"Striking while the iron is hot." A Writing Fellows Program Supporting Lower-Division Courses at an American University in the UAE

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Abstract: US-based writing fellows programs have traditionally placed writing fellows in upper-division courses to support student writing beyond first-year composition, given that student writing skills become more developed in the context of genre- or discipline-based writing. The author describes a writing fellows program at the American University of Sharjah (AUS) in the United Arab Emirates where, despite initial attempts to place writing fellows in upper-division courses, faculty requests for writing fellows came from classes at the 100- and 200-level, resulting in students receiving writing fellow assistance while still enrolled in introductory writing courses. Drawing on interviews with professors, writing fellows, and students in three lower-division writing fellow-supported courses, the author concludes that writing fellows at AUS are quite effectively placed in lower-division courses running concurrently with first-year sequence writing courses due to the immense learning curve AUS students face in their first few semesters. First-year transition challenges can be characterized by the differing pedagogical approaches of various secondary educational systems, divergent cultural attitudes toward learning and teaching, students' inexperience with American university-style academic writing and writing conventions, and the disparity between the content of the first-year writing sequence, suggesting that even in introductory courses AUS students need writing support earlier in addition to later in their university life. Writing fellow intervention in these lower-division courses introduces and provides a network of support that students new to the university—and their professors—do not know how to access on their own.

Introduction

In August 2005, some 35 years after Tori Haring-Smith developed a writing fellows program at Brown University and a half a world away in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), I proposed starting a writing fellows program at the American University of Sharjah (AUS). During my first intense weeks at AUS as a new faculty member in the Department of Writing Studies—spent acclimatizing to both the intense desert heat and the rigors of my new position—and as I made my way through orientations, introductions to faculty, and the inevitable "shop talk," I quickly concluded that student

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writing was perceived by AUS faculty to be poor and, in a number of majors, writing assignments were rare—the former ostensibly the reason for the latter. My response to these challenges—to develop a writing fellows program—was drawn from a decade of involvement with peer-tutor writing endeavors. That AUS already had a flourishing writing center was greatly encouraging, and, in part, influenced my idea to expand writing assistance to a writing fellows program, an initiative long understood to support students in their discipline-specific writing courses and to encourage professors to use writing as a means of learning and assessment (Haring-Smith, 1992; Severino & Knight, 2007). My department, the dean, and the administration enthusiastically supported my proposal to investigate the viability of a writing fellows program via a pilot study the following semester, a study whose perceived success by participating professors, students, and writing fellows led, a few semesters later, to the establishment of both 1) a small writing fellows program and 2) a 3-credit training course to train generalist undergraduate tutors who could take on either role of writing fellow or writing center tutor.

By Spring 2010—three years later—the AUS Writing Fellows Program had grown steadily. Although the program resembled the accounts in the literature in terms of both logistics and curricular benefits, I had identified some patterns and understandings within the program that had a uniquely "AUS feel" and diverged from the established, or at least published, conceptions of writing fellows programs. One significant development was the naturally-occurring gravitation of writing fellow assistance to 100- and 200-level courses in lieu of the upper-division courses that I had originally intended. Simply put, even despite recruitment efforts aimed at upper-division courses, requests for writing fellows came for classes at the 100- and 200-level. Keen to allow the program to align itself organically within the institutional and cultural norms, as advocated by those who have initiated peer tutor programs (Bräuer, 2002; Zawacki, 2008), I was content to assign my writing fellows to those student-centered professors who requested them and who generally engaged with their writing fellows and provided feedback gladly. Yet, this development resulted in students receiving writing fellow assistance while still enrolled in first-year writing courses, and, as such, ran counter to the established WAC approach of placing writing fellows in upper-division or major courses to support writing instruction beyond the first-year composition.

At this point, it seemed time for an in-depth look at the program to understand this development, and, more broadly, to investigate the program as a unique response to institutional needs, primarily with the goal of providing a sounder basis for writing fellow program decision-making and growth. While there are no analyses addressing writing fellow program building or assessment in multilingual settings outside of North America, the few studies addressing WAC programs in international settings situate their approaches and understandings in various aspects of the institutional context—university norms, student characteristics, and writing instruction (Bräuer, 2002; DeDominicus & Santa, 2002; Harbord, 2003; Turner, 2006). Emphasizing the need for "home-based writing research and pedagogy," Gerd Bräuer (2002) notes that "a structural change in institutions needs to grow directly out of existing structures and their cultural contexts, even though outside challenge can often be an important first step toward something new" (p. 62). To examine my writing fellows program through a cultural and structural lens, I made use of the "literacy landscape" framework suggested by Erin Penner (2009) of the University of New Mexico as she considers the potential of WAC to address the needs of the university's diverse and multilingual student population. Drawing on cultural ecology (Guerra, 2008; Kells, 2007), Penner advocates an approach to developing WAC programs that…

> locates the dimensions of heterogeneity… takes into account the cultural, economic, and social histories that have affected the myriad communities that interact with the university… and seeks to include students in mapping and conceptualizing their own

> literacies, and therefore involves students, along with other stakeholders, in the process of reconceptualizing both literacy and basic writing education. (2009, p. 6)

By involving the writing fellow program stakeholders in my inquiry, as Penner suggests, I hoped to comprehend more systematically how the realities and histories of the writing fellows program participants had influenced the institutional context. This knowledge would help me to extend my understanding of the potential of writing fellows interventions at AUS, and, as such, resulted in the following research question:

> How do the professors, writing fellows, and supported students in these lower-division courses perceive their involvement in the Writing Fellows Program, particularly in view of American-university writing expectations for students of diverse educational, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds?

