13

One Vision at a Time

Betty Beck

The class came idling in, looking for familiar faces as they chose seats away from the front of the room. Eight o'clock approached, and the noise level grew. The teacher spent a few minutes welcoming everyone back to school on that hot end-of-summer day. Then, she began.

"For the next three minutes, write how you feel about your writing. Do you like to write? What are all the kinds of writing that you use in your daily routine? Are you concerned about your spelling and grammar? What kinds of writing do you most enjoy?"

After a moment of hesitation, the class settled down and wrote quietly. The only sounds were the movement of pens across paper and the uneven hum of the portable fan. Relaxing, the teacher looked around the newly opened J. P. McCaskey Writing Center and observed the diverse group of teachers who had volunteered for the August Writers' Workshop. The center's first students—teachers from science, industrial arts, English as a second language, home economics, social studies, English, reading, special education, and business departments—filled the room.

From these teachers had come the idea for a writing center. Before bringing their classes into the center in the fall, they would experience their own struggles and discoveries with writing as they composed, revised, edited, and published their contributions to the first workshop anthology, *Page One*.

That was eight years ago. Much has changed since then. Pens and paper have been replaced with two twenty-computer networks and a desktop publishing center, but the enthusiasm for writing has not abated. Prospering in a Lancaster, Pennsylvania urban high school of 1,700 students (45 percent white and 55 percent minority), the McCaskey Writing Center has published hundreds of books chronicling the experiences of thousands of students.

From today's vantage point, the Writing Center's success seems predestined; a closer look confirms that the eight-year evolution of acceptance within the school has been an uneven process. The proposal for the Writing Center written by Morris Krape, English program coordinator, and Joyce Syphard, assistant principal at McCaskey, gave the center its uniqueness: it would not be an English department program; its emphasis would be writing in all disciplines. The center's staying power has always been its ability to change to meet the demands of students and teachers who use writing process and who are comfortable with the place of word processing in that process, regardless of subject areas.

Every time a teacher is willing to take risks, to change, and to grow, the vision of the Writing Center changes; each teacher's vision impels change within the Center. Collectively, these visions guide the growth of the writing and learning across the curriculum program at McCaskey.

Before the Center Opened

When the Writing Center opened in the fall of 1984, it had a three-year history. Principal John Syphard became intrigued with the idea of changing the ways that students learn and teachers teach. He called upon the expertise of SUNY Writing Center director Lil Brannon to present a series of writing strategy workshops for teachers, and the process of change had begun.

One would think that Brannon's workshop would have been met with enthusiasm; however, it turned into a forum for some teachers to vent frustrations at a system unresponsive to the "real" issues: a high dropout rate, problems with tardiness and absenteeism, drugs, alcohol, child abuse, a rising rate of pregnancy. The group had started with forty teachers, but one-third left after the first workshop, citing a number of reasons for not wanting to use writing as a process: too much work, too difficult to grade, cannot cover enough content, cannot be done in my subject, don't want to eliminate the teaching of grammar. Fortunately, others saw it as a springboard into a more open class setting where they could stress process rather than lecture and large-group work.

Tom Wentzel, remedial reading teacher, remembers, "One day, probably in 1981, a Franklin & Marshall student doing a field experience with my classes asked me if I had ever tried expository writing in my classes. I fended off her questions with the standard rationalization—my kids can't read, how could they write? But the seed was planted. When Lil's workshops came along, I signed up."

Wentzel, along with a core of other teachers, stayed with the

workshops. Some surprising results emerged when these teachers applied theories in their classrooms. Even reluctant writers responded with clarity and honesty when confronted with nonpunitive writing assignments. Now, constructive dialogue during student-teacher conferences affirmed the student's ideas and encouraged elaboration. The "errors" traditionally stressed—spelling, mechanics, grammar—took a backseat to making meaning. When thought-provoking questions replaced red editing marks, students responded with enthusiasm. Teachers, buoyed by their successes, wanted a visible commitment to writing process in the school; and the vision for the Writing Center was born.

The Early Years: Finding Our Way

In the summer of 1984, I was hired by the school district of Lancaster as the center director; concurrently, I was a fellow in the National Writing Center Project at Penn State Harrisburg.

