

First Time Student's Perception of the Writing Center

Albert Xu

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Abstract

My research aims to answer the following questions: How are the experiences of first-time students at the writing center? What are the student perceptions of the writing center. I administered surveys to 7 first-time students at the writing center. The goal of the survey was to observe any trends that arise from the type of students that visit the writing center, the student's experiences at the writing center, and the student's before and after perceptions of the writing center. The survey results indicate that students are unaware of the initial intentions of the writing center. In addition, students do not revise their impression of the writing center, continuing to mostly believe that the writing center "is to help struggling students". Hopefully the writing center can make its tenets more clear to students and teachers in the future.

Keywords: First-time, perceptions, writing, center

Introduction

There seems to be some confusion about the role of the writing center. The typical student seems to think that the writing center is only a place to go for the truly desperate – students who are close to failing, or absolute perfectionists who want that A+. This perception is even further reinforced by instructors across various curricula, encouraging students that “if you need help, then visit the writing center”. To the casual observer, the writing center may seem somewhat extraneous. After all, what determines a paper's grade isn't the writing center, but the instructors within the course.

“The goal of the writing center is not to produce better writing, but better writers.” I have heard this mantra many, many times over the last couple of months, and it seems to be in direct protest against what most people see of the writing center. Indeed, the tutors at the writing center employ more of a suggestion and question based teaching style, rather than simply lecturing. Some would call this a non-directiveness approach, where the tutor is less “telling”, and more of “suggesting” or “pumping”. Part of the more passive approach towards helping students is trying to avoid smothering the student's own writing, and part of it is to help the student realize their own ability to approach their writing in a metacognitive way, to really let them think about their own writing and to internalize their own thought process.

It is unclear as to whether or not the students have any changes in their perception of the writing center. I will carry the following questions through the next section, and attempt to answer them in the **Discussion** section: What do students think of the writing center before they attend a tutoring session? How about afterwards? Are students aware that the tutors at the writing center are focused on not only their current paper, but their writing ability in general? Are students interested in visiting the writing center again in the future?

Review of Literature

There doesn't seem to be a comparison study about how student writers feel about the writing center before and after they visited. However, instructors involved in the writing center have given their own viewpoints on the writing center, which collectively constitutes the "lore" of the writing center. The research I am planning on doing will have questions for students, guided by the lore provided by these influential figures in the writing center/writing tutoring world.

Take, for example, Stephen North's *Idea of the Writing Center*. Regarded as "the godfather of the writing center," North criticizes the state of the writing center, complaining about its ineffectiveness and its lack of funding. "This is an essay that began out of frustration," (p. 433), he (1984) writes, clearly unhappy with the way writing centers are represented by his colleagues in English. His (1984) colleagues at various institutions and affiliated companies fail to see the ultimate goal of the writing center, and are unaware or misunderstand what the writing center could be capable of (p. 433). It was a general assumption that writing centers were to help people with many mistakes in writing. Writing centers "have been represented or misrepresented more often as fix it shops than in any other way, and in some fairly influential places." (North, 1984, p. 435) While the distinction between what a writing center should be and shouldn't be is clear to North, even he admits that the distinction is easy to muddle and confuse. He (1984) writes, "what seems perfectly natural to me is not so natural for everyone else" (p. 440). One would wonder what it would take to indoctrinate someone into North's line of thinking. Indeed, prospective undergraduate tutors at the writing center at various institutions are required to take a vigorous 3 credit hour course, with the purpose of not only training them and giving them the tools to succeed as tutors, but also to constantly remind them of the theories of the writing center.

These theories include directive/non-directive communication between tutor and student (Nordlof, 2014), or cognitive and motivational scaffolding. Great pains are taken to not smother the student's writing (Harris, 1986).