My study focused on three lower-division courses from different disciplines—an engineering course, a social science course, and a science course. My criterion for choosing these courses was that each was currently supported by a writing fellow and had been so for least one prior semester. Participants included each professor (three in total), four writing fellows (the social science class had two writing fellows), and six students from the WF-supported classes (two from each class, randomly selected from those who had indicated a willingness to be interviewed for the study in their end-of-the-semester survey on their writing fellow program involvement). All informants participated in an approximately hour-long semi-structured interview, which allowed flexibility for participant expression. (See Appendix for the interview protocols). Interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed, examined for iterative themes, and then color coded by theme, providing a systematic method for data reduction. While the study revolved around the themes elicited through these interviews, I also drew from material in the peer tutor training class, which offered insight into student writing issues in order to provide institutional context. Students whose assignments were identified as relevant were asked to sign consent forms if they wished to contribute their work to the study. To protect the confidentiality of all the participants, I have changed their names and, in the case of the professors, avoided mention of their specific course or department. In the case of the writing fellows and student participants, mentions of majors, nationalities, and languages spoken were omitted unless deemed necessary to the study's comprehensibility.

In the next section, I provide some institutional background to highlight the effects of transplanting American-style university writing expectations to AUS and to create a context for understanding the strong need for writing fellows in the lower-division courses.

The Institutional Context

The American University of Sharjah is an independent, coeducational institution, accredited by the Commission on Higher Education of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools. Founded in 1997, it is a young, primarily undergraduate institution, with a College of Engineering, a School of Business and Management, a College of Arts and Sciences, and a College of Architecture, Art and Design. As of fall 2010, there were nearly 4900 undergraduate students enrolled. The AUS Institutional Research office reports that the top ten student nationalities of the 82 student nationalities represented are Emirati (citizens of the UAE), Jordanian, Egyptian, Palestinian, Syrian, Pakistani, Indian, Saudi Arabian, Iranian, and Iraqi. Faculty members claim 48 nationalities (Fast Facts, Fall 2010).

Most AUS students come from a variety of secondary schools in the UAE. While some are educated in Arabic-medium schools, most are educated in British-, American-, Indian-, or Pakistani-curriculum schools where the medium is English, a choice parents have likely made based on the fact that the postsecondary institutions in the UAE teach only in English. Yet, regardless of the medium of instruction, a large number of students enter AUS with very little academic writing experience. Prior to their first-year composition course, a significant number of students—even those who go on to excel in writing and become AUS writing tutors—have not been exposed to an American-classroom style discussion of writing; terms like thesis statements, topic sentences, supporting details, transitions, development, and organization are new to most entering freshmen. In one interview, a first-semester student who received writing fellow support in the science class highlighted in this study reflected on some of the differences between her writing course and her high school writing:

> [In high school] I think I was pretty good in writing…. [It was different from my AUS writing class because] it was more free writing and freedom of speech [opinion] and things like that. But [at AUS] it is like you have to take a body and a thesis statement and a conclusion. Back at school you get to do your own stuff in writing. . . . because words always came from our heart. We were never asked to go look up ideas or topics unless it was like an anthology and poetry and you had to read about the poet; whatever we thought we wrote down on paper.

Her report is fairly typical, and, as it suggests, few entering students have engaged in any real source-based writing, a reality acknowledged and discussed in the tutor training course that was established along with the writing fellows program and that trains the fellows and tutors together. This training course, which aims, in part, to fill the gap between the pedagogies of peer tutoring that have arisen from a North American context and the realities of regional practice has generated a great deal of understanding about our students' linguistic and literacy experiences, much as Penner (2009) suggests in her literacy landscape model. Indeed, the tutor trainees corroborate the student interviewees' comments on school-based expectations for writing organization and source-based writing, often citing large attitudinal differences between their secondary schools and AUS toward source-based writing, documentation, and issues of academic integrity. Many report that the internet has been a significant and accepted source for their secondary school writing assignments and recount that copy/pasting writing assignments from the internet—as long as the prose has been "cleaned up" by adjusting the line spacing and arranging the font to look like an original student work—is acceptable to many secondary teachers.