My first task was to arrange one-third of the cavernous old library into five working areas: a classroom area, a conferencing and writing area, a word processing area, a reading area, and a production area. The teachers could generate ideas and read in large groups in the classroom area. Teachers and students could write, read, and listen to individual stories at the tables and chairs in the conferencing area. In a corner of the room, students could relax and read other students' writings in the Writing Center's library of publications. In the production area, students and staff could assemble books at the oversized table with a paper cutter, a GBC binding machine, and a supply of binders. The ten Apple IIe word processors, which did not arrive until second semester, would be lined against a wall. We discovered it was a room arrangement that worked.

My next task was to work with the group of teachers who formed the support group for the first year. Assisting me were seven teachers, one each period, assigned to the Writing Center as a duty period. These teachers came from the science, history, English, reading, home economics, and business departments. Together, we planned the opening of the center relying upon students trained as peer writing tutors. One hundred twenty-six tutors were trained in writing process during the month of September. In October, the doors opened, and we knew almost immediately that we had used the wrong model.

The peer tutors could not effectively work with students who knew nothing about writing process. Students who came for help wanted a quick fix: grammar and mechanics. There was confusion about the writing assignments. What had the classroom teachers actually assigned? As in the game of "whispering down the lane," the versions of the assignments we heard from the students were dramatically different

from the actual assignments given by the teachers. Tracking down assignment information was time-consuming and, too often, did not give us enough information to help improve the student's writing.

A new vision was needed. If students could not tell us what the assignments were and if seeing each teacher to discuss the assignment and grading process was too time-consuming, what would work? And then the computers arrived. With the computers came the curious: first, the students; then, the teachers. We suspected we had something special, but how to use it was still a mystery. The students were fascinated with the computers; I was not because I wanted to emphasize writing. The connection eluded me.

Watching the tutors work with the Apples gave me an idea. If the teachers needed experience with writing process, which I understood, and if we needed students, then, why not bring entire classes to the center? I would teach the writing process while the teacher controlled the content. The student tutors would teach the students to use the word processors. We could all listen and react to student writings. The computers could print out clean copies that would be easily published. Everyone contributed, and everyone benefited.

The most significant benefit turned out to be using the computers for the publication of class anthologies. When teachers began to see their students' pride in the publication of their writings, they realized that tangible publications were more effective than grades in motivating students to revise and edit.

We developed a process for publishing a class anthology. After we collected a piece of writing from each class member, the class would brainstorm titles until one was found that summarized the contents of the anthology. The class artist would incorporate this title into the cover design. The manuscript was sent to our print shop where one copy for each student was printed. When the books came back, we put plastic binders on and gave a copy to each student in the class. On the day of distribution, we held "Great Authors' Parties" to celebrate each publication, inviting friends and family for public readings of the stories. *The Eclectic Anthology*, *Eyeballs in the Water*, *McCaskey Fables*, *Nursery News*, *My Wedding Book*, and *Blacks Who Built America* became some of our best sellers; everyone wanted a copy. Teachers became enthusiastic about teaching units that included writing because their students were eager to publish.

From this enthusiasm came the second summer workshops. The first Writers' Workshop anthology, *Page One*, contained only personal experience stories. In this workshop, I wanted the teachers to publish a second anthology, *Page Two*, that would be a blueprint and a resource for teachers who wanted to construct their own writing units. Teachers grouped themselves according to subject areas so they could share

ideas about content while styling individual writing to learn experiences. Teachers practiced all the techniques that they would later implement in their own classrooms: learning logs, multiple drafts, conferences, revising and editing, and response groups. Each teacher acted as scribe, shared a personal experience story, and constructed a plan for using writing as a process during the next year. Then, they scheduled time in the Writing Center to implement that plan.

Page Two consisted of three parts: a learning log detailing concepts covered in each workshop session; personal experience stories; and units of writing that required the teachers' classes to come to the Writing Center the following year to write, revise, and publish a classroom anthology. What did these McCaskey teachers design for their students? In biology, Cyndy Dinsmore had her students imagine that they were a McDonald's hamburger so they could describe the journey through the digestive system. June Schwar, who supervises the Child Development Center, had her child care students publish a parents' newsletter four times a year. The family relationships instructor, Mary Shawkey, had her students produce two reference books: *Families in Crisis: Where to Turn in Times of Need* and *My Wedding Book: A Guide to Planning a Wedding.* In Jo Stokes's math class, students kept learning logs, analyzing their progress as math students. George Resh's local history class compiled interviews with World War II veterans. In a class with high absenteeism, Fran Keller used scribes to record and read aloud the concepts and assignments from the previous day. Tom Wentzel had his remedial reading students publish high school "survival guides" that were sent to the junior highs.

