Sustaining and Incentivizing Tutor Education through Self-Paced Modules

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Most writing centers staffed by peer tutors undergo regular turnover of employees as they graduate. While a consistent training program for new tutors can ensure that the entire staff knows the essentials of one-to-one writing pedagogy, no such program can cover everything. Often, tutors continue their learning through professional development (PD) meetings that focus on more advanced topics chosen by the center's leaders. To keep the entire staff engaged, including returning tutors, the PD curriculum must change from semester to semester. Yet, that means that some tutors will miss out on topics covered in a semester before their hiring. In contexts of high turnover, how can tutor educators sustain tutors' knowledge? This article offers one solution: online PD modules that reward completion with badges.

TUTORING WRITING IS GETTING HARDER, AND TUTORS NEED MORE PREPARATION

As the nature of writing and students' needs evolve, tutors' jobs grow more challenging by the year. I recall my own tutor training in 2010 with nostalgia: times, and the demands on tutors, seemed simpler then. In fact, times really have changed. There are more graduate and professional students than ever before ("Condition of Education"), many of whom grew up with languages other than English, and they need tutors' help with complex genres such as scholarly articles, theses, and dissertations. Students, including tutors, increasingly have neurodivergent diagnoses ("Neurodiversity in Education"), as well as mental health challenges (Gallup and Lumina), affecting interpersonal dynamics. Compounding these complexities, online tutoring—videoconferencing and asynchronous—became a necessity because of the pandemic. Moreover, as composing platforms proliferate and chatbots get smarter, tutors need familiarity with multimodal and AI writing. Tutors need robust training to successfully respond to each of these common yet complicated needs. Yet, whether a writing center can afford an entire semester of training or a single day, it's impossible—and undesirable—to cover every pertinent issue at the outset. A truly comprehensive training would overwhelm new tutors with information that is best learned while they are actively tutoring and testing their praxis.

At my writing center, training currently extends over the three months of summer semester, delivered via a module in our learning management system (LMS). It introduces new peer consultants to the values and practices of our center, hones their perceptiveness through a series of exercises where they get feedback on their feedback, and supports interpersonal skills. This mostly asynchronous curriculum requires consultants to spend several hours per week reading and completing activities in which they apply the theories. Our center's funding model allows us to pay tutors for their time, but other incentives, including those I mention below, can be used in

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centers that may not have the same kind of funds available. Because I want them to focus on developing their ability to coach writers, and because many of them hold summer jobs, I hesitate to add anything else to the nearly forty lessons. So, many pressing topics get only cursory attention. Although we hold weekly PD meetings for our consultants, since we feature different lessons each semester, it could be a year until a new consultant encounters a given topic.

To give all our consultants access to the same knowledge, regardless of their hire date, our directors and graduate assistants have thus far developed five self-paced modules covering ePortfolios, accessible document design, oral communication, conversational English, and intercultural communication. Each module is designed to take about ten hours for consultants to complete, ideally during their downtime on shift. The development, implementation, and implications of the module on intercultural communication—which took several years of gradual work—will be this article's focus.

DEVELOPING THE INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION MODULE

Numerous scholars have called for writing centers to better prepare tutors to work with multilingual writers (i.e., L2, ESL, EAL, ELL, NNES), who have become a core constituency in U.S. higher education. Many writing center leaders have responded to these calls by developing workshops and trainings tailored to the multilingual students at their institutions (Lin and DeLuca; Kryzhanivska et al.; Cox; Draxler et al.; Rinaldi). To add to the tutor education resources on this salient subject, and to demonstrate the potential of self-paced PD in writing centers, I briefly explain my two-year process of creating a module devoted to multilingual writers.

While undertaking coursework in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), I piloted the first version of the module with a handful of consultants. Based on the TESOL scholarship, I knew that educators need to understand multilingual students' backgrounds and aspirations. Synthesizing TESOL scholarship on this subject, I composed essays on multilingual learners' prior educational experiences, the home languages common among our writing center's clients, differing definitions of good writing around the world, and the tension between linguistic assimilation and empowerment. I also assigned chapters from the collection *ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors* (Bruce and Rafoth). While the pilot group said they enjoyed most of the lessons, they found the reading load too heavy, especially since they lacked sufficient opportunities to discuss their takeaways with each other. I used their feedback to revise the curriculum, downsizing it from ten to six lessons and integrating it into required PD meetings. Although the consultants found the leaner version more manageable, tying it to meetings revived the question of how to sustain learning: within a few months, many consultants would depart and be replaced, so only a subset of the staff would have engaged with this critical topic. Repeating the same meetings the next semester would bore the returning consultants. Therefore, the next semester, I sought to turn the updated lessons into a self-paced module (again), taking greater advantage of the multimodal and interactive capabilities of Canvas, our institution's LMS.

