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Educating Tutors to Engage in Writing Center Workshop Purposeful Practices

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The work of writing centers is continually expanding beyond one-to-one tutoring. Rebecca Jackson and Jackie Grutsch McKinney posited in 2011 that though writing center work exceeds the traditional tutoring model, much of this work "remains hidden." They found that writing center professionals (WCPs) increasingly included non-tutoring activities, such as workshops, in their missions; however, few were talking about this in their scholarship. This gap in scholarship poses a challenge for writing center professionals seeking to grow their writing support services beyond traditional one-to-one tutoring. In this article, we present results from a national survey distributed to WCPs in order to identify the work they do to create writing center workshops. We focus specifically on the role of tutors in developing workshops as well as how tutors are being prepared to do such work. From these results, we provide an overview of materials and practices current WCPs use to develop workshops, and we argue that research on defining purposeful workshop practices needs to continue. We begin with the catalyst for this survey—our own experiences as graduate assistants and tutors who were charged with the task of developing workshops at Virginia Tech.

In the spring of 2016, we were approached by Graduate Student Assembly (GSA) delegates to deliver a writing workshop at the 2016 GSA Symposium for graduate student research. We designed a workshop that would be informal and collaborative for an interdisciplinary graduate student audience; as such, we planned to facilitate group discussion and provide students time to write with our support. After the first session, we distributed a post-workshop survey, which revealed that several participants wanted the workshop to be more directive. To address students' desire for a more directive workshop approach, we restructured the workshop the next day and included a guided demonstration

using an example where Becky transformed a conference presentation into an article. While our feedback for this second directive workshop was overwhelmingly positive, several students noted the workshop was too discipline-specific. We were disheartened that though our original workshop was well-planned and steeped in what we believe to be purposeful writing center practices, it did not seem wholly effective to participants. As we reflected on this experience, we realized we were not fully prepared to develop workshops for a general graduate student population outside of the English department.

We turned to writing center literature to find that few scholars are researching and reporting the development of workshops. Jackson and Grutsch McKinney point out that scholarship about workshops has appeared sporadically throughout the decades and has been anecdotal in nature. Indeed, within the last decade, *The Writing Center Journal* (*WCJ*) has included only a few articles that specifically mention workshops (see Carroll; Godbee et al.). In *WLN*, several scholars have shared their experiences with workshops (see Adkins; Bedore and O'Sullivan; Malenczyk and Rosenberg; Schultz), but this literature has not yet adequately addressed tutors' roles in conducting workshops for writing center clientele, nor does it explicitly identify effective workshop strategies in order to educate tutors to contribute to the development of writing center workshops.

Before we could develop a set of purposeful practices for workshop development, and in order to address the current gap in scholarship, we felt it was imperative to explore the current workshop practices of writing centers across the country. To do so, we analyzed results from our National Survey on Writing Center Workshop Practices, which we had circulated to writing center professionals about the specifics of conducting writing center workshops. In what follows, we first describe our research design, and then we discuss our results as they pertain to tutors' roles in workshop development. From our survey results, we offer suggestions for educating tutors to engage in workshop practices and encourage further research to move closer to identifying purposeful workshop practices. For more information about our survey, results, and analysis, see our chapter in *How We Teach Writing Tutors: A* WLN *Digital Edited Collection.*

RESEARCH DESIGN

National Survey on Writing Center Workshop Practices: We created a survey that contained a total of 24 questions: 17 multiple-choice and 7 open-ended. With IRB approval, we

circulated the survey via email using the IWCA's list of writing center directors' contact information. Our final list of possible participants included just over 1,000 writing centers from which we received 211 survey responses. The return rate of the survey was approximately 20%; therefore, though this is a good response rate, this data set is not representative of all writing center professionals, their centers, and their experiences. Respondents include current and former writing center directors and assistant directors, administrators, graduate students, and other WCPs (i.e. coordinators, interim directors, faculty, etc.). Results indicate that the majority of participants (96%) are current or former directors or assistant directors. Additionally, most respondents (82%) indicate that their writing centers offer workshops.

