

Philosophy of the Writing Center

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Abstract: The primary objectives of this paper are to discuss the history, benefits, and integration of Writing Centers(WCs) in institutions of higher learning. This analysis adopts the design of a literature review to scrutinize contemporary investigations on the role of WCs in improving learners' language competencies. Writing and reading may be a struggle for college students, especially ESL learners. The primary indicators of sentence and paragraph formation problems include the inability to come up with coherent writing. Understanding the ways in which the integration of the WCs has improved reading and writing among students in higher learning institutions requires a scrutiny of the historical developments of WC and their specific influence on college students. In conclusion, this analysis recommends partnerships between academic librarians and WCs administrators, an emphasis on individual assessment, and goal setting to establish what is expected of learners, as critical factors that foster the efficiency of WCs as educational resources.

Keywords: writing process, tools, assessment, efficiency

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I. PHILOSOPHY OF THE WRITING CENTER

The development of the WC can be traced back to the 20th century; however, the professionalization of these centers took place during the 1970s. Nevertheless, an examination of American institutions of higher learning reveal that language and learning programs were implemented way before the establishment of modern-day WCs, especially in conference and tutorial settings within the literary society. As explained by Waller (2002) [1], the literacy societies offered learners platforms through which they owed their allegiance to reason, and in their debates, disputations, and literary exercises, they imparted a tremendous vitality to the intellectual life of the colleges" (n.p). The notion of writing processes has been studied by numerous researchers since the 1970s.

The research by Ronesi (2019) [2] revealed that the process of writing is not tied to linear format but is perceived as a continuous process that allows the authors to develop, edit, and clarify concepts. A study by Ronesi (2019) [2] identifies stages of writing such as rehearsal, editing, and revision that are applied interchangeably and continuously by students to come up with meaningful content. Ronesi (2019) [2] concluded that non-professional writers often focus on the rules and standards of writing, which limits their self-expression abilities. On the other hand, skilled writers often generate their ideas, revise and reorganize thought processes before deciding on the content to use for their piece. The standard approach identifies the stages that foster the exploration of ideas and individual opinion regarding the topic in question. ESL classroom allows an opportunity to enhance the process approach as the tutors present the concept as a collective academic task rather than an individual endeavor (Ronesi, 2019 [2]). Group discussions and other brainstorming activities are often encouraged before the beginning of the writing process. Most ESL classes prepare the students for pre-writing, journal writing, and professional writing that is discussed with classmates and teachers.

In the past, Writing Centers were headed by peer tutors due to the institutions' emphasis on developing an intellectual individual who is capable of maintaining logical debates with peers. In addition to applying interactive reading and speaking lessons, the WC primarily focused on the process of writing with an ultimate goal of nurturing excellent authors who were not influenced by "the antitheses of generic, mass instruction" (Waller, 2002, n.p [1]). Thus, it appears that the original idea of establishing a writing center was to enhance learners' proficiency in terms of language and communication. In exploring issues that necessitated the founding and establishment of the WC in American Institutions, it is important to locate historical antecedents as presented by modern scholars. Waller (2002) [1] states that three key motivations for the development of WC include: the need to support writing skills in students across technical curriculums; provide platforms for remediation; cater for classroom outgrowths. There are currently ongoing debates on the philosophy of the WCs and how they have improved learning process in American colleges and universities. However, this paper will focus on the discussion of how WCs can be integrated into higher learning institutions to enable learners to perfect their writing skills.

II. ANALYZING THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE WRITING CENTERS

According to Tiruchittampalam, Ross, Whitehouse, and Nicholson (2018) [3], writing development stages are viewed as nonlinear, but hierarchical at various levels, for example, a particular stage could involve idea of refinement and critical thinking. The social theories of content creation also perceive writing as a reflection of shared values and contextual conventions of the writer's experiences and interactions of the person. An operational view of the process involves the transition from the general knowledge of the topic to the review of the relevant literature. Moreover, proficiency requires the development of answers that respond to the topic in question and content revision to meet the standards of writing.

Tiruchittampalam et al. (2018) [3] introduce the idea of Higher Order Concerns (HOCs) which define the ability of a writer to generate content, logical flow of argument, organization of ideas, and the overall comprehensive work. On the other hand, Lower Order Concerns (LOC) include factors such as grammatical issues and lexical mistakes. Tiruchittampalam et al. (2018)[3] reflect on writing as a continuous event that involves an evaluation of ideas, formation of logical connection between sub-goals, generation of content, and revision. During the writing consultations, the course instructors are often encouraged to teach the students the recursive and evaluative processes as the ideas of writing.

Sanford (2012) [4] points out that the 21st-century Writing Centers are founded on social interactionism and expressivism philosophies. The theory of expressivism supports the students' path to self-discovery as they create different types of authentic writing, thus advocating for consistent engagement between tutors and learners. On the other hand, the interactionism model stresses the social aspect of collaborative writing processes, alongside the relationship between instructors and their students as co-learners. The author states that:

Students navigate a process for bringing their own ideas to fruition that includes both individual exploration (as in student-led sessions in which tutors make liberal use of the Socratic method to draw out student writers' intuitions about writing) and participation in a dialogue that brings ideas into beneficial conversation (as in peer-review sessions facilitated by writing tutors)(Sanford, 2012, p.2 [4]).