In addition, the memorization of facts and model responses, known in regional slang as "mugging up," is often promoted in writing instruction which is mostly driven by students' need to respond in essays on standardized exams. Many students report that teachers provide them with model answers to memorize in response to a variety of possible essay questions. A few years ago, this practice had, for a few of the AUS tutors, the negative repercussions of having their class's English IGCSE exams—subject exams in UK-curriculum secondary schools world-wide—questioned by external examiners and returned to their school "ungraded with allegations of mass cheating" (Ronesi, 2009, p. 88). This test-oriented approach to "teaching" writing appears to be shared in the Gulf region and the Subcontinent. An Indian writing fellow wrote reflectively as a tutor trainee on her experience in both systems and the effect this knowledge will have on her as a tutor:

> [In India] I was taught to think like the book instead of on my own. Therefore, the term "plagiarism" seemed unduly harsh, when I first encountered it [at AUS]. In India, writing assignments not only condoned "plagiarism," but actually preferred it. "Borrowing data"

> was in fact all that we could do, since thinking for ourselves or own deductions were unacceptable. I was drilled to "learn by heart" and write my exam answers word for word from the textbook (from memory of course). Now, being entirely accustomed to the system of "more original, the better," I comprehend the seriousness of "plagiarism" as an offense, but more importantly [as a tutor], I can relate to some people who don't. Referencing is very important to show that you have incorporated some other sources in your own work, and are acknowledging them as not your own. Of course, an Indian student [new to AUS], who had known the rigorous 'mugging up sessions' of school, would see little point in referencing, as the entire piece would be unoriginal.

This writing fellow's reflection on her understanding of and adaptation to different pedagogical approaches corroborates Vivian Zamel and Ruth Spack's (2006) conclusion from their research on international and multilingual students and WAC that "students' previous educational or cultural experiences… do not reflect what students are capable of accomplishing" (p. 145). Yet, the fact is many entering freshmen at AUS have had little experience with American-style academic writing, have not engaged in process-writing, are unfamiliar with patterns of exposition and organization, and are unsophisticated about source-based writing and related issues of academic integrity. In responding to student needs, the AUS "freshman-year" writing sequence often translates into a four-course sequence which can extend far beyond freshman year; depending on an entering student's performance in the writing placement exams, AUS students are shuttled into one of three possible writing courses, all emphasizing WAC practices of process and peer review. A developmental course, WRI 001, introduces academic writing conventions through reading and writing and addresses strategies like time management and study skill development. A second developmental course, WRI 101, focuses on responding to academic texts and introduces documentation. WRI 102, the highest course into which an entering freshman can be placed and required for all students, addresses analytical writing, documentation, and beginning research strategies. The last course in the sequence, ENG 204, is devoted to research strategies, culminating in the construction of an argumentative research paper. Fewer than four percent of entering freshman place into WRI 102 their first semester at AUS and are thus able to complete ENG 204 their second semester. The majority of students place into either WRI 001 or WRI 101, and it is possible that students might not successfully complete those until the end of their third semester and fifth semester respectively. This means that some AUS students spend several semesters as university students with very low-level writing skills and little understanding of American writing conventions; a few students have even taken ENG 204 in their junior or senior year. Clearly, these students cannot be prepared early enough for writing assignments in their concurrent classes, even those at the 100- or 200-level.

While the mismatch between the content of freshman-sequence or ESL writing courses and the requirements of students' other, and often concurrent, courses is a well-documented phenomenon for both under-prepared and multilingual students at American universities (Blakely, 1995; Leki, 2003; Zamel & Spack, 2006), it has not traditionally been a WAC concern. Notwithstanding the notable research addressing under-prepared, multilingual, and international students in WAC/WID (Harklau, Losey, & Siegal, 1999; Leki, 2001; Leki & Carson, 1994), the US-based WAC movement, developed within the context of US educational systems, history, and culture (Bazerman, 2005) has understandably assumed students to be primarily native speakers who are fairly conversant with American writing conventions and who have assimilated American notions of academic integrity. This assumption underlies the prevailing practice that WAC and WID initiatives concentrate on upper-division or major courses, since freshman year composition courses are seen as a providing an early, foundational base for the students' genre- or discipline-based writing. However, in the case of many AUS students, their foundational base stretches through a substantial amount of their time

at university given that many students are not equipped to write critically and analytically by the end of their freshman year. This inability has the unfortunate consequence of providing faculty with easy and robust reasons not to require writing in their classes.

In WAC literature, faculty resistance to using writing as a means of learning and assessment is well-known; at AUS, this resistance is amplified by the perception that requiring writing is a fruitless exercise in frustration because students neither write well nor abide by expected writing conventions. While WAC enthusiasts would undoubtedly argue that those are exactly the reasons students *must* write in their classes, many professors are understandably wary of tackling such a task. As Dr. Morelli, the social science professor featured in my study, noted,

> [Including writing assignments in my class] means from about week six to the end of the semester, I don't have weekends. And that's a choice that I make because I think it's important, and I think it can make a difference. But maybe in 5 years, I won't want to do that. And I certainly understand the colleagues [who have more obligations]—there's no way they can do that. So it very much is a question of resources.