THE ROLE OF THE TUTOR IN WORKSHOP DEVELOPMENT

Our survey results reveal that tutors play an integral role in the development of workshops. From the 158 responses to the multiple-choice, select-all-that-apply question "Who develops workshop content?" 43% selected "undergraduate writing center tutors," 39 % selected "graduate writing tutors," and 65% selected "director." Furthermore, of the 150 responses to the open-ended question "How do you develop the content for workshops?" 22% discussed and highlighted the role of tutors (or consultants) without being specifically prompted to do so. In what follows, we focus on the responses that address the tutors' roles and discuss two emergent themes: tutor experience and tutor autonomy.

Tutor Experience: About 40% of respondents who addressed the tutors' roles highlighted tutor experience or expertise as significant to the development of ideas, topics, and workshop content. Respondents "consult tutors," "receive recommendations from consultants," and use "[t]utors' ideas" when generating topics and workshop content. Participants reported that their undergraduate and graduate tutors' experiences with one-to-one consulting allow them to identify clients' needs and generate ideas for types of workshops. For example, in explaining how the process of developing workshops begins, one respondent noted that both graduate and undergraduate "tutors will mention how they noticed a certain class is coming a lot or how a certain assignment seems challenging for students," and they will "develop resource materials" for workshops accordingly.

Survey participants usually did not distinguish between undergraduate and graduate tutors' experiences and expertise; however, some did make distinctions between the two groups. Those who referred to undergraduate tutors highlighted their

tutoring knowledge and skills gained from one-to-one sessions. One participant asserted that they base the workshops "on the experience of undergraduate tutors who conduct hundreds of individual consultations." Respondents also emphasized the importance of their graduate tutors' teaching experience. One participant noted that graduate student consultants "often draw on their experiences as teachers" when developing topics and content. Thus, respondents identified both their undergraduate and graduate tutors as professionals with unique expertise that is useful to workshop development. In these instances, undergraduate and graduate tutors' experiences with clients in tutoring sessions and graduate tutors' teaching experiences become the foundation for workshop development.

Tutor Autonomy: Respondents revealed that tutors have varying degrees of autonomy when developing workshops. Approximately 20% of respondents who discussed tutors' roles mentioned that workshops are developed either solely or primarily by tutors. One respondent explained that while the director chooses topics for tutor-led workshops, they "leave it up to the coordinator and co-presenters to flesh out the details." Tutors have full autonomy to utilize good research practices by developing content for workshops with the help of outside materials or resources. One respondent noted that tutors create workshops using literature, their colleagues, and their own experiences.

About 15% of participants who discussed tutors' roles described them as having partial autonomy to develop workshop content, with several mentioning that tutors generate topics and/or create the workshop content on their own but receive approval from the writing center director. One writing center director explained that the "writing consultants brainstorm and present ideas" and the director "help[s] to shape and inform them." In other instances, the director gives the tutors more autonomy in the initial development of the workshops and provides feedback before they present. One respondent noted that when a faculty member requests a workshop, the director assigns two tutors to develop a plan and "ask[s] for drafts and provide[s] guidance as needed." In these cases, though tutors are not the sole developers, they have quite a bit of responsibility for developing workshops.

While participants identified tutors as being primarily responsible for developing workshops, almost half mentioned that tutors have shared autonomy. That is, workshops are developed through collaboration among writing center staff. One participant mentioned that "[u]ndergrad writing consultants and the writing

center director work together to plan student-focused 50-minute workshops." Tutors also work with one another to develop topics and workshop content. One respondent explained that a "team of consultants," led by a graduate student, develops original content and modify existing content.

TUTOR EDUCATION FOR DEVELOPING WORKSHOPS

Survey results reveal that while 67% of respondents do offer a tutor education course, only 35% discuss workshops in their tutor education programs. In this section, we briefly describe the materials our participants use and considerations they make to teach workshops in their programs.

Participants teach the development of workshops using previous workshop materials, including PowerPoint and Prezi presentations, handouts, "game plans," workshop handbooks, scripts, outlines, activities, itineraries, sign-in sheets, brainstorming, and outcomes. Several respondents noted that they familiarize their students with these existing materials and explain the process of content development and the rationale for each workshop. Others use existing materials as models from which the students can create new material to be used in future workshops. For example, an instructor of a tutor education course reviews old materials with students and then prompts them to "work as [a] group to develop materials for new workshops."