These assertions mean that the concept of Writing Centers are not merely formative and are aimed at ensuring that students relate to their written content, rather than focusing on submitting grammatically correct papers.

III. THE ROLE OF WRITING CENTERS IN ADVANCING STUDENTS' WRITING SKILLS

The process of writing has several stages that include content gathering, drafting, editing, and revising. In an examination of the effectiveness of WCs in assisting learners with writing skills, Tiruchittampalam et al. (2018) [3] noted that writing centers including the Middle East and North Africa Writing Center Alliance and the International Writing Centers Association provide technology-based resources to the growing number of ESL learners. For instance, the one-on-one tutorials provided to learners from across the globe create an optimal and unique opportunity for becoming an excellent writer. The primary principles that underscore the operations of WCs across and outside the US include the provision of customized consultations that are led by learners. These discussions usually require participating students to submit written samples to their instructors, demonstrate their understanding of the goals of scheduled educational meetings, and collaborate with both instructors and peers in accomplishing the necessary tasks. Since the relationship between learners and teachers in WCs are usually non-hierarchical, students are enabled to provide feedback without fear of judgment or prejudice. WC administrators and affiliated instructors assist writers in achieving long-term goals in creative and analytical writing. Moreover, WCs have been confirmed to enlighten learners on synthesizing peer feedback as an acculturation technique to ensure a smooth transitioning to the future discourse community.

For most students, writing is a complex task that requires utmost commitment and dedication. Ziegler (2009) [5] emphasizes that the authenticity of writing should reflect the processes of thinking, pre-writing, enlisting, and revising. According to Ziegler (2009) [5], students require peer feedback and the opportunity to present their ideas to third parties as a way of testing the practicality of their writing styles. Most importantly, educators should note that little guidance is crucial even for proficient writers. Ziegler (2009) [5] incorporates a statement released by the NCTE which maintained that:

NCTE members recognized the important contribution writing centers have made to the success of many students at all levels of education. Be it, therefore, resolved, that the National Council of Teachers of English endorse the principle that the establishment of a writing center should be a long-term commitment on the part of an institution, including stable budgeting and full academic status(Ziegler, 2009, p.8 [5]).

The capacity of WCs to offer college or university learners the academic support needed to attain the status of experienced writers has been confirmed by numerous educational explorations. The study by Robinson (2009) [6] that focused on the York College Writing Center uncovered that a majority of learners exhibited basic writing skills as shown from the educational and philological profiles. According to Robinson (2009) [6], contemporary discussions of WC's practice and philosophy usually concentrate on how well these centers are managed within an academic institution. Moreover, scholars often look to establish the balance between

providing efficient services to both faculty and students, while maintaining pedagogic instructional styles, and teacher-student relationships. The concept of WC has become the center of discussion concerning how tutors can provide instructions and support the development of writing skills for ESL students. Nevertheless, there seems to be a consensus that little has been done to examine how regular and below-average writers can use these WCs and advance their learning.

The main focus for WCs has been to assist native and international learners in expanding their focus beyond fulfilling their tutors' instructions and meeting the immediate goals of education. Writing centers have also helped students view writing as an intricate process that allows them become members of the elite communities. As emphasized by Robinson (2009) [6], WCs also provide students with means by which they embrace their language identities, while enabling learners to synthesize their thoughts with those presented in literary works. Nevertheless, it is important to note that even excellent writers sometimes find difficulties drawing the line between their "authentic thoughts" and the academic form of thinking that is required by the instructors. Robinson (2009) [6] stated that the challenges experienced by ESL students trying to utilize WCs might arise due to difficulties aligning their cultural values with the stylistic demands within American higher learning institutions. These types of challenges affect both resident and international students. Writing centers also enable learners to carry out one-on-one interactions through which they point out reservations, frustrations, achievements, and doubts associated with their assignments and academic relationships.

According to Ziegler (2009) [5], most students require face-to-face discussions which are not often conducted within the classroom, not because of inexperienced or untrained teachers but due to the structure of curriculums which require complete teachers' dedication to be accomplished within a restricted amount of time. Secondary school teachers are the most affected by limited office hours, which makes it impossible to organize one-on-one discussions with their students. Therefore, WCs have become a trusted place where instructors refer students who require extra course-related assistance. Certainly, learners have managed to use the resources provided by WCs to prepare for competency tests that they must undertake throughout their studying. Considering the pressure on teachers to facilitate and monitor homogeneous test scores, the relief that is provided by WCs cannot be underscored.

IV. INTEGRATING WRITING CENTERS AT THE UNIVERSITY

The integration of WCs in institutions of higher learning requires academicians, teachers, and administrators to set in place short and long-term goals. Sanford (2012) [4] identifies five goals and best practices for WCs, following a study conducted in the Writing Center at the University of New Mexico (UNM). Sanford (2012) [4] mentions that the success of the University of New Mexico is based on the capability of lecturers to provide learners with the necessary guidance. The UNM Writing Center is part of the institution's Center for Academic Program Support, which allows students to seek essential support from tutors without having to place appointments. Learners in the UNM WC can stay for several minutes to hours in the facility's workstations, which usually accommodate 4-6 learners at a time. However, the most crucial characteristic of the WC is its high level of staffing by peer tutors and receptionists, who guide on a needs basis. By incorporating the help of student tutors, the UNM Writing Center maintains a peer dynamic.

