CHAPTER 28.

THE WRITING CENTRE AT ST. MARY'S UNIVERSITY COLLEGE, BELFAST, NORTHERN IRELAND

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This essay describes how my experience of teaching in writing pro-grammes in the US influenced my development of Northern Ireland's first Writing Centre, established in the spring of 2002. I discuss partic-ular influences and how they led to specific pedagogical practices. The experience of moving from an American to a UK academic culture, and the contrasts that the move revealed, were an especially important part of the formation of my personal pedagogy, with insights, I believe, for writing centres on both sides of the Atlantic. As this essay indicates, I remain strongly committed to the student-centred tutorial practices advocated by Donald Murray of the University of New Hampshire and the close, critical scrutiny of student texts, as advocated by Kurt Spellmeyer of Rutgers. Central to this narrative is the belief that criti-cal writing is a significant element of social and political practice.

Opening up a writing centre at St. Mary's University College on the Falls Road in Belfast was in many ways the fulfillment of an unanticipated dream. It was an "unanticipated" fulfillment because, like many of my American col-leagues, I had dreamt initially of becoming a lecturer in English. I had planned to share my love of literature with students who would then become enlight-ened and improved, thereby fulfilling Matthew Arnold's high argument about the place of literature in education.[1] My gradual disaffection with Arnold's lofty claims, combined with my subsequent exposure to pedagogies for teaching writing, ultimately converted me to a lecturer in academic writing, one who made a good fit with the liberal arts degree being offered at St. Mary's.

What does that dream look like in reality? In reality, St. Mary's University College is a close-knit community of approximately 1,000 students, lecturers, management and staff. The community is self-effacing but quietly confident about its place in Northern Irish society. Students were initially friendly and

welcoming when I began teaching there, and they became more so the better I came to know them. Management was supportive of the importance of a writing programme to the liberal arts degree, and with their assistance, a colleague from the English department and I were able to obtain substantial additional funding to establish a writing centre.

Lest that reality appear utopian, it came with a significant set of challenges. First, the liberal arts degree at St. Mary's had a strong commitment to widening access, which meant that many of our students were likely to be first-generation university attenders, unfamiliar with the culture and academic practices of tertiary education. Secondly, the heavy commitment to standardised testing in the North—the 11-plus, GCSE and A-level exams—meant that students graduating from high school sorely needed to develop further competence in critical approaches to research, reading, and writing. Finally, if my American impressions of Irish students were correct, they were reluctant to express their critical opinions publicly. The challenges, then, were to develop writing courses that could effectively encourage these students to develop the critical sophistication required for university work and to get them into a writing centre where they could talk about their writing.

A brief history of my development as a writing lecturer will help to explain the practices that I have come to hold dear and which I believe are suited to St. Mary's. In the United States, many graduate students in English Literature begin their teaching by being assigned first-year courses in academic writing, often known as "Freshman English" or "Freshman Composition." As an American graduate student, I began apprenticeship as a composition instructor at the University of New Hampshire (UNH) in 1985. Their writing programme, which had achieved prominence primarily through the work of Donald Murray, emphasised a writing process pedagogy that made use of one-on-one teacher-tutor conferences (individual tutorials) and classroom workshops (full-class discussions of students' essays). The programme encouraged students to write personal narratives and was memorably enthusiastic about the act of writing.

While my own reserved personality probably attenuated some of this enthusiasm, the programme provided an important reminder that writing ideally should be enjoyable, and I began to develop a more restrained vocabulary: "engagement," "struggle." "accomplishment," "absorption," "insight," and "competence." These conceptions proved valuable in my one-on-one tutorials with students, and as I began to learn to draw them out about their own writing and looked for ways to encourage their interest, I gradually shifted from being a "lecturer" to being a "responder." As Murray put it, "The instructor responds to the student's response and to the student's suggestions for improvement."[2]

Beyond Murray's emphasis on the importance of listening and responding in the one-on-one tutorial, he also provided a good scaffold for the writing process, which encouraged students to think of writing as a series of activities. Students could learn that in any piece of written work, there are a multitude of possible interventions. I still cling possessively to my first edition of Murray's text on student writing, *Write to Learn*, and I continue (facetiously) to tell my students to memorise Murray's model for the writing process—collect, focus, order, draft, clarify—each stage associated with a number of possible developments of their texts.[3]

