

Asking Students for Solutions: The Writing Center as Client in Project-Based Learning Partnerships

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Writing centers have long enthusiastically embraced student participation in inquiry and research on writing centers, championing this opportunity for project-based learning (PBL). The Buck Institute defines PBL as learning experiences in which “[s]tudents work on a project over an extended period of time—from a week up to a semester—that engages them in solving a real-world problem or answering a complex question. They demonstrate their knowledge and skills by creating a public product or presentation for a real audience” (“What is PBL”). This definition aligns well with how Lauren Fitzgerald and Melissa lanetta define writing center research: “method-based, systematic inquiry that generates new knowledge for both the researcher and the work’s audience” (7). Discussions of PBL and undergraduate research in writing centers generally focus on work done by tutors (DelliCarpini and Crimmins; Fitzgerald). Tutors provide important insights, both for the field and for the individual writing centers where they work, but what about the perspectives of students not already embedded in our communities? In this article, I discuss how writing centers might extend their practice of embracing PBL through partnerships with courses across the curriculum. This form of PBL allows writing centers to improve and advertise at the same time, partnering with the students they hope will use the writing center and asking them to propose solutions to the center’s real-world problems.

MY EXPERIENCE WITH PBL PARTNERSHIPS

For several years, York College of Pennsylvania, a private four-year college, has embraced PBL, exploring ways to infuse this “high-impact practice” (“Transforming Higher Education”) throughout the curriculum. Often, professors and instructors new to PBL or those working with undergrads seek campus clients to partner with for these experiences instead of community partners as a lower-stakes introduction to this kind of work. I was excited to serve as

one of these campus clients because I saw the project as mutually beneficial; the students would gain practice in problem solving and composing for authentic audiences, and I would get student help in addressing problems and complex questions in the writing center. I also saw it as a marketing opportunity for students to learn more about the writing center.

PBL with First-Year Students

In fall 2019, I was asked to participate in a pilot to embed PBL into first-year seminar (FYS) courses by serving as a client for introductory-level projects. I was assigned to two different FYS courses. At my institution, FYS courses are one-semester, themed courses (on topics as diverse as animal rights, women in sports, and the constitution) that introduce students to the kinds of thinking, reading, and writing expected of college students. In one section of FYS, Class A, which focused on the concept of belonging, the writing center was the specific client for the class, and as one project for the course, students were tasked with developing proposals to meet a need or challenge facing the writing center. In the other section of FYS, Class B, which was a special section focusing on academic success for underprepared students, I was one of two college representatives (the Director of Academic Advising was the other) who provided information and evaluated students' proposals for a project that answered the question: What is our college missing?

Not only were the foci of the projects different, the process and my involvement in the projects were different as well. The two instructors and I were all new to PBL, so I invited the instructors to determine how and in what way I would be involved in the process. In Class A, where the writing center was the sole client, a tutor and I were invited to give a brief presentation to the class about the writing center, specifically noting our concerns about lack of student knowledge about the center. Then, in teams of three or four, students conducted research and produced a formal proposal based on a template that the instructor and I developed collaboratively. In their proposals, students were asked to identify a problem, offer a solution, and discuss potential obstacles or challenges to enact their proposal. The instructor sent me each team's final proposal at the end of the semester.

In Class B, the director of Academic Advising and I attended a student-led question session where students in the class asked us a variety of questions about college life at our institution to determine what was missing at our college that would be beneficial for our students. Teams of three to four students then developed

projects around the topics of either student life or academic support. Teams working on projects related to academic support set up consultations with me to pitch ideas for proposals and get feedback on their initial ideas. I was then invited to attend formal presentations from the teams at the end of the semester.