Participants also use materials from outside sources or literature to teach tutors about the development of workshop content. Several respondents highlighted specific writing center or writing pedagogy scholarship, including Jackie Grutsch McKinney's *Peripheral Visions*, Hephzib Roskelly's *Breaking (into) the Circle*, *The St. Martin's Sourcebook for Writing Tutors* (Murphy and Sherwood), Beth Finch Hedengren's *A TA's Guide to Teaching Writing in all Disciplines*, *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors* (Ryan and Zimmerelli)*,* as well as resources from writing center publications such as *WLN*, *Praxis,* and *The Writing Center Journal.* Despite the dearth of scholarship specifically pertaining to workshop practices, respondents still ground their discussion of workshops in research about writing center theory and practice more broadly.

Our results indicate that only about half of the respondents who offer tutor education provide formal instruction on workshop practices. At the same time, our findings in the previous section reveal that tutors receive on-the-job education by working closely with directors and in collaborative teams with other tutors

or staff members to develop workshop content. Thus, these results suggest that workshop education and development is collaborative.

DEVELOPING PURPOSEFUL WORKSHOP PRACTICES

Initially, when we began to plan the workshop for graduate students *as* graduate students, we immediately tried to locate resources in current writing center scholarship. Results from our national survey showed that development of writing center workshops is happening, and often, we just do not see this work reflected in our scholarship. Therefore, as we continue to develop and facilitate writing center workshops as WCPs, we would like to see more research and scholarship about the development of writing center workshops.

In this article, we offer a starting point for developing purposeful workshop practices, and we advocate for more empirical workshop research in writing center studies. For example, future research can begin to address the following:

• Workshops and spatial rhetoric
• Connections between teaching practices and workshop facilitation
• Workshop assessments
• Interdisciplinary inclusivity in workshops
• Workshops and knowledge transfer

As this study aims to offer a step toward developing purposeful practices by identifying the considerations writing center professionals make when developing workshops, based on our surveys, experience, and research, we've compiled suggestions for WCPs as they begin or continue to develop or modify their workshop practices.

Purposeful Workshop Practices

• **Consult tutors when developing topics for workshops.** Since tutors are constantly engaging in one-to-one consultations, undergraduate and graduate tutors understand clients' specific needs and challenges, which can help WCPs identify content and need for specific workshops.

• **Choose the level of tutor autonomy that works for your specific writing center and staff.** Autonomous tutors develop workshops on their own or use literature or outside materials. Semi-autonomous tutors generate topics and material and then seek director approval. Tutors who share autonomy work in collaborative teams that may include directors as well as graduate and undergraduate students. As our results

demonstrate, tutor experience and expertise are invaluable to workshop practices. Tutors with more writing center experience may be comfortable with more autonomy or be equipped to lead a team. Additionally, depending on the workshop topic, it may be appropriate to assign tutors with disciplinary expertise a leadership role in workshop development.

- **Consider implementing a combination of formal education and informal education, such as on-the-job training, for developing workshops.** Formal education can take place within tutor education courses (if available) or through professional development. For on-the-job education, graduate or senior tutors can lead collaborative teams, while novice tutors observe or assist. Additionally, directors or assistant directors can observe a practice or rehearsal of tutor-led workshops and provide feedback before an actual presentation.

Empirical workshop research is another opportunity for writing center professionals. While it is evident in our study that WCPs use materials from the field that suggest best practices for one-to-one tutoring, we cannot assume that one-to-one tutoring offers an apples-to-apples comparison to workshops. In other words, because the field lacks established practices for the development of workshops, our respondents have done their best to work from what is available to create ala carte practices. Therefore, to suggest purposeful practices and subsequently study them for effectiveness, we would like to encourage a foundation of workshop practices, distinctly different from one-to-one tutoring.

Jessa Wood et al. offer an example of empirical research in their study of the benefits of workshops to help students understand how to paraphrase. They delivered pre- and post-tests to identify the effectiveness of the workshop for helping students to avoid patchwriting. Additionally, though not explicitly related to workshops, Holly Ryan and Danielle Kane provide a potential model for empirical assessments in their study of the effectiveness of different intervention techniques used in writing center classroom visits. To assess these techniques, they administered pre- and post-classroom-visit surveys to students in 41 writing courses. In turn, workshop assessments could measure the effectiveness of materials and strategies through pre- and post-workshop instruments, such as tests, surveys, or interviews. To identify purposeful workshop practices, as a field we can continue to develop and publish empirical studies.

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