Another common apprehension concerning the challenge of requiring students to write in upper-division courses has its roots in the linguistically-diverse nature of our faculty. Dr. Davenport, the engineering professor interviewed in this study, shared this concern about multilingual colleagues' ability to respond to written work: "Some of our professors here teaching classes using writing aren't native-speakers, and may not be as comfortable writing; should they be assigning grades based on format, grammar, logical flow, and so on?"

The term "vicious circle" seems appropriate here. Students enter the university largely unprepared for American-style university writing, and many professors, eager to assess student learning in an efficient and meaningful way, avoid writing assignments, thus eliminating the opportunity for much-needed writing practice. Clearly, writing fellow intervention in 300- and 400-level courses is too late. Indeed, it appears more expedient and timely to reinforce writing learning early in students' university life in order to develop a more writing-savvy student population, thereby reducing professor reluctance to assign writing.

As I will explain, the themes that emerged from my study demonstrate how the nature and dynamics of the AUS Writing Fellows Program are affected by the interaction between the demands of American-style university writing and our institutional context. In the next section, the stakeholders talk about these dynamics, including 1) professors' reasons for being involved and their expectations and goals for student writers, 2) professor-writing fellow collaboration, 3) writing fellow-writing center interdependence, and 4) the writing fellows' support of student learning through their roles as cultural informants.

The Writing Fellows Program: The Stakeholders Speak

Professors: Reasons, Goals, and Expectations

Like the professor participants in Chris Thaiss and Terry Myers Zawacki's (2006) study on academic writing in the disciplines, the three AUS professors I interviewed understood their goals and expectations for student writing in terms of their own writing experiences. Yet, beyond that, these three professors pointed out that their own writing struggles—particularly as students—were a driving force in including writing in their courses and for requesting writing fellows.

"I'm atoning for past sins," chuckled Dr. Davenport, an engineering professor, who admits that an upsetting experience with student writing in an upper-division course several years earlier had turned him off from assigning papers. Those papers were characterized by a lack of organization and blatant plagiarism, even after he had taken time from class to cover documentation techniques. Dr. Davenport recounted that he refused to assign another paper for several years.

> Then I ran into [a colleague] who had incorporated a paper using a writing fellow. So I talked to her and decided I really needed to make up for giving up on [the students.] They are going out into their job field, in their career, with these poor writing skills and we shouldn't be allowing that. So, I added a paper and a writing fellow to my course and volunteered for every committee that has come concerning general education courses. . . . When you see requirements that writing be included in the different programs, I started that!

His current championing of writing at the course level and on curriculum committees at the university level has evolved from both empathy for students' animosity toward writing and his own experience as an engineer.

> I didn't really care for writing much when I was a student. As a matter of fact, I took my writing course as a correspondence course. And I hated it so much. I just hated writing. I took it correspondence because I thought it would be easier…. [Many engineering students feel] "I don't want to do writing, I just want the equations." I was feeling exactly the way the students felt. Then you have to go out into the real world, and the real world was writing. When I was at my previous job, almost all of what I did was communication. I took piles of data and tried to turn it into something John Doe on the street could understand.

Dr. Boucher, a professor in a scientific discipline who sought writing fellow assistance from the program's earliest days, recalled that a student of hers—a writing center tutor—suggested she contact me when the tutor realized Dr. Boucher felt overwhelmed by the students' challenges in completing the two required writing assignments. Fluent in three languages—English being the latest addition—Dr. Boucher acknowledged that she struggled a great deal writing in English as a graduate student in the United States.

> For me it was very hard…serious writing [in English] started with my PhD. But I was very, very lucky for a chemistry professor who started a class for writing for the graduate students. I still have his lectures…. These days, I still need help—I call on friends and colleagues to read what I have written.

To Dr. Boucher, writing is imperative for science.

> Your research is the domain of the science. It is not just for you. Science is only science if it enters the universal domain. The research in my computer is not science. Science needs to be corroborated by many people. It needs to go out. . . . I want that students are able understand science—the way it works—the scientific approach to the problem—to find an issue that interests them, locate credible information on it, and discuss it in a scientific manner. For example, the UAE ranks second in the world for diabetes, so a research question could be "Why are there such high numbers of diabetics in the UAE? Then, is this incidence of diabetes equally high between nationals and expatriates?" I use this paper as

> a way for them to explore scientific issues—many for the first time—and learn how to give credit to sources.

Like Dr. Davenport, Dr. Morelli, who has assigned writing fellows to her social science course for three semesters, gravitated to the AUS Writing Fellows Program when a colleague involved in the program suggested it. Moreover, like Dr. Boucher, Dr. Morelli was a young adult when she added academic English writing to her repertoire of spoken and written languages. As she considered the challenges her students face, she recalled her own initiation into writing in English at the university.

> [My students] are very articulate and they like to talk, but the minute they have to put something in writing, it's very painful. I mean, I've been there. I've been through exactly that process of struggling through every sentence. I explain that to the students. I say, "Listen, I didn't start writing in English until graduate school. I know it's difficult. And I know there are no shortcuts."… When I was a student, one of the things that it took me a long time to learn was this idea that you have to rewrite. Sometimes you write 20 pages and you can use three paragraphs. I think it's so important that they learn that early on. That when you write, you think, but once you think that you have everything there, you need to distinguish between writing as a thinking tool and writing with a view to communicating. Those are two very different purposes of writing, and that's one of the things I try to alert them to.