As teachers began to use what they had learned at the Writers' Workshops, more class time was spent talking about, editing, and revising one piece of writing instead of just producing larger numbers of papers. In slowing down the number of papers and by concentrating on the development of one paper, teachers showed students how writing could be improved. The computers became an integral part of that process. Word processing facilitated revision and allowed nearly painless publication of student writings. With ten Apple IIe's, groups of students composing at the terminals formed spontaneous collaborative learning groups.

Because of the increasing demands during the second year, ten more Apple IIe's were added. Now, individuals could work on their writings but with less collaboration than occurred at shared terminals. Student writers still wanted feedback, and conferencing with writing became the norm—not just at the terminals but in every corner of the center.

By the mid 1980s, we had become simply another part of the school. Students took the Writing Center for granted and were surprised

to find out that not all schools had one. Student publications appeared everywhere: in the in-school suspension room, the library, the principal's office, and the community. We believed that we had created a state-of-the-art center, but we could not have foreseen the changes the future would bring.

The Middle Years: The Years of Acceptance

Based upon the success at McCaskey, writing centers moved into the libraries of the four junior high schools. When the writing centers opened in the junior highs, students became familiar with word processors. This, in turn, brought a trend toward students' composing directly at the terminals and away from paper and pencil composing. Some students felt composing with paper and pencil slowed their thinking processes. Having writing centers in the junior high shifted McCaskey's emphasis from teaching beginning word processing to spending more time on development and revision. About this time, two writing activities appeared that would refine the way we worked with student writers.

I remember that it was a hot day. The Writing Center has no air conditioning, and in the September heat the west windows baked the room and all of us. Sitting at my desk, I turned to see Fran Keller, a friend and colleague, walking toward me. "I'm teaching paperbacks," she announced. She was not happy. "How do you *teach* paperbacks?"

Without too much thought, I said, "Have them write a paperback." We looked at each other and realized the potential of using the Writing Center for a full semester's work rather than the usual five-day visit. That simple exchange has resulted in a six-year, twelve-semester discussion about the most effective way of having students become writers.

So, what happened when we asked a group of non-college-bound urban teenagers to write a paperback? Like publishers or editors, we dealt with many real issues of writing: appropriate language choices, PG-13 ratings, character development, setting, plot, symbolism, and dialogue. We learned that there had to be some limits. If we set no limits, some students would mirror in their writings only the violent, sexual behavior seen in the media.

Although early in each semester some students resisted, we have never had a student who refused to write a paperback. A bigger dilemma was that many of Fran's students could not stop writing in time to publish. It was not unusual for students to write fifty-page stories; it was not unusual for them to spend all their spare time in the Writing Center living in their writings; it was not unusual for them to continue writing long after the class was over and the final grades had

been given. As teachers, Fran and I needed only to get out of their way, to give up control, which was harder than it sounds.

When students believed that they had ownership of their writing, there was a writing explosion. It happened every semester even with some of our most reluctant writers as they lost their writers' blocks. They also loved to read each other's stories. Sometimes, it sounded as if they were talking about families.

"How is Kayla? Did she make up with Jake?"
"No. He left her for Marly."
"Good. I didn't like Kayla. She lied too much."

Part of the difference in this writing activity was that the students worked for a whole semester on one piece of writing that evolved over an eighteen-week period. So that there would be no requirement to force closure, we decided not to publish their writings in a class anthology, but to call them works in progress. This was a critical decision, a departure from the Writing Center's philosophy. Taking away the publication requirement has lessened the responsibility of assisting students in extensive editing. To work with a student to standardize mechanics and spelling for publication was a massive job and required too much of the student's time away from writing, although some students requested help. We stressed proper paragraphing for direct quotations, and we had students use the spell checker. Creating a paperback enabled students to feel a connection with professional writers by experiencing firsthand the decisions and struggles a professional writer encounters. In addition, this activity turns writers into more discerning and analytic readers.

Not publishing the students' paperbacks gave me some insight: all students' writings were works in progress; and publication, while an important element, was not the only goal in the Writing Center. Fran asked one of her students, "Did you ever expect that you would be able to write this much?"

"Certainly," she replied, "I was just waiting for the opportunity."

Another English teacher, Andrea King, used writing in all her courses. When she first brought her classes to the Writing Center, I was impressed with the independence of her students, particularly since her class size was over thirty. I noticed she used a class plan that communicated her expectations and showed them the concrete steps in writing process.

