminishes when teachers' attitudes about the nature of writing begin to change. Those nagging questions about writing centers come from the traditional view of writing: Will someone do the work for the students? Will all mistakes be corrected? Can students help other students or will it be like the blind leading the blind? In these situations the teacher is the authority

over all knowledge about writing and students are the receivers of that knowledge. The writing center model supplants those traditional notions by giving the writer the authority to make choices about the writing and by placing the reader, whether it be teacher or fellow student, in the position of raising questions about those choices.

Third, time needs to be set aside for informal talks during the school day, both for the consultant to talk to the teachers and for the teachers to talk with each other. This time might be used for the consultant to teach a model lesson or a series of lessons while other teachers observe and then later discuss what happened. The consultant, too, could visit classes of teachers and discuss what was happening during that class. Since a consultant is not a supervisor who must play an evaluative role, teachers often appreciate the visit and are often more willing to discuss the things that are failing to happen in the classroom. But most important is time for the consultant to meet with each teacher alone to talk about teaching and writing, to hear how the writing center is working for the students, to listen to what is going on and what needs to happen next. Teachers also need time during the school day, about once per week, to talk to one another about the project. This can be done by assigning teachers with the same duty period or preparation period to small task groups. In these groups teachers share what is going on in their classrooms, read articles in common, raise questions that need to be addressed, plan classroom research projects, develop new ways of working with the writing center, and plan ways of introducing more faculty to the writing center.

A writing center can be a place where writers explore ideas and engage in inquiry about their subjects. Modern views of writing instruction show us, if our practice hasn't done so already, that there is no one-shot inoculation against all writing ills. There isn't even a good way to separate out various components of writing. Learning to write happens while writing. One learns to spell, learns the language of texts, learns to construct ideas and shape them by writing and reading the writing of others. And that learning becomes directed and purposeful when the writer's needs and questions become the framework for instruction rather than a prescribed workbook or a teacher-initiated syllabus. If we persist with the traditional view of the writing lab, then those who participate in such a program, both teachers and students, will stay on the fringes of academic life, being labeled as "remedial." And others who could profit from the idea of a writing center will never set foot in the door for fear of being labeled as dumb. A writing center, however, is central to all writers, for every writer profits from having readers, those who can raise questions about

a draft in progress or even celebrate a job well done. A writing center, because it demands a change of faculty attitude, finally is more difficult to construct. Yet one knows the effort was all worthwhile when students and faculty enter into dialogue, talking to each other about their writing. Every school should see itself as a community of writers. Every school should have a writing center.