Why Visit Your Campus Writing Center?

by Ben Rafoth

This essay is a chapter in *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing,* Volume 1, a peer-reviewed open textbook series for the writing classroom, and is published through Parlor Press.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Writing spaces : readings on writing. Volume 1 / edited by Charles Lowe and Pavel Zemliansky.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-60235-184-4 (pbk. : alk. paper) -- ISBN 978-1-60235-185-1 (adobe ebook)
1. College readers. 2. English language--Rhetoric. I. Lowe, Charles, 1965- II. Zemliansky, Pavel.
PE1417.W735 2010
808’.0427--dc22
2010019487

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There is something about the experience of speaking with someone one-on-one—the facial expressions, enunciations, gestures—that makes us feel alive and energized.* Who we talk with can matter more than the topic itself, but either way most people love a good conversation. Among strangers traveling through an airport or waiting in a doctor's office, words seem to gather like stones in a pool. People gravitate to conversations so naturally that they make time and travel far to experience them. When time is short and travel impractical, people buy conversations by the minute.

Conversation is the key idea behind writing centers, and it's the number one reason why it pays to visit your campus writing center. Writing is too hard to do alone, and writing center tutors can help. I asked several tutors from different writing centers to tell me how students benefit from the writing center, and I hope you will find what they said as convincing as I did.

Talking It Up

Every day, tens of thousands of students across the U.S. and around the world walk into (or go online for) their campus writing center, many

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for the first time. They usually say something like, "I need someone to look at my paper." They don't literally mean they want someone to look at the paper and that's all. They want someone to spend time with them, read the paper carefully, show appreciation, and say what they think about it. They also don't merely want to hear what a tutor thinks about the paper. They want to ask questions, explain what they've written, and see how the tutor reacts. They want a conversation that revolves around questions such as:

> What do you think about my paper? Is it any good? What do you think my instructor and my classmates will think about it? Does it need to be improved? And how would I go about that?

A conversation develops around these and other questions, writer and tutor sitting in chairs or on a couch, pages fanned out on the table before them. The tutor might invite the writer to read the paper aloud, but that's not a requirement; tutors also like to read the paper silently and absorb its content, structure, and stylistic nuances.

Reflecting back on her senior year as a tutor at Niles West High School's Literacy Center in Chicago, Susan Borkowski told me,

> I quickly learned that a tutoring session is mostly about asking questions. Writing is a way to communicate thoughts. It follows naturally that in order to produce good writing, we have to start by stimulating our minds to think deeply about our topics. So often we *think* we've pushed our minds to the limit and can't see a way to make a thesis any deeper or more complex . . . until someone asks a question about it. We *think* we've explained ourselves as much as we can because we are only thinking about it in a limited way. But when someone else asks a question, we start talking out loud and soon we find that we're thinking in completely different ways about a concept we thought we had already flushed out completely.

Susan tutored her classmates in a place where every day, hundreds of students stop by on their own to write and read and talk and listen. Literacy Center tutors would be the first to acknowledge that not everyone leaves one hundred percent satisfied, but the many students

who keep coming back for help says something about the good things that happen there. Could these students do as well by themselves, sitting alone in front of a computer and waiting for inspiration? I tell my students to try it sometime, and when that doesn't work, visit the writing center.

Tutors try to focus on things that are important to the writer: the challenge of the assignment, the ideas there seem to be no words for, the little editing stuff that attracts red ink. Tutors encourage writers to take notes and start writing when the ideas begin to flow. Tutors are usually paid by the hour, so they'll wait while you write. The important thing is to build enough momentum so that when you go home to finish the paper, you'll already be on a roll.