The projects from both classes offered exciting ideas for our writing center to consider. Class A offered recommendations to increase knowledge about the writing center on campus. For example, one team focused on creating a social media marketing plan; another team shared ideas for informational videos the writing center could create; another submitted a proposal for the creation of a writing center site or module with asynchronous information and resources that could be accessed on our campus learning management system, Canvas. Two teams from Class B worked on proposals related to the writing center. In response to the question “What is our college missing?” one group put forth a proposal for the writing center to include tutoring support for presentations and public speaking. The other team proposed that the writing center incorporate an online chat or quick questions service as an additional support service we could provide writers. Some of these ideas we have already moved to incorporate while others we are still considering and researching. We have been able to use the social media plan from one team as part of our social media strategy and have created a Canvas site for the writing center. We are working with partners in the Communications and Writing department to develop plans for growing our support for oral communication and are researching possible tools for an online chat service. Essentially, we have been able to move on ideas for which we already had the tools and infrastructure to enact, but for other projects that require more resources, the proposals are serving as starting places for future consideration.

PBL in Disciplinary Courses

In spring 2020, the instructor of a Scientific and Technical Communication (STC) course approached me, looking for a client for PBL experiences in her courses. The PBL projects for the STC courses were more focused and more advanced than those from the FYS sections; these students specifically conducted usability research projects on our appointment system and processes for the writing center. In support of usability research in writing centers, Stuart Blythe claims, “Not only do usability research methods make users equal partners in a dialogic act rather than the subordinated component of a larger technology, the inclusion of end users into the design process can give them a significant voice, thereby allowing their needs to be represented more fully” (111-12). Blythe points

out the value of having end users participate in usability testing so administrators can make adjustments that better support these users. In our case, partnering with students in usability projects brought them in as student-partners who were not just representative possible end users of the technology and systems of the writing center, but active participants in the usability research itself. These student-partners were integral to the data collection process and provided solutions developed from their own analysis. Thus, these student-partners gained valuable experience collecting data and creating data-supported proposals, and the writing center received useful ideas to improve the usability of our services.

Students in two sections of this instructor's STC course partnered with me on a project specifically focusing on the usability of WOnline, the system our center uses for appointments. I met virtually with the STC students, sharing my desire to determine how students broadly attempt to connect to tutors, whether students understand the types of tutoring appointments available, and whether they are able to easily navigate the system to make appointments, something that became increasingly important during the transition to remote learning due to COVID-19.

Since our campus uses WOnline for writing tutoring, subject tutoring, and academic coaching, the STC sections determined five task scenarios to observe as part of their usability tests: 1) make an appointment with an academic coach, 2) cancel that appointment, 3) make an appointment with an online writing tutor, 4) cancel that appointment, and 5) find a drop-in session for organic chemistry. The students in STC recruited students from our institution who had never made an appointment with a tutor or academic coach. With an institutional grant supporting PBL projects, the instructor was able to offer \$5 gift cards as participation incentives. The students in the course observed the participants, via Zoom, conducting the five tasks.

After students completed these observations, I received a usability report compiled by both sections of the course as well as written reports or video presentations from individual teams consisting of three to four students, each making recommendations for actions the writing center could take to better address the usability of WOnline. In this round of usability projects, some key themes and recommendations were to have a prominent color-coded key within WOnline to help students understand how to use the system, to embed links, and to include directions for making appointments into Canvas. Additionally they recommended we rebrand WOnline to better encapsulate what it is and how it is used by our

institution, renaming it Spartan Learning Services, so it did not seem like it was just for writing center appointments. All of these recommendations were implemented by fall of 2020.

I partnered with the same faculty member and her three sections of STC in fall 2020 to conduct two follow-up usability studies. The first repeated the task observation protocols of using WCOline after the writing center had made modifications based on the recommendations from the spring 2020 proposals. The second project focused on the new Canvas site we developed for the writing center based in part on a proposal from the FYS PBL project described above. This site was launched in fall 2020 as what is called a “public Canvas course,” which means that students are not automatically enrolled in it as they are for Canvas sites for their academic courses, but can instead enroll themselves at any time to access the materials and resources within. I shared with the STC students that I wanted to explore whether students were able to easily access and navigate this site to find resources they might need. Due to anticipated pandemic-related challenges for participant recruitment and a lack of funding available for PBL that could be used to incentivize participation that semester, the instructor had her students serve as both researchers and participants. Each section was split in half, with half serving as researchers and the other half as participants for the first project and vice versa for the second. While this was not an ideal scenario, it allowed students to complete these usability studies during the challenging time of a pandemic.