When I think back to the clunky, now-defunct LMS I used as an undergraduate, I am impressed by the many functionalities of current systems, such as Canvas, Blackboard, Moodle, and Brightspace. Their most basic advantage is to reduce the administra-trivia of teaching: when used well, they streamline the organization of educational materials and the tracking of student work, leaving more energy to be invested in engaging with students and providing feedback. Many writing centers take advantage of their institution's LMS to manage tutor education (Greer, Lytle, Shrewsbury, and Dvorak) or even to deliver asynchronous workshops to classes across the

curriculum (Towle). These pedagogues use videos and discussion forums to engage learners in the subject matter, whether that is writing center policies or annotated bibliographies.

Marrying asynchrony with interactivity: this was likewise my aim for the intercultural communication module. For guidance, I turned to the Modern Classrooms Project (MCP), which was recommended by my TESOL professors. MCP advocates for self-pacing, blended teaching, and mastery-based grading. In contrast to traditional classes that move in lockstep, in MCP classes, students move at their own pace through a unit after the teacher introduces it. Blended instruction refers to occasional whole-group lectures or discussions, frequent one-to-one instruction, and learning materials that students access independently. In those materials, video lessons recorded by the instructor play a starring role, allowing students to rewatch the lesson as many times as they need. Since the class is self-paced, the student should be appropriately stimulated: for some, completing the required assignments will provide sufficient challenge, while others will thrive by taking on ambitious, complex projects. Every student must demonstrate mastery of the unit before they can move on.

I adapted MCP's principles, designed for classroom contexts, to transform the materials into interactive videos. Within each video, I created comprehension quizzes to check consultants' recall and understanding of the information they had just learned. In some lessons, I incorporated multiple levels of activities for them to complete. For example, in the first lesson, they must compose a reflection on their language learning experiences; if they want to do more, they can create an infographic for educators. I used Zoom to record and caption the videos. Realizing that some learners prefer reading over watching, I also provided written versions of each lesson; the latter are publicly available on our program's website, https://auburn.edu/academic/provost/university-writing/resources/, which hosts hundreds of open educational resources (Brown, Smith, and Cicchino).

Aligning with the MCP philosophy of universal mastery, every consultant should be able to complete the module within their downtime on shift over a single semester, but the activities invite the most motivated learners to invest more time and energy. To encourage peer learning, consultants share their responses in discussion forums. Since, in some of the activities, consultants produce educational resources, I also encourage them to share their work on their ePortfolios, which they all create during their writing center employment, possibly benefiting a wider audience.

Getting the intercultural communication module to a stage of pedagogical soundness took several semesters of gradual studying, writing, and iterating—a fair amount of work, to be sure. Yet, such self-paced modules offer reusability and scalability that pay educational dividends, with the initial time investment paying off over years of students' learning. The modules may remain in use for as long as they are deemed relevant. Moreover, they can serve other audiences besides the peer consultants. Since our center belongs to a writing-across-the-curriculum program that supports faculty and staff as well as students, materials designed for one group often translate to others. I used a slightly revised form of the intercultural communication lessons to guide a faculty learning community through a series of discussions about teaching multilingual learners; we enjoyed rousing discussions on topics ranging from instructors' responsibility to help students master English at the sentence level to the risks of cultural essentialism.

MICRO-CREDENTIALING: BADGES FOR EPORTFOLIOS

While the MCP focuses on contexts where students earn grades for their work, in a writing center, what does a tutor earn for partaking in extra PD? Our consultants are paid whenever they are on

shift, and we ask them to use their free time to pursue pertinent learning. But some extrinsic motivation—a micro-credential, for example—can complement tutors' intrinsic motivation to improve their knowledge and skills. Awarding the peer consultants a badge they can include on their résumé and ePortfolio allows them to earn formal acknowledgment for their effort. Much like their analog forebears pinned to scouts' vests, badges are micro-credentials people can use to demonstrate their learning. As precedent, a decade ago, Purdue's Writing Lab awarded its consultants badges for undertaking special projects, such as facilitating workshops and staff meetings, presenting at conferences, and leading English conversation groups (Conard-Salvo and Bomkamp). In the first semester of badging, their tutors demonstrated interest in earning these micro-credentials, which some chose to feature on their LinkedIn profiles. Unfortunately, the in-house software used to develop these badges is now defunct.