Anthony, a first-year undergraduate from Philadelphia, had been coming to the Writing Center at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, where I teach, three to four times per week to write a rhetorical analysis for his freshman writing class. At first, he only wanted help in finding examples to illustrate logos, ethos, and pathos in an article he was assigned to read. It was a good session, and Anthony got the examples he wanted. Then he told his tutor that this was a hard assignment because all of the examples in the article seemed to fit more than one element. This observation might have ended then and there, but his tutor urged him to say more about the overlap. They talked for another fifteen minutes or so, and on his next paper, Anthony focused on the overlap in his thesis, claiming that logos, ethos, and pathos are not distinct elements in persuasive writing. Anthony was one of the few students in the class who wrote about the overlap, and when the instructor read his paper aloud in class, he looked pretty smart. He thought of the overlap on his own, but it took a conversation with a tutor to see how he could go in that direction and still stay within guidelines of the assignment.

When I asked tutors why they believe students benefit from visiting the writing center, it would have been perfect if they had all said, "It's the quality of the conversations we have here" because that's my thesis. Instead, they gave richer and more interesting answers. One wrote to me from a pool where he was lifeguarding, another wrote during downtime while working at the writing center, and another used a mobile phone on the road. All responses exuded the passion that leaps out from people who are totally committed to what they do, whether they make any money at it or not.

Daniel Phillips tutors in the Writing Studio at the Fashion Institute of Technology in Manhattan. Anyone who has ever seriously considered a career with Armani or Chanel or Claiborne would soon find that FIT is the first step to landing a job with these top tier design houses, and while there they learn that fashion designers spend a lot of time writing. Daniel said:

> When I sit down with a student for the first time, there's always a brief and slightly awkward introduction, and then we talk for a few minutes about their major, what they do, their assignment, the food they're eating hurriedly ("I'm so sorry, but I never get time for lunch"). And then for me comes the challenge. This is a new person. I have no idea how they learn, what works for them, if I should speak more or sit and listen, if I should focus on their grammar or on making the subject of their essay more focused and apparent. For you the student, it is a game of expectation. You want us to help you with your writing, probably. For us, it is a matter of pedagogy, the way we can teach you what you're asking to learn, but without simply laying it out for you to gather up. Sometimes in a session, I make almost no statements. I simply ask questions. We are not so much tutors as we are a presence that encourages you to write, to question your own logic, to revise, to reconsider.

How does it happen, this conversation that leads to better writing? There are many ways, but it starts with getting ideas out of your head, through your lips, and into someone else's head. When you verbalize something you have been thinking, several things happen:

- You hear what you just said and how it sounds, as if you were hearing someone else say it.
- The tutor hears what you said, and you have to respect their need to make sense of it.
- Once you speak, you become motivated to listen to what the other person says—because you started it.

- Once you both speak, there is momentum to keep going and to influence what comes next, or not. You can sit back, or disengage. It's up to you.
- Both of you have fired neurons in your brains that change what is in your heads.

Each of these has consequences for thinking and writing. Erica Bazemore, a tutor at the University of Iowa, pinpoints some of the consequences when she says: "I have had numerous occasions when I couldn't quite put into words what I wanted to say, and it only took a conversation with a professor or a colleague in my department to help me put on to paper what I have been grappling with in my head." Founded in 1934 by a professor of Communications, Iowa's Writing Center may be the first center in the nation. Working at a place with such a long and distinguished history of helping students to write, Erica understands the relationship between conversation and writing.

Finding Confidence

Students go to the writing center not only because they are looking for ways to put their thoughts into words but also because they want reassurance. Daniel Phillips, the FIT tutor, wrote, "Sometimes we are there to tell you how good your writing already is (and it probably is already pretty good) and that you don't need to change much at all. It's different with every student and every session." I've never met anyone who went to a writing center to feel bad about themselves; there's ninth grade for that. Hearing that your writing is good and that you don't need to change what you have written is actually quite valuable.

Yecca Zeng, at FIT, told me,

> I can see an instant confidence arise when students walk through the door and find other students with whom they may discuss any idea, any step, any type of writing that they may be having trouble with. When students realize their peers are the ones who are helping, it is easier for them to relax and be more outgoing and elaborate on exactly what they want to accomplish.