Perhaps my research will provide some sort of answer to these questions. Of course, the purpose of the research that I plan to conduct is not to educate students about the true purpose of the writing center; it is merely an examination of the change in how students perceive the writing center. Compared to North, Muriel Harris' "Talking in the Middle: Why Writers Need Writing Tutors" is a more optimistic take on the state of writing centers. Harris (1995) suggests that writing centers are more aligned with their central beliefs, a place where students can use their writing to benefit themselves in the long run. Harris writes, "Writing centers do not duplicate, usurp, or supplement writing or writing-across-the-curriculum classrooms" (Harris, 1995, p. 27). As Harris asserts, the goal of the writing center is not to help students rewrite their writing for them, but to let them rewrite their writing themselves. Tutors are there to facilitate discussion, guide the student, and answer any questions if need be. Tutors are *not* there to somehow automatically improve the grade of a paper. Consider the passage below by Harris (1995):

Students may not have come willingly and may (as is often the case) have come with inappropriate expectations that the tutor will fix the paper or show them what to do. Accordingly, they may initially be irritated or unhappy that the tutor's role is not to proofread the paper for them or tell them how to get a higher grade. But given a few minutes of tutorial conversation, students begin to see that the tutor can help them learn how to proofread or how to fix their papers. Every tutor has tales of students who turn sullen, morose, or even hostile when they learn that the tutor isn't a free editor, but who eventually calm down and join in the conversation about strategies they can use. (p. 29)

Lore provided by Harris suggests that yes, students have a flawed expectation of the writing center, and that when presented with reality, they change their expectations accordingly.

To me, this is the likely scenario that transpires when new student writers enters the writing center: at first, they don't understand the main tenets of the writing center, but they come to realize the differences between their pre-notions and reality.

“Writing is hard,” John Warner (2017) writes, in his article *We Know How to Teach Writing*. “Writing is a skill developed through deliberate practice that takes time and in reality never reaches an end point... Many, if not most, K-12 teachers are also burdened with far too many students and other demands on their time and spirit to provide the kind of one-on-one instruction that is optimal for writing instruction.” (Warner, 2017). Recounting my own anecdotal experience, it seems like students enjoy the one-on-one attention that they receive, and they are satisfied with the improvement of their writing *and* their ability to write. Students appreciate the patience and diligence that tutors strive for.

Given the right conditions, students can come to love the writing center. I have noticed that tutors in the writing center are always friendly and willing to help, and they keep the student's best interests at heart. Tutors are careful not to sound condescending or overly critical, and definitely give praise where it's deserved. Tutors work to try and establish a rapport with students. “Along with having their questions answered, students want a ‘feeling of camaraderie’” (Thompson, 2009, p. 82). This is actually a motivational scaffolding strategy. Students respond well with praise, and a negative reaction can be mitigated with relinquishing ownership to the student, or giving sympathy (Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2014). All the evidence so far suggests that students coming in want to not only improve their paper, but also to have a sense of companionship. Thompson and others also conducted a study on how students liked the writing center as whole, graded on the Likert Scale. (The Likert scale measures student's feedback on a scale of 1 to 6, one being extremely unsatisfactory, and 6 being excellent.) Students were

generally very comfortable with their sessions at the writing center, giving a high score of 5.30 (Thompson, 2009, p. 90). Student questions were also answered well, with a score of 5.21(Thompson, 2009, p. 90). However, tutor's expertise and positive feedback sections were lower, at a 4.97 and 4.74, respectively (Thompson, 2009, p. 90). Overall, students felt very satisfied with the writing center, and its attitudes towards students.

Again, what I want to examine is how students feel about the writing center, and how they think of the writing center. Is the writing center a positive resource? Does the student feel like the writing center provides them with significant help? Is the writing center friendly and approachable? As Bransford (2004) writes, "there is no universal best teaching method." (p. 22). While the writing center is just one of many places to enrich English and writing, I certainly think that it is a phenomenal place to gather thoughts and improve both student's writing and their writing skills. What I hope to see is that other students can see the writing center in a similar light.

Methods

To reach out the maximum amount of people, and to best answer my research questions, I decided to conduct a survey. The survey focuses on first-time students at the writing center. Unlike conducting interviews or reviewing transcripts of writing center sessions, surveys seemed like a optimal way to reach a lot of people and gather a lot of evidence for whatever conclusion I could be reaching.

Again, the survey was focused on first time students visiting the writing center. It asked questions to obtain basic demographic data, such as what class the student is in, or if they're a native speaker or a second language speaker. It also asked the student about comfort, as in if they enjoyed the writing center or not and would they come again. Finally, it asked the student what

the goal of the writing center is, and if their their perception changed after coming to the writing center. A copy of the survey can be found in the appendix.