We have adapted her class plan for other classes. The following is a sample:

1. Read your draft to the class.
2. Type and revise your draft at the computer.

3. Print your draft. Mark it **Draft 1.**
4. Read your draft to another student. Listen to his/her draft.
5. Write your comments about his/her draft on the conference sheet and return the conference sheet to the writer.
6. Revise your draft. Mark it **Draft 2.** (There should be some significant changes. If not, see a teacher.)
7. On Draft 2, underline the changes you have made.
8. Have a conference with a teacher for final editing.
   Have the teacher initial draft 2.
9. Use the computer's dictionary.
10. Print out two copies:
    Print one draft quality, double-spaced (for Mrs. King to grade)
    Print one letter quality, single-spaced (to be published in a class anthology)
11. By Friday, paperclip these together and give to Mrs. King:
    Your handwritten draft (on top)
    Your conference sheet filled out by another student
    Your drafts 1 and 2 (underlined and initialed)
    Your final drafts: one single-spaced and one double-spaced

The weekly plan generally follows the sequence above; however, the conference sheets are specific to the writing assignments. These weekly plans make the students independent learners who no longer ask, "What do I do now?"

Expanding Andrea's idea to research papers, particularly in Ann Pinsker's sophomore American Cultures classes and Carroll Staub's Global Studies classes, we concentrated on thesis statements. On the conference sheet, the student reader must identify the writer's thesis statement and find at least three supporting concepts. Students discover the construction of thesis statements by listening to others.

Although we do not use these plans and conference sheets with all classes, I think the classes that use this process accomplish more because the teacher's expectations are clear from the beginning of the class, and the structure is sequenced logically and understandably for every student.

Believing that written expectations facilitate the transition from the classroom to the Writing Center, I developed a checklist for teachers to explain what to do with their classes before coming to the Writing Center and to explain what to expect when they get there.

What to Do Before Bringing Your Classes to the Writing Center

For the Writing Center:

- If you are planning to come to the Writing Center this year, schedule as early in the 1991–92 school year as possible. As of June 1991, there are only four weeks unscheduled for the next school year.
- Discuss the assignment with Mrs. Beck, including any special needs you may anticipate such as a minilesson on documentation, special computing requirements, and so on.
- Give a written copy of your assignment. This should include the due date and the criteria for grading (if you are grading this piece).
- Indicate if you want your class to produce a publication such as a class anthology, letters, contest entries, college essays, and so on.

With your classes:

- Conference with students to make sure they have the necessary information before they come to the center.
- Discuss your deadlines for your students' writings.
- Explain about the Writing Center's hours before and after school. No pass is needed for these hours. If students want to come from a study, they must get a pass from the Writing Center before or after school.
- Check to see that every student has a piece of writing, a first draft. You may want to collect those drafts on the Friday preceding your visit to the center.

What to Expect in the Writing Center

Here is a basic plan of action. If you have special requirements, we can plan your days to suit your writing unit. Just let us know how we may best help you and your students.

- Part of the first day will be spent in a large group planning session. Each student will read a portion of writing (one- to two-minute limit) and tell where the writing is going.
- The remainder of the week will be spent word processing, sharing writing with small groups, revising, and individual conferences for editing.
- Students who have not finished may schedule time in the center during a study or before/after school by obtaining a pass from Mrs. Beck before school from 7:15 until 7:50 or after school until 4:00

Another idea that works is what I call "conference progression." It started in an English as a Second Language class where some students

who are new to our country lacked confidence when using English. I have the student read to me, listening carefully so I can think about the content. Then, I read the writing back to the writer, choosing one or two details to discuss with the student, who will then make a few additions, elaborating just a bit more. After printing out a revised draft, the student sees another teacher who repeats the process. Although it sounds painstakingly slow, our goal was to help the student gain confidence and independence by taking small steps with different teachers; it was not our goal to "correct" everything.

Although this conference progression seems obvious to us now, we teachers did not understand the importance of collaboration in the beginning. This team approach to helping students was the most significant result of working together in the Writing Center during the middle years. We learned how interdependent we teachers had become. We needed to share ideas about writing and about students. The students benefited from seeing us working together as a team.

Vision for the Future

Just when we thought twenty computers were enough, the center experienced a surge of activity. More teachers wanted more class time for their students. Students, on the other hand, having experienced the ease of writing with word processors, wanted more individual time using the computers. They were now coming to the high school with better keyboarding skills and more knowledge about software.