In fact, Dr. Morelli's own struggles with source-based writing were recalled in one of her chats with her writing fellow, and their combined recollections informed Dr. Morelli's approach to introducing documentation.

> [Source-based writing] is a lot for them to get used to. And that is one of these transitions from high school to university I think, that's really, really difficult for them. And I have to say, [my writing fellow] and her feedback from last semester was very helpful in that way, because she made it clear to me, from a student's perspective, just how important it is to get in [practice with source-based documentation]. I can't remember when I started using footnotes—I mean, I think I did in high school. But I also remember that it was difficult in the beginning knowing how many and when to add them. So I completely understand but [the writing fellow's] feedback was a very helpful reminder to try to reconstruct my own learning process in that.

Earlier, I mentioned the apprehension expressed by Dr. Davenport regarding the ability of our AUS linguistically-diverse faculty to assign and assess writing to their students. Yet, Dr. Morelli and Dr. Boucher's multilingualism certainly did not deter them from prioritizing writing in their courses nor did it diminish their effectiveness. In fact, over the six semesters, nearly half the participating professors in the writing fellow program were multilinguals who had acquired English later in life. This commitment by multilingual professors is explained by Enric Llurda (2004), who points out that multilingual educators are often better-positioned to help students negotiate English learning as they "have lived through the process of becoming bilingual and expressing themselves in different languages" (p. 318).

It is important to point out that while Dr. Davenport grew up in an English-speaking country, he, too, understands writing as struggle—as a person who, despite internal resistance, had to write in order to make a living. Clearly, the professors' stories of their own writing challenges as students shed light on their openness to including writing fellow input at all stages, an opportunity that the writing

fellows appreciate, even as many of them have come from a variety of non-American schooling traditions.

Professor - Writing Fellow Collaboration

Every semester, I send a message to colleagues teaching WRI 102 and ENG 204 in search of student recommendations for next semester's tutor training class. While strong writing skills are a given for these recommendations, I ask professors to consider only those superior writers who have good interpersonal skills, appear to be diligent, and display good time management skills. Subsequently, the students who ultimately wind up in the tutor training course reflect Trimbur's description of tutors as "high academic achievers: they are independent learners, they get good grades, they know how to 'psych out' a course, they are accustomed to pleasing their instructors" (1997, p. 22). Even as many of the tutors are new to American-style education, these traits help them accommodate this new system. Indeed, some find the American approach resonant with their personal learning styles and preferences. As one of my tutor trainees noted in her journal as she considered the idea of being facilitative in a tutorial session: "Even though I come from an Arabic school where we are always told what to do, I found I like talking about my writing and making my own decisions."

Not surprisingly, in line with writing fellow literature (Haring-Smith, 1992; Mullin et al., 2008; Soven, 2006; Zawacki, 2008), AUS writing fellows enjoy the idea of sharing their expertise as students and of having some influence on the class curriculum. This was evident in both professor and writing fellow interviews. For example, in their initial meeting, Dr. Davenport, the engineering professor, shared his goals and expectations with his writing fellow, and based on their discussions, made significant changes to the assignment.

> Initially, the writing fellow and I sat down, and I discussed what I was hoping to get out of the assignment, which is not just technical information to familiarize them with a piece of equipment, but also I wanted to reinforce the writing—that writing is important and plagiarism isn't accepted, and I just wanted them to practice what they are doing in writing. So we looked at the draft assignment that I had which was just "describe piece of equipment, how it is used, what it is made of"—all just description. [The writing fellow] suggested that we add "what are the advantages, the disadvantages, and how might you improve the process." So that actually now the students have to put some of their thought into it. I had done the paper [the previous way before] before, and there was really nothing from the students in it. I really liked that suggestion and incorporated that in the assignment.

His writing fellow elaborated:

> I told Dr. Davenport that that the original assignment was kind of dull—just facts that the students are reading and paraphrasing, so I told him that he could have a section where they could actually do some critical thinking. For me, the main draw of writing papers is to put your own bit into it, to use your head. Plus, he would see how many people really understand the subject, or those students who have interest or passion. My main idea was critical thinking. We've been taught in our courses you shouldn't be blind consumers of information. You should think about it.

This writing fellow's impact did not end with re-casting the assignment. When, after the first round of conferencing ended on the first draft of the paper, the writing fellow reported that, in addition to organization and "staying on task" problems, a good many students who had not yet taken the final

freshman-sequence course—ENG 204, the research course—were struggling with citations. The writing fellow suggested that Dr. Davenport contact the writing center and schedule a tutor to make a presentation on citing sources, a service the writing center offers to the university. Somewhat to Dr. Davenport's surprise, the writing center tutor who turned up to present on citations was actually a student in that engineering class. In this case, the writing fellow's savvy regarding the services of the writing center clued the professor into a heretofore untapped resource—tutor presentations on writing issues—and simultaneously reinforced the notion that engineering students can be excellent writers.