In our center's case, I went a low-tech route with the badges, which may protect them from inevitable changes in software platforms. Rather than creating them through a formal badging application, I envisioned them as eye-catching images that our consultants would feature on their ePortfolios to demonstrate their achievements to a site visitor. A consultant with graphic design skills, Jesse Beck, created badge templates. He made several options and polled his colleagues about their favorites. The winning design features our unit's color scheme and a playful pencil that we personalize with the consultant's name. A central icon conveys the module's subject, with the intercultural communication badge featuring a symbolic talking globe.

Offering badges to encourage students to perform certain tasks belongs to the larger educational trend of gamification. Using aspects of gameplay like characters, quests, rewards, playfulness, and competition can motivate some students to engage more deeply in learning. For instance, Jamie Henthorn, a writing center director, turned her tutor training course into a role-playing game where tutors become characters and undertake quests. Such guided playfulness, Henthorn reflects, can encourage novice tutors to be curious and exploratory since they can experiment with imaginary identities and rousing missions. While my center's badging program has fewer elements of play, it does attempt to motivate consultants with the prospect of a prize.

"Attempt" is the operative word! My hope that dozens of consultants would excitedly work through the modules did not become reality in the first year, when badges were offered for two

modules. Eight consultants (one-fifth of our staff) earned a badge in accessible document design; many of these consultants had an added incentive to finish that module, since we required it for anyone who wanted to author a resource for publication on our website. The intercultural communication module saw less uptake: six consultants started it, but only three finished it and earned the badge.

For the three stalwarts, they accomplished the following learning outcomes, as assessed through their written and multimodal products:

1. Critically reflecting on their own language learning experiences and intercultural interactions.
2. Comparing English's features with those of another language of their choice.
3. Analyzing the cultural beliefs that produce a seemingly normal writing center practice.
4. Developing a worksheet explaining a U.S. perspective on a writing convention or concept to an international/multilingual writer.
5. Making an argument about the writing center's role in linguistic assimilation, empowerment, and separatism.
6. Presenting principles of intercultural communication for a non-writing center audience.

For outcome #6, one consultant created a PowToon video explaining the U.S. definition of plagiarism, another designed a PowerPoint about an essay in *ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors*, and another made a brief podcast reflecting on his takeaways. Along with the language transfer chart (outcome #2) and the worksheet (outcome #4), this final project would make a compelling addition to consultants' ePortfolios, providing evidence of their learning along with the badge itself.

While I was pleased with the learning of these consultants, I realized that, to achieve my longer-term vision of most consultants working through the self-paced modules, the badges provided insufficient impetus. The three consultants who finished it were already unusually proactive employees and likely would have finished the module even without the promise of a badge.

To provide more motivation, I developed a new job progression opportunity. Before, the only promotion option, with a limited number of openings, was the role of Lead Consultant. The position's significant workload—mentoring coworkers, facilitating weekly small-group PD meetings, and assisting the directors—deters most consultants from applying. So, I created a new title as a midpoint between Peer Consultant and Lead Consultant: Senior Consultant, which comes with a small raise. To be eligible for promotion to either the Senior or Lead role, consultants now need to earn at least two badges, as well as participate in one of our optional committees or affinity groups. Though the results remain to be seen, the prospect of showing obvious job progression on a résumé might motivate more consultants to undertake the self-paced modules—ultimately benefiting the writers they serve.

TAKEAWAYS FOR WRITING TUTOR DEVELOPMENT

The project laid out here offers two practical takeaways for the writing center field:

1. **Sustaining tutor education:** LMSs offer many advantages in building and organizing training and PD modules. While creating a high-quality asynchronous module requires a robust process of curriculum development, testing, and revision, that initial investment will yield years of consultant learning. In my case, entering the second year of implementing self-paced modules, I simply copied the existing modules over to the new course site. While someday, the modules will need to be revised to reflect the latest

scholarship, for now, the only day-to-day task is to monitor for submissions, provide feedback as needed, and personalize badges upon completion.

2. **Incentivizing elective PD:** My experience indicates that badges alone are insufficient motivation for most consultants to invest energy in optional PD. More substantial incentives are needed. The prospect of job progression should be within reach for most writing centers, since, in cases of budgetary constraints, a higher title need not come with a raise.

On a personal level, I found crafting the module to be the most meaningful project I completed at Auburn University's Miller Writing Center, due in part to its alignment with my longstanding interest in migration and linguistic diversity, and in part to how much time I spent on its many iterations. The time investment might seem alarming, but the project was hardly a daily labor. It gradually evolved over several years. Seniors, when asked to reflect on their college writing experiences, identify projects to which they devoted great time and effort as especially meaningful (Eodice, Geller, and Lerner)—logically, a semester-long project becomes more memorable and personal than a paper dashed off right before the deadline. Just like our students, we in administrative positions benefit from extended projects where, as I experienced with this module, our knowledge grows, our pedagogical creativity flourishes, and our values find practical expression.

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