Sometimes tutors can cure a case of cold feet, as when students invest time in a topic and even write most of their paper before they decide to change the topic and write about something else. Such last-minute, impulsive topic changes are usually a mistake. Most students would be better off if they had had the confidence to keep what they had written and sought input from others about how to revise it. "I have not come near to outgrowing the need to share my writing with a responsive, receptive person who can provide feedback and engage me in a discussion about how to move forward with revision," said Sam Van Horne of the University of Iowa.

On the east coast, at Loyola University in Baltimore, Paige Godfrey put it this way:

> Ever since I started working in the writing center, I have had a student who always requests a consultation with me. Being that there are so many wonderful consultants in the writing center, I always questioned what it was that made this student a "regular." At the end of the semester, the student pulled me aside to thank me for all that I had done to help her throughout the year. She stated that the most helpful thing I had done for her was make her feel more confident about her writing. Rather than pointing out the areas that needed improvement, I like to focus on the areas full of strength and work off of them to improve the weaker areas. There is no doubt that many students need improvement with their papers—I am certainly not Shakespeare myself. However, if you show them their own potential, it allows them to look deeper inside themselves as writers and grow from it.

For many people, the hardest part is showing their writing to someone else.

According to a popular website for health information, WebMD (http://www.webmd.com/anxiety-panic/guide/mental-health-social-anxiety-disorder), the most common situations in which people feel anxiety due to potentially negative judgments from others are:

- Eating or drinking in front of others
- Being the center of attention

- Interacting with people, including dating or going to parties
- Asking questions or giving reports in groups
- Using public toilets
- Talking on the telephone
- Writing or working in front of others

Most people are okay with toilets and telephones, but who hasn't experienced writing anxiety? The important thing is to reduce the feeling of vulnerability. Here is the University of Iowa's Erica Bazemore again:

> The ability to share something as personal as a piece of writing can be a daunting task for some students, but getting into the habit of not only sharing writing, but having someone respond to it can help to make someone a more confident writer. In addition, face-to-face communication through writing and speaking can help people develop effective ways of self-expression and comfortable ways of communicating with each other. Our society is becoming increasingly less personal on the level of language and through our daily interactions, but writing centers have a built-in mechanism to counter this trend. The writing center is a place for taking the abstract and making it concrete. It is a place for collaboration, sharing, expression, and empowerment.

For a few students, visiting a writing center feels like admitting they are not good enough to be in the course they're taking. I spoke to one of the graduate student tutors in my writing center, Motasim Almwaja, an excellent writer from Jordan who is cautious about what he says and writes in front of his friends from the Middle East because he does not want to appear foolish. (He had to remind me that even in soccer, accepting defeat in his culture is not an option.) For him, strength vs. weakness is a matter of how you look at it. Motasim has worked very hard to perfect his English, constantly memorizing words and phrases and then using them when he speaks and writes. He points out that instead of admitting a weakness, going to the writing center shows strength and the resolve to work for what you want.

When you share your writing with a tutor, you can be pretty sure the tutor is not going to laugh at your writing (unless you write comedy) or criticize your paper. They've seen it all and are not interested in judging you or your ideas. They will help you to discover something good about your writing that you can build on. They want to see you succeed because helping students to write is their job.

A Sense of Audience

A writing center can help students to refine their sense of audience so that they better understand how readers will respond to their writing. Acquiring this sense of audience is a bit mysterious because it depends a lot on experience. When a comedian causes an audience to convulse in laughter about ordinary things that happen to everyone, it's the comedian's keen sense of audience and timing that makes the jokes so hilarious.