One of Dr. Morelli's writing fellows was able to contribute her expertise from her experience as a writing center tutor as well as from her admittedly shaky start with documentation issues as a freshman.

> I have made suggestions, and Dr. Morelli has always taken them into consideration. For example, I felt that we should have a first session where the students just discuss their topics because in the writing center, we always tell people to come to us when they're in the process of writing their paper, just for brainstorming. And the reason we tell them that is because it will be a lot less discouraging for them should they decide they want to change their focus. So we had a discussion about that and decided that we would try one discussion session for the assignment. . . . And another thing we also decided to do was [change her policy from] last semester [when she was less strict about documentation with the freshmen]…. I told her that I think that [she] should be as thorough as [she is] with [the upper-division students'] citation. Based on my experience, I feel that if a freshman gets that kind of information—understanding that <u>need</u> to always be citing, being <u>afraid of</u> not citing—in their first semester before they lose that drive that they have coming straight out of high school—then they're going to be so much better for it. So that's another thing that we changed in the assignment.

This pedagogical support extended to other aspects of the course than simply curriculum. Dr. Boucher often ran her assignment sheets and other documents by her writing fellow for comprehensibility: "In fact, I wrote the model paper that I provide my students in the syllabus, and [my writing fellow] went and made corrections in it!"

Writing Fellow / Writing Center Interdependence

Carol Severino and Megan Knight (2007) contend that writing fellows programs bring writing center practice out into the university. They have found that, in many cases, when students in courses assisted by writing fellows are exposed for the first time to conferencing, they realize that receiving writing feedback is helpful and are inspired to seek more help through the writing center. This is certainly the case at AUS. Indeed, the fact that that writing center tutors and the writing fellows are trained together and encouraged to try both models creates an interdependent, even synergistic, relationship between the two services. Yet, the decision to include tutors and fellows in one training class emerged not from pedagogical principles but from institutional reality. Prior to my arrival, the writing center director had investigated starting a peer-tutoring course as she found that in-service training was time-consuming and felt that recruiting new tutors already conversant with peer tutoring philosophy and strategies would permit more time for fine-tuning. When our department head, encouraged by the success of the writing fellows pilot, asked me to launch a writing fellow training course, I was concerned about enrolling a sufficient number of students to satisfy the registrar. The writing center director and I agreed that an ample number of students would be

interested in enrolling in a class that trained them to be tutors in the writing center, an already established program, and that a number of those students would be more inclined to be a writing fellow, or at least be willing to try both models. Given the small number of writing center tutors at that time—roughly 20— we reasoned that a coterie of trained generalist tutors who could take on the role of either writing center tutor or writing fellow would be of the most immediate benefit. Once trained, writing fellows—all placed in courses outside of their major—would be expected to work closely with the professor to understand the discipline-related demands of the writing assignment. While this generalist approach worked well enough in the early semesters when writing fellows supported a few higher-division classes, certainly, the gravitation to lower-division classes made the writing fellow debate surrounding generalist vs. specialist approaches (Severino & Traschel, 2008; Soven, 2001) a moot issue for our program, since the discourse of the lower-division classes was not yet that specialized.

As writing fellows recounted their experiences with their courses and the students they support, they mentioned the writing center a great deal either as a reference for experience and as an extension of their service as a writing fellow—or both. As mentioned in the previous section, Dr. Morelli's writing fellow drew on her experience as a writing center tutor in suggesting an initial session just for brainstorming about their assigned essay. Moreover, as she worked as both a writing fellow and a writing center tutor in that semester, she invited students who needed more help than she could provide during the conference to make writing center appointments with her.

On several occasions, when time permitted, Dr. Boucher's writing fellow, also a former writing center tutor, found herself escorting her first-semester freshman students to the writing center for a first visit and to make an appointment. "Even if a writing center tutor comes [to a class on the request of their professor] and explains the writing center to their class," she explained, "sometimes freshmen are too scared to go there, or to try to make an appointment online." One of those students was very glad for the initiation to the writing center via her writing fellow. "I made an appointment with one of the tutors and we worked on connecting ideas." She added, "[The writing center] had lots of handouts and I took one about transitions. And I still use it. I just stuck it in my room and whenever I want to write, it's right there."

Dr. Davenport's writing fellow, who, as mentioned earlier, suggested he schedule a writing center presentation on citations, also recommended the writing center to students when she felt limited either in terms of providing linguistic support or keeping to her contractual agreement of two conferences.

> There was one girl in the class whose language was so weak, I couldn't help her. I just couldn't understand what she was trying to say. It was sad because she was very motivated. After doing my best with organization and citation help, I told her that she should visit the writing center and ask to work with an Arabic-speaking tutor who could help her clarify what she was trying to say…. In fact, I told nearly everybody to go to the writing center. I was only scheduled to conference with [the students] twice during the semester, and many students needed more help. I told them they could go as many times as they wanted, but some of them said "Yeah, but [the writing center tutors] won't understand the content." I told them not to worry—there are engineering students who tutor in the Writing Center! I even reminded them [of their writing center tutor classmate] and suggested they could make an appointment with her.