I left physical copies of the survey in the writing center, and writing center consultants were notified of the survey. The plan was that tutors could present the students with the survey after a tutoring session, and the student would hand the survey to the writing center receptionist. I would collect all the surveys at the end of the semester. After I gathered the surveys, I transcribed the results into an excel worksheet and highlighted some trends.

There were some challenges associated with the research portion of the project; the main issue was that there was time constraints to collect enough data. To conduct an official academic survey, I had to complete the CITI training course and wait for IRB approval. Also, tutors also frequently forgot to hand out surveys to students, resulting in some lost opportunities to gather more data. In addition, new students have to compete with returning students at the writing center, especially at the end of the semester, when a multitude of writing related projects and assignments are due. All these issues led to an undesirably small amount of sample size, so it was rather difficult to draw solid conclusions based on the evidence (or lack thereof).

If a future student decides to attempt a survey, I would suggest working earlier through CITI training and obtaining IRB approval to proceed with the survey. If given the option, I would also be more aggressive in informing writing center tutors about the survey, so students are aware of the survey when they end their tutoring session.

Findings

Participants:

Out of the 7 students surveyed, there was 1 freshman, 1 sophomore, 3 seniors, and 2 graduate students. All the students surveyed were second language speakers.

Student Comfort:

Students were given an option to rate their enjoyment at the writing center from 1 to 10, 1 being least enjoyable and 10 being most enjoyable. The mean for the ratings was a 9.14 out of 10, and the median was a 9 out of 10.

Also worth noting that *all* the students, without exception, reported they would visit the writing center again.

Student Perception of the Writing Center's Purpose (before):

All of the 7 students, save one, surveyed came in with a draft revision for their essay. (Though, the one outlier student came into the writing center for "citation help", which arguably equates to draft revision.) However, the students had different initial opinions about the writing center's purpose.

- 1 student believed that the writing center is designed "to help me get a better grade on my assignment".
- 5 students believed that the writing center is designed "to improve my writing".
- 3 students believed that the writing center is designed "to help struggling students".
- 2 students believed that the writing center is for exclusively "resume building/personal statement revisions". Additionally, 1 student thought "resume building" was in addition to the services the writing center provides.

Student Perception of the Writing Center's Purpose (after):

4 students (out of 7) changed their priorities for their paper or assignment during their session at the writing center (for example, deciding to work on thesis revision instead of

grammar). Students were also given a scale they could rate how much they felt like they accomplished according to their goals before coming to the writing center from 1 to 10, 1 being not at all and 10 being they accomplished everything they set out to do. Most of the answers were satisfactory, with a mean of 7.86, and a median of 9.

However, none of the students changed their opinion about the purpose of the writing center. Two students amended their answer with an additional choice in their multiple choice. The updated opinions of the students are shown below:

- 2 students (from 1) believed that the writing center is “to help me get a better grade on my assignment”.
- 4 students (from 2) believed that the writing center is designed “to help struggling students”.
- 1 student (from 0) believed that the writing center is designed “to make friends”.

Discussion

The writing center at UIUC does many things right. It allows students to feel comfortable and at ease. It helps students discover their priorities in writing, or what they should focus on. All the students that answered the survey would visit the writing center again, which is a success in of itself. However, the writing center fails to educate students of its ultimate goals and intentions, a mantra coined by Stephen North and repeated across the nation: “our job is to create better writers, not better writing.” The evidence here is that none of the students changed their answer to “to improve my writing”. Granted, the two survey participants that did not select that particular answer in the survey were also upperclassmen (in one case, a grad student), so those

two could be focusing their attention on that particular aspect of the writing center.

Unfortunately, only loose assumptions can be made with the limited amount of data given.

A reminder: the survey sample size for this research is small. A total of 5 survey results were collected, hardly representative of the student population as a whole. However, some of the questions had unanimous answers, which still indicates a strong trend in their respective categories, and warrants further looking into. Therefore, I believe it's safe to assume the writing center at this institution is a positive environment in which students can feel safe to share their writing and are comfortable returning to. One student even felt trusting enough to believe the writing center is a place "to make friends".

Many students selected the survey option "to help struggling students". While the writing center does exist to help struggling students to some extent, I believe that the writing center has grander visions for its purpose. All students need writing tutors, even the excellent writers (Harris, 1995). The writing center and the tutors will try to help the student obtain a better grade on their assignment, but the primary focus is in helping the student help themselves via techniques acquired through class and through training. After all, tutors learn about the many methods of tutoring, such as cognitive and motivational scaffolding, the ability to recognize metacognition, how to write rhetorically, and even correct grammar application and practices.