However, good writing involves more than enthusiasm and an awareness of writing as a process, as important as these elements are. Through my experience at UNH, I realised that students could become effective writers about their personal experience, such as winning a football match or going to a formal dance. If they were to venture further, into persuasive forms of writing, their arguments often, frustratingly, were predictable and lacked engagement: they would write familiar arguments about familiar issues in familiar ways. The issues did not even appear interesting to them because they were on safe ground. Very little of this writing did more than reflect their own positions within their dominant culture; that is, they tended to write unproblematically about their experience of the world around them. If they were to abstract values from their experience, these were generally culturally accepted ones. For example, a football match was about "good sportsmanship," a formal dance was the "best day of my life," abortion was simply "murder"—all familiar cultural subject positions.

My dissatisfaction with this kind of writing gained theoretical underpinnings when I studied academic writing under Kurt Spellmeyer at Rutgers University.[4] In his classes we read student texts through the lens of critical theory. While my own interpretations undoubtedly err on the side of pragmatism and reductionism, I found real power in the use of these theorists. Foucault's structuralism, for example, became a commentary on how students were lulled through the discourse that surrounded them into constructing safe and predictable arguments.[5] In contrast, Derrida's views on deconstruction helped me to see how students' tightly held arguments might be the consequence of rigid binary oppositions.[6] Finally, Raymond Williams' (1977) Marxist theory demonstrated that student texts could be productive of social change, but also might very well participate in an ideological false consciousness that preserved the status quo.

Critical theory enabled me to look at students' texts from a fresh perspective: what kind of meaning could emerge from the student text? This perspective turned me into a kind of Sherlock Holmes of student writing: in the presence of larger cultural constructs, what meanings were students attempting to make? This perspective kept student texts fresh and interesting and took me away from

an overemphasis on essay structure. Instead of endlessly looking for thesis statements and well-structured arguments, I searched for emerging meaning.

Arriving on Irish shores, my initial experience of teaching at Queen's University Belfast (1994-2002) was that there was not much interest in writing pedagogy. Students were expected to have come to university as competent writers. My experience, however, was that even at prestigious universities such as Queen's, a significant number of students were under-developed as independent learners and writers. For example, when I assigned my class to read Hamlet, one promising student said, "You mean go off and read the whole thing?" In secondary school, such students had been taken step-by-step through literary texts in preparation for their pre-university exams and, additionally, some were told exactly what to say about them. A history student told me that in preparing a critical question upon whether World War I led to World War II, he was told that there was only one correct answer.

Fortunately, at Queen's, I was able to collaborate with another American colleague who had a keen interest in developing a writing programme. He garnered provisional funding for pilot programmes in the teaching of writing from the Queen's School of English. A series of writing seminars ran for two years before devolving to a smaller programme in individualised tutoring. My colleague and I would sit together in our shared office and meet individually with students interested in improving their writing. The high level of appreciation from them for this work, and our developing skill with the one-on-one tutorial, made us keen to expand the programme.

That opportunity arrived when we moved to St. Mary's University College, a teacher training college associated with Queen's that had just established a new degree in the liberal arts. This degree incorporated the teaching of writing as a central element of its programme, and I found myself with the unexpected luxury of teaching students in the classroom on a regular basis. I made use of Murray's writing process model, and, to foster engagement, supplied students with the kinds of critically challenging texts that I hoped would encourage them to problematize their experience. I further deployed strategies of small group work, combined with a myriad of writing activities, in an attempt to develop classroom discussions. These classrooms were not always as lively as comparable American ones, but student reviews showed that they thought I was an 'energetic' teacher and that the texts were interesting.