This advice apparently resonated with several students, as, during our interview, Dr. Davenport reported surprise at receiving e-mailed writing center reports indicating that students from this

course had visited. Although these reports, sent only by permission of the students, had been a longstanding feature of the writing center, Dr. Davenport had never received any before. Certainly, the writing fellow's "marketing" of the writing center as a helpful place featuring "engineering-major and Arabic-speaking tutors" convinced his current engineering students that visiting the writing center was a worthwhile option.

Writing Fellows as Cultural Informants

David Mosher, Davin Granroth, and Troy Hicks (2000) elaborate on the role of tutors as cultural informants, touching on tutors' potential roles as guides to explain American university writing to multilingual students. Certainly, in assisting students with diverse linguistic, educational, and cultural backgrounds—backgrounds which, for the most part, do not support the expectations of an American-style writing program or American-university writing—AUS writing fellows can be understood as cultural informants. However, while Mosher, Granroth, and Hicks' concept of a cultural informant implicitly assumes 'native" expertise in terms of language, education, and culture, AUS writing fellows come from a more informed understanding—that of individuals who have successfully accommodated different linguistic, educational, and cultural systems and approach their support with an "I've been there, so let me help you" attitude.

As I discussed previously, the AUS Writing Fellows Program quite naturally gravitated toward lower-division course support. Yet, I must credit Dr. Morelli who, in an e-mail following her first-semester experience with her writing fellow, made me aware that the program was particularly effective for freshmen.

> The benefits of the [writing fellow] assistance have been particularly great for this course because the majority of the students in the course are freshmen, and could be 'socialized' into the program as part of their transition to university life. Looking back at the semester, I think the program saved a couple of freshmen from an "F" - both because of the actual feedback they received and because the extra support alerted them to the fact that academic writing at university is different from what they had had to do during their high school education.

All participants—professors, writing fellows and students alike—felt that writing fellow support in lower-division courses made more sense in view of what Dr. Boucher called, "the huge transition between high school and university." Clearly, when crossing cultures or systems, early intervention and support is crucial to later success. Particularly compelling were the thoughts of those writing fellows who had previously been writing fellows in upper-division courses:

> You see these freshmen coming in and you remember how it was when you came straight out of high school. It's not just your writing that's different but it really is the way you look at things, and when you're in this position, you can better help them shape the way that they think about their writing and their courses. I feel like I have seen significant changes in [these freshmen] students.

> The students get more from the experience because as freshmen, they are more susceptible to learning, welcoming of any information that comes [their] way. The students appreciate your input more.

Dr. Boucher's writing fellow explained how she counseled her students on one of the differences between high school and university writing:

> A lot of them would go off topic. I knew why. I told them I was a freshman once, and I did the same thing. This is because school teachers don't stress the importance of staying on topic. We could write about anything. I would just write anything, and I would get total marks. And then when [the students] come to university, they would think the professor is like a school teacher; they don't realize the professor means business. [Subsequently] the students don't even read the sample paper [the professor provides]. They just don't think it's necessary.

Students appreciated the guidance borne of writing fellow experience:

> It's really, really important to have writing fellows in freshman courses. You come from high school and you follow a different system, and there are very few of us who went to schools which taught writing formats and things like that. People come in blank. They don't know what to expect, what the teacher expects. So it's good to have a student who thinks at your level, who has jumped the same hoops as you.

> One of the things that puts me at ease is [my writing fellow] keeps it like "I'm student, you're a student. I've been there, so let me help you." [My writing fellow] said when she started off, there was no writing fellows program, and as a freshman, there was a lot to take in. She had assignments due and [while] the professors will help, as freshman, students have a fear of the professor, so when students have a fellow who they can tell, "Look, I have had this problem," it's so helpful.

While addressing university-level writing expectations, writing fellows encourage university-student behaviors that will allow the students to develop as independent learners who know how to use available resources. For many students, this involves a change of attitude about the role of instructor or professor as many AUS students come from schooling traditions where there is a wide divide between students and teachers.

> With your professor, there is a big gap. That's been the tradition—I'm from India—in Indian schools, there's this teacher and student thing that needs to be mediated. It's actually good that you respect your teacher, but then, the students, I think they feel more comfortable and confident in environments where the teachers are friendly—are more involved with students.

At AUS, professors expect that diligent students will take advantage of office hours, and the students benefit from encouragement to cross this boundary. AUS writing fellows help to make their professors accessible to students, frequently prompting students who are doubtful that professors really want to see them to take advantage of office hours and seek their advice and guidance. In their interviews, students credited their writing fellows for encouraging them to meet with their professors:

> Dr. Boucher is the only professor I have approached, because [my writing fellow] told me to go. It was such a big help. Not only with the essays, but even after that I was able to ask about the [general course] questions. So, now I feel free to do so because there's a direct communication line between us. [These days, when the professor sees me], she's like, "How's your research going?" Now, things are much better. I want to do the essay good because the professor's asking me about it. She cares about it. She wants me to do good.