Perhaps students that frequent the writing center have a better understanding of the workings and ultimate goal of the writing center. According to the data, however, some first time students fail to grasp that the writing center is less of a temporary workshop, and more of a learning classroom than a quick-fix pitstop. Perhaps tutors at the writing center could explain their intentions, a more long-run focused goal rather than an hour long proofreading session. Although this runs the risk of alienating the student, I believe we should trust our students to

pursue the spirit of learning, rather than become GPA seeking machines. As Harris writes, “the vast majority of students start on a more positive note.” (Harris, 1995, p. 28)

While it is good that the writing center is a place where students can easily access and feel at ease, the writing center could be at risk of losing its focus on how to better students. If the staff are not careful, the writing center could take steps backward and become the dystopian past that Stephen North describes in his “Idea of a Writing Center”.

References

- North, S. M. (1984). The Idea of a Writing Center. *College English*, 46(5), 433-446.
Retrieved from: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/377047>
- Harris, M. (1995). Talking in the Middle: Why Writers Need Writing Tutors. *College English*, 57(1), 27-42. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/378348>
- Warner, J. (2017, August 20). We Know How to Teach Writing [Web log post].
Retrieved October 10, 17, from <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/just-visiting/we-know-how-teach-writing>
- Thompson, I., Whyte, A., Shannon, D., Muse, A., Miller, K., Chappell, M., & Whigham, A. (2009). Examining Our Lore: A Survey of Students' and Tutors' Satisfaction with Writing Center Conferences. *The Writing Center Journal*, 29(1), 75-105. Retrieved October 10, 2017, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43442315>.
- Bransford, J. D., Brown, A. L., & Cocking, R. R. (2004). How people learn: Brain, mind, experience, and school. *Washington, DC: National Acad. Press.*
- Nordlof, J. (2014). Vygotsky, Scaffolding, and the Role of Theory in Writing Center Work. *Writing Center Journal; Fall/Winter 2015, Vol. 34(1)*, 45-64
- Harris, M. (1986). Strategies for Teaching One-to-One. *Teaching One-to-One: The Writing Conference*. 105-134..
- Mackiewicz, J., & Thompson, I. (2014). Instruction, Cognitive Scaffolding, and Motivational Scaffolding in Writing Center Tutoring. *Composition Studies*, 42.1, 54-78.

Appendix

Investigating the Experiences of First-time Students at the Writing Center

Thank you for taking time to complete this short survey. The aim of this survey is to examine student impressions of the writing center after their initial visit. We hope to improve students' first-time experience at the writing center and better understand students' impressions of the writing center.

1. Your Year:

- a. Freshman
- b. Sophomore
- c. Junior
- d. Senior
- e. Graduate student
- f. Other: _____

2. You are a...

- a. English Native Speaker
- b. Second Language Speaker

3. You came in the writing center for...

- a. Brainstorming
- b. Draft revision
- c. Final revisions
- d. Other: _____

4. Did your priorities change after you talked with your tutor? (For example, you came in to fix grammar, but you ended up working on thesis revision instead.)

a. No

b. Yes

5. Did you enjoy your experience at the writing center?

No	-	-	Kind of	-	-	Yes			
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

6. Did you accomplish what you wanted to do at the writing center?

No	-	-	Kind of	-	-	Yes			
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

7. Would you visit the writing center again?

- a. No
- b. Yes
- c. Maybe

8. Before your session, what did you think the goal of the writing center is? Mark all that apply:

- a. To help me get a better grade on my assignment
- b. To improve my writing
- c. To help struggling students
- d. Resume building/ Personal Statement revisions
- e. To make friends
- f. The writing center is not helpful and should be eliminated
- g. Other: (please write below)

9. After your session, what do you think the goal of the writing center is? Mark all that apply:

- a. To help me get a better grade on my assignment
- b. To improve my writing
- c. To help struggling students
- d. Resume building/ Personal Statement revisions
- e. To make friends

f. The writing center is not helpful and should be eliminated

g. Other: (please write below)

If you have any concerns, questions, or comments, please email awx2@illinois.edu. I thank you for your time and patience in filling out this survey.