Enter the networks. What were ten Apples became twenty Apples. What were twenty Apples became forty IBM PS/2s on two local area networks each run by an IBM Model 80, which manages the Novell system and the I-Class software. Separate from the two networks is a desktop publishing center, loaded with Pagemaker software and complete with a scanner and laser printer, which produces the school newspaper in camera-ready layouts. The newspaper staff makes use of our "technology to go," three Radio Shack laptop computers. These laptops move the Writing Center throughout the school.

With the arrival of the networks, we outgrew our original one-third of the old library and moved to the other two-thirds. We also outgrew our old schedule. From an 8:00 A.M. to 3:00 P.M. day, we changed our opening to 7:15 in the morning and our closing to 4:00 in the afternoon.

The expanded hours allowed us to accommodate a new tutoring program that runs both semesters and complements the school's initiative to use principles of the Johnson and Johnson Cooperative Learning Center of the University of Minnesota. During nine weeks of each semester, approximately sixty Millersville University education majors

come to the Writing Center to tutor individuals and small groups. Volunteers also come from the community, from Harrisburg Area Community College, from Franklin & Marshall College, and from McCaskey to tutor our students.

We continue to schedule classes for writing activities. Fran Keller's paperback class has just finished the semester's work with five students still writing their paperbacks into the second semester—after the class ended. Joan Kochel's tenth-grade general English classes have published individual family books with unique covers and pages for photographs. One student dedicated her book to her newborn son. Alison Carzola's Spanish classes published magazines and newspapers in Spanish. In his Advanced Placement composition class, Frank Gray formed collaborative groups that researched, wrote, and presented material on topics such as "restructuring schools" and "gender differences." Each student in the collaborative group was responsible for a specific part of the final project. Business teacher Donna Freeseman had her students researching their individually chosen business professions to discover if they want to pursue a specific career. Sociology teacher John Valori had his students write a present and future obituary for his death and dying unit. Health teacher Frank Albrecht had his students publish books entitled "Where I Find Meaning in My Life." He pasted a photograph of the class on each cover.

A new writing assignment involves students' writing their college admission essays for Kathy Novosel's Collegiate Power Reading class. College-bound juniors and seniors write their college essays in Kathy's class and come to the Writing Center for additional feedback. Kathy explains, "Writing the college essay is unlike any other writing assignment our students face. Their personalities, their outlooks, and their perspectives will be judged by total strangers. These strangers can grant or withhold a very important prize—admission to the college of their choice. While this is a wonderful opportunity to show themselves as unique individuals, so much more than the sum of their cumulative GPA and SAT scores, it is also a daunting task for student writers. The Writing Center defuses the anxiety. Supportive adult 'strangers' and peers react in a constructive way to these critical writings. The opportunity to gauge the reactions of others before mailing these essays is an invaluable benefit. The Writing Center is an indispensable part of this very practical writing assignment."

Besides scheduling writing classes, teachers are making more extensive use of the center's network capabilities. Because of the network, Tom Wentzel could bring in his remedial reading class to experience a text and graphics computer adventure game called "King's Quest IV." As part of a unit on folktales, his students played, "King's Quest IV: Perils of Rosella" by Sierra. Having been taught the elements of the

folktales, the students came to the Writing Center to experience these elements in this interactive game. In five days' time, students who were reluctant readers or who were using English as a second language became independent readers in their quest to "save King Graham." After playing the game, which takes more than five class periods, students will write a folktale of their own, demonstrating their understanding of the traditional elements.

At the same time that Wentzel's students were in the back room kissing frogs or stealing the witch's eye, students from Charlotte Spinella's psychology class were using "Psychology on a Disk" to do a shaping experiment: training a computer rat to exert more pressure on a lever by rewarding with or withholding a food reinforcement. Her students must write about their learning process when using this software.

Having seen the success of collaboration in the Writing Center, teachers and administrators continue to seek other ways to use these principles. This year McCaskey has become part of the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) coordinated by Brown University. In CES, writing will become a strong component because evaluation is based on performance and portfolios.

The Writing Center continues to be a laboratory where students can use technology to write, but the human element remains most important. It must continue to be a place where students receive encouragement and support. It must remain a place where students can discover their strengths and their talents. Our student writers, anticipating a larger audience for their writings, collaborate with teachers, peer tutors, and each other to polish their works; our current generation of writers expects this process. Their vision will guide the future.

Acknowledgments

Response group: Donna Freeseman, Debbie Gardner, Frank Gray, Fran Keller, Andrea King, Kathy Novosel, Ann Pinsker, Mary Ann Rudy, Gloria Spangler, Carroll Staub, Tom Wentzel.