> My writing fellow advised me to go see my professor during the first conference we had because she recognized my topic was too broad. I resisted at first but as I kept writing, I realized she was probably right. . . . Finally, I went [to the professor], and yeah, we had a good talk about my paper, but about more general things too.

The "early-intervention" role that writing fellows play by introducing students to "savvy student" skills through their interaction on their writing assignments cannot be over-estimated. From drawing students' attention to the guidelines of the assignment sheet, to helping them meet the challenges of source-based documentation, to encouraging them to make use of available support like the writing center and professor office hours, writing fellows attend to ways of learning that the students' cultures might not support, their high schools might not have taught, and that their current writing class may not be addressing. This writing fellow role—as cultural informant helping students transition into American-university style writing, crossing linguistic, cultural, and educational systems— extends the traditional concept of a writing fellow.

Conclusion

Particularly in their roles as cultural informants, AUS writing fellows in lower-division courses offer early intervention and guidance that contribute to student success. In recounting lessons learned as he introduced a writing center in a German university, Bräuer (2002), explains the importance of peer tutoring programs that support students at the beginning of their university studies:

> [they] not only provide the skills for independent work but also for the self assessment thereof in order to make self-regulation steadily efficient. Empirical research has shown this interconnectedness needs to be taught, especially among freshmen students, who, according to a study by McCune, show little overall development in their learning styles and have only little motivation to change, which is due mostly to a lack of knowledge about their ways of learning…. It is part of the university's responsibility to give students a chance to recognize these traits as early as possible in their college careers. Peer tutoring… and mentoring at schools seems to provide this kind of chance to grow as learners. (p. 69)

Bräuer's reflections are echoed by other studies that underscore the need to provide peer tutor support to freshmen as a means of easing transition and allowing them to reach fuller potential as scholars, particularly in contexts characterized by diversity (Fox et al., 2010; Newton, & Ender, 2010; Rhoden & Dowling, 2006: Yam, 2010). Moreover, Bräuer's reference to "interconnectedness" plays out through the themes highlighted in the interviews; writing fellow intervention in these lower-division classes introduces and provides a network of assistance that students new to the university—and their professors—do not know how to access on their own. Writing fellows play a pivotal part in promoting this connection by 1) sharing with their professors their insights from their experiences as students and as writing center tutors, 2) suggesting modifications or challenges to assignments that support student learning, 3) bringing writing center services to the attention of the professors and students, 4) encouraging students to see their professors as allies rather than adversaries, and 5) mentoring students in the new ways of thinking and writing that this American university requires.

As I emphasized earlier in this article, my initial hope in creating the writing fellows program was to extend writing instruction beyond the first-year writing sequence through placement in upper-division writing-intensive courses or major courses. This did not happen. However, we learn a lot

when our expectations are not met, as Bräuer (2002) and Terry Myers Zawacki (2008) acknowledge as they draw lessons from WAC endeavors which appear "less-than-successful" (Zawacki, 2008). This study suggests that writing fellows at AUS are quite effectively placed in lower-division courses running concurrently with first-year sequence writing courses due to the immense learning curve students face in their first few semesters. Issues of freshman transition—heightened by the differing pedagogical approaches of various secondary educational systems, divergent cultural attitudes toward learning and teaching, students' inexperience with writing and the writing conventions deemed important in the American system, and the disparity between the content of the first-year writing sequence and the writing requirements of even introductory courses—suggest that AUS students need more writing support earlier in their university life. It is certainly clear that the assistance of a knowledgeable and empathetic writing fellow to ease students into the rigors of academic writing and to encourage learner independence seems a very palatable solution to new AUS students.

Indeed, meeting the students' writing needs at this early stage in their university life seems akin to "striking when the iron is hot." Moreover, this early intervention contains the potential for a cumulative effect, resulting in more professor willingness to assign writing in upper-division courses—a hunch that I hope to explore in future research.

Appendix

Interview Protocols

INTERVIEW GUIDE: PROFESSORS

- Grand tour: Story of using writing fellow in class from "idea" to present moment
- Complications or challenges encountered
- The writing fellow's performance
- Collaborating with the writing fellow on assignments
- The effect on the course as a whole
- Thoughts on writing fellow support regarding lower-division vs. upper-division courses

INTERVIEW GUIDE: WRITING FELLOWS

- Grand tour: Story of being a writing fellow in this class from beginning to present moment
- Complications or challenges encountered
- Critical incidents
- Level and quality of collaboration with their assigned professor
- General observations on student writing issues in this class
- Thoughts on writing fellow support regarding lower-division vs. upper-division courses

INTERVIEW GUIDE: SUPPORTED STUDENTS

- Grand tour: Story of being supported by a writing fellow in this class from beginning to present moment
- Secondary experience with academic writing
- Writing in current freshman writing course

- Writing challenges in writing fellow-supported course
- Complications or challenges encountered with writing fellow
- Critical incidents
- Thoughts on writing fellow support regarding lower-division vs. upper-division courses

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