Once students had collected data, I received a usability report for each project. The first, the follow-up on the usability of our appointment system after modification, showed significant improvement of usability and made no specific recommendations for future action. The second project, which explored the usability of our Canvas site, showed that while students had little difficulty navigating the site once they had gained access, finding and self-enrolling in the site proved to be challenging. Since this project yielded specific issues to be addressed, all teams of students addressed this issue in their recommendation reports or presentations. Some of these recommendations included finding a way to automatically enroll students to access the site, incorporating an instructional presentation as part of orientation that covers the resources available on the site and guides students to self-enroll, and scheduling a marketing campaign with enrollment instructions shared with students each semester. We are considering these options, working with other stakeholders such as our IT department and orientation organizers to determine which strategies we want to employ to address the usability concerns these projects raised.

PBL'S IMPACT ON WRITING CENTER USAGE

One of my interests in collaborating with faculty on PBL projects was also to expose more students to the writing center. In their research on the effectiveness of writing center class visits, Holly Ryan and Danielle Kane examined how different intervention strategies to introduce students to the writing center impact students' knowledge of the writing center and the likelihood of their usage of its services. While PBL is distinct from the interventions they explored, I similarly wanted to examine the relationship between participating in a writing center PBL project and actually using the writing center.

In total, across the seven course sections that I partnered with (2 FYS, 5 STC), there were 127 unique students. Of these 127 students, 106 had not had an appointment in the writing center prior to working on the project. Table 1 shows the total number of students in each course and the number of students from that course who worked with a writing tutor either the semester of the PBL project (either for the PBL course for another project or for a different course) or in subsequent semesters within the timeframe of this project (Fall 2019-Spring 2021 semesters).

Table 1. Writing Center Usage during and after PBL Project

	FYS- Class A	FYS- Class B	STC-Sp20 (2 sections)	STC-F20 (3 sections)
Total Students in Sections	25	24	33	49
Students with WC Appts during/after Project	4	20	4	8
% of Students with WC Appts during/after Project	16%	83%	12%	16%

While this is a very small data pool, each course had at least a small percentage of students use the writing center, a percentage that is in line with the usage we see reflected with other more traditional outreach efforts like class visits or workshops. FYS Class B had a very high percentage of writing center usage, but it is not clear whether that is from engaging in the PBL project or if the instructor encouraged students through additional means.

Thus, PBL partnerships were as effective as more traditional forms of outreach to encourage tutoring usage. Additionally, these partnerships were a mutually beneficial experience both for students, who participated in a high-impact practice that allowed them to engage in active learning for an authentic audience, and for our center, which received ideas to improve our services and accessibility.

REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

All of the PBL projects looked different, and the outcomes varied, but they provide a picture of the different forms that PBL can take and how writing centers can partner with faculty and students from across the curriculum to create mutually beneficial experiences. The final projects from the PBL partnerships created great starting points for new initiatives for our writing center to consider, providing a window into what these students were looking for from a writing center. I will caution those undertaking PBL partnerships, though, especially those with first-year students, to have clear expectations for what the students will produce. Many solutions offered required additional research and planning from our staff. Thus, those engaging in PBL projects should not expect that students will necessarily give them plans or ideas that are ready to be immediately implemented. Instead, they can help provide a clear direction for future work and projects.

I have offered detailed descriptions of the processes and products of my experience with PBL partnerships to provide models of possible projects for writing center administrators who are interested in implementing this practice at their institutions. PBL will look different based on institutional context, availability of funding, writing center needs, and courses and students available for partnerships. In whatever form it takes, however, PBL partnerships have great promise for writing centers to help us gather ideas and solutions from the students we want to support. They also provide an opportunity for students to learn more about writing centers while inviting these student-partners into our communities not just as clients, but as contributors. PBL partnerships build connections and relationships with students and faculty from across the curriculum while supporting and championing a high-impact practice at our institutions, thereby positioning writing centers as collaborative and innovative forces on their campuses.

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