My American colleague provided a superb start for our mutual ambition to establish a peer tutoring programme in writing by securing an initial grant from the English Subject Centre.[7] We began to establish the programme by drawing upon essential lessons learned at Queen's. We had come to believe that the one-on-one tutorial was central, that tutorial discussions should centre upon what

the student wanted to do, and that, because of this focus upon the writer, the concept of having students tutor other students was essentially sound. It was sound because our peer tutors were not going to put themselves forward as experts, but rather as fellow writers who could listen and offer suggestions. As another American colleague, Kathleen Shine Cain, continually asserts, "Writing is a social process." Students may retreat to a solitary location to write—the so-called "ivory tower"—but they are probably deceiving themselves if they believe they do not need the criticism and support of fellow writers. Bolstered by our experience, the training of peer tutors became grounded in student-centred tutoring and the writing process.

Additionally, based on my education at Rutgers, I encourage my tutors to see themselves in the detective role I imagine for myself: Sherlock Holmes searching for emerging meaning in student texts. When we practice reviewing pieces of student writing, I encourage tutors to emphasise content. If, for example, tutors comment that an essay needs a thesis statement, I encourage them to go one step further and ask what the particular thesis statement should be. Thus, in the tutoring session, queries such as, "Are you saying that Marxist political theory does not address the issue of central government?" are much better than, "Where is your thesis statement?"

After three years of initial support from the English Subject Centre, my colleagues and I were in the excellent position of having enough experience to speak with some authority when applying for a grant to be designated as a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning in Northern Ireland. Our application was successful and in 2006 our funding increased fifty-fold. A significant benefit of this funding was that we were more fully able to develop a relationship with Dr. Kathleen Cain, who directs the Merrimack College Writing Centre in Massachusetts, US Kathy came to St. Mary's for a year as a visiting lecturer and was able to contribute her expertise to the further development of our writing centre. The contrasts between the practices of American and UK educational systems proved productive in our thinking about how to develop writing centre pedagogy, and Kathy and I have developed a number of joint conference presentations on the subject of this difference. The second significant benefit was that we were able to move into a larger teaching space with a connected suite of rooms: a peer tutor office, a teaching classroom, and an office for me as director. The willingness of St. Mary's to provide us with this space was one of the most significant aspects of our success: we became an obvious physical presence at the college and students began not only to come to tutorials, but to begin to "hang out" at the centre and study and collaborate on their writing. The rooms are not pre-possessing, but the space itself is excellent. I am able to confer with peer tutors in an informal atmosphere, and the space is an

excellent design emphasising collaboration rather than formal teaching. As one of the peer tutors commented: "There is no hierarchy in the writing centre."

When I meet with peer tutors individually at the end of each academic year, I am greatly encouraged and pleasantly surprised by their insights. My colleagues and I learn from them. My dream had been transformed from teaching the appreciation of literature into the opportunity to see students empowered by their ability to engage in the process of writing: not empowered merely because they had mastered writing skills, but because through writing they could learn to be effective and engaged social participants in a larger world. The writing centre that we have set up at St. Mary's is good value because students, very properly and naturally, tutor other students. Staffed by twenty-five student peer tutors, we can handle up to 100 sessions per week, and last academic year we had close to 700 tutorials. Each session is a unique opportunity for a significant discussion about writing. In the writing centre students do what should be a normal part of the learning process: they learn from each other.

NOTES

1. See, especially, Matthew Arnold (1869/2009), *Culture and Anarchy*.

2. Donald Murray, *A Writer Teaches Writing* (1968, p. 148). Chapter 8, Conference Teaching: The Individual Response , represents the foundation for our tutoring strategies.

3. Donald Murray (1985, p. 57). Note that the text has gone through seven subsequent editions: the first edition uses the process described in this essay.

4. To get a good sense of this kind of pedagogic practice, see Kurt Spellmeyer (1993).

5. See, especially, Michel Foucault (1986).

6. To get a sense of the theory behind the deconstruction of texts, see Jacques Lacan (1982a, 1982b, 1984).

7. As part of the national Higher Education Academy, The English Subject Centre supported the teaching and learning of English Literature, English Language and Creative Writing across UK Higher Education. For more information on St. Mary's funded project "Exploring the Potential of Peer-Tutoring in Developing Student Writing" see http://www.stmarys-belfast.ac.uk/downloads/writing%20centre/cetl/documents/ESC%20Report%201.pdf.

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