Great comedians make telling jokes only seem effortless; we don't see the hours of preparation, false starts, and flops that preceded it—all things they probably relied on teachers and coaches to overcome. Tutors seem to understand that writing a good paper is a team effort. The part that tutors contribute as readers is crucial because they draw writers outside of themselves to see the paper as others are likely to see it. This is a hard thing to do on one's own. We tend to steep in our own thoughts. But a tutor stands apart, reading the draft with fresh eyes and pointing out the gaps the writer needs to fill so that ideas flow smoothly. Over time, writers learn to read their writing from the perspective of their readers by internalizing the responses of tutors and replaying them in their heads when they write the next time. We all develop a sense of audience, but we never outgrow the need for someone else's fresh eyes. Mike Czajkowski, an undergraduate at Illinois Wesleyan University in Bloomington, Indiana, told me,

> I do think it is important to seek another pair of experienced eyes when writing a paper, especially an academic one. I generally go see a professor I'm comfortable discussing my writing with, who knows my style really well, or I see a friend whose writing and opinion I trust (generally in the same class as me). I think it's important because we need to realize we

> aren't writing those papers for ourselves, so we should inherently seek anything that allows us to see a paper outside of our own bias toward it.

I also heard from Marisa Martin, whose writing center shares its mission with her college's Jesuit tradition. The mission states: "In the Jesuit tradition of working with others to reach a common goal, the Loyola Writing Center understands that writing requires input from others. The Loyola Writing Center offers consulting for the entire Loyola community of writers, including undergraduate and graduate students, as well as faculty and staff." Working with others to reach a common goal is also what Marisa wanted me to know: "We are sounding boards for the fears and anxiety of writing. We are there to give writers tools to work through these situations and to give them tips to work it out on their own next time." Working together improves the chances of working independently. Marisa and her colleagues believe they can help students enough that they will be able to succeed on their own.

Getting What You Need

So why visit the writing center? If I had to boil down what I have tried to convey here, I would say students should visit the writing center because:

- Writing isn't easy and tutors can help. (It's pretty basic.)
- Tutors are able to discuss writing in a way that moves you forward. They create idea-rich conversations.
- Writing centers instill confidence that you are on the right track, or help you get there if you're not.
- Writers need readers.

I think these are sound reasons, but some readers may wonder why it has to be a writing center tutor and not a roommate or a gym buddy. Listen to Kelly Ruth Anderson, a tutor at the University of Iowa. I asked her the same question I asked the others, "Why do you believe students should visit the writing center?" For her answer, she posed a slightly different question: "Why do students visit the writing center?" She pointed out that what people should do and what they actually do

are often quite different. I like her answer because it demonstrates one of the ways that tutors are trained to help writers: when given an assignment, they turn it to the writer's advantage. Kelly told me:

> Why *do* students visit the Writing Center? For all the wonderful talk about "becoming a better writer," most of my tutees visit the WC—at least initially—out of a sense of real and tangible need. *My teacher said that I need better transitions. English isn't my first language, and I need help with grammar. I need an "A"—how can I get an A on this paper?* And I'm not sure that I can blame students for acting out of these specific needs—we seem to be a pretty results-driven society, and many students overlook the role that writing can play in their future lives. (So why bother with some lofty, perhaps seemingly insurmountable, goal like "becoming a better writer"?) In other words, I can give students the "real" reason to visit the Writing Center—to become a better writer—but I'm not sure that answer will *actually get them to visit the writing Center.*

Kelly eventually answered the question I had asked, but first she said something she felt was just as important. This was a wise move, one that elevated her idea and made it memorable. Kelly knew what I had asked, but first she told me what I needed to hear. Writing center tutors do the same thing, and Kelly's response is a reflection of this. Tutors and teachers know that everybody wants to receive good grades on their papers. But grades are the end product of what you do to earn them. If Kelly were your tutor and you didn't know what to write in response to a question on an assignment, she could help you to see the question in a different light that would show you a different path to take. She cannot give you the A you want, but she can give you the idea you need.

Learning to write is not a uniformly warm fuzzy experience, but it can lead to some of the best encounters you will have in school—with tutors in the writing center who are there just to help.