Sanford(2012) [4] recommends that institutions looking forward to establish productive WCs should encourage learners to adopt the perception that writing is a process. Regardless of the inclination by academic centers to advertise WCs as platforms that allow both tutors and learners to seek help at any phase of writing, it is vital for students to understand that a complete draft is a result of extensive brainstorming, analysis, presentation, and revision. Tutors who only focus on the end products of creative or analytical writing reinforce in students the idea that the main procedures involved in writing are only valuable insofar as they generate complete texts. In this way, instead of having learners comment on parts of a whole essay such as the concluding paragraphs or thesis statements, instructors should encourage students to make suggestions for writing improvements and note down key points being made by fellow writers by re-reading and analyzing the paper. As Sanford (2012) [4] maintains:

Knowledge of the process of planning, crafting, and revising written communication is an essential aspect of development for college writers. Tutors engaged with a completed draft see only an outcome of this process. In working with student writers who are actively writing and pre-writing, tutors can engage with the writing process itself, diagnosing issues related to how students approach writing (Sanford, 2012, p.4 [4]).

Secondly, Ziegler (2009) [5] states that it is crucial to investigate how staff members and learners throughout institutions of higher learning perceive the efficacy of WCs. Although establishing a Writing Center is an excellent idea for academic institutions with ESL or International students, its positive impact can only be far-reaching if it adequately engages students and teachers by informing them about its benefits. The most crucial step is encouraging collaboration between the parties involved. A practical way of boosting cohesion is having peer consultants distribute fliers and organize for presentations within the school, which enlightens

learners on the evidence-based benefits of WCs. Once crucial stakeholders are brought on board, they are then capable of urging more learners to utilize resources provided within the WCs.

Similarly, consultants must use presentations as platforms to de-mystify the notion that educational discussions within the writing centers are guided by strangers and must involve pen and paper. According to Ziegler (2009) [5], “anyone coming to the Writing Center can come with anything related to writing and the writing process. Not every student came in with a paper; some just wanted help with ideas, brainstorming, organization” (p. 42). The roles of WC administrators include guiding learners on how they can tackle questions, and not merely edit these papers. Ziegler (2009) [5] also adds that advertisement may be done through special events, fliers, bulletins, and weekly announcements on the school’s website.

After marshaling support for the WC from students and tutors, the next step in the integration of the writing center should involve creating new spaces in which learners feel comfortable discussing their reading, writing, and comprehension matters. Archer and Richards (2011) [7] maintain that WCs should be “non-directive, confidential, a place that is not directly connected to grades or evaluation, a place that allows for pause and preparation” (p.22). Therefore, writing centers should somewhat cater to the needs of average and below-average learners in ways that help them dissociate from the idea that remedial writing and reading are punishments for the underachievers. Most importantly, learners should not feel discriminated based on factors such as race while striving to improve learning in these centers.

Racial and cultural inclusivity can be achieved if students and tutors are included in teams that facilitate the formulation of operational guidelines and terms of service, which are then applied indiscriminately. Although including students in the decision-making process may be beneficial in promoting peer culture in a writing center, it increases administrative risks for institutional heads. Archer and Richards (2011) [7] reaffirmed that creating a student culture will foster the implementation of visionary projects that could not have otherwise been achieved. Thus, managing a WC that seeks to educate students can significantly assist learners in making informed choices, and participate in relevant improvement initiatives.

The third fundamental step should include understanding and upholding the power of both group and individual identities by supporting face-to-face conversations as tools of intellectual exploration. Discussions between tutors and students should be seen as the beginning of the formation of an intricate network of learners who are eager to develop each other’s reading and writing skills, thus resulting in general academic improvements. The role of students’ networks cannot be undermined, especially in encouraging new thought processes. Archer and Richards (2011) [7] state that the bases of the South African intellectual debates are centered on the construction of collective or personal student identities, and the perceptions that culture and language are fundamental resources that learners can use to improve study outcomes. In most instances, learners tend to perceive tradition and culture as factors that shape their attitudes. In quoting a point made by Hall (1994) [8], Archer and Richard (2011) [7] agree that “cultural identities are not an essence but a positioning; identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (p. 24). Moreover, students are constantly seeking ways of disengaging themselves from their pasts and getting immersed in dialogic constructions that can transform their future.

Mullin (2001) [9] proposes several best practices that would foster the integration of Writing Centers in academic institutions. Mullin (2001) [9] used writing research outcomes from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA), in addition to extensive data analysis to establish effective ways of managing students’ WCs. According to the author, effective WCs must have features including meaning-constructing tasks, interactivity, and well-thought-of expectations for peer tutors and students. Providing learners with interactive components allows students to brainstorm ideas before drafting them on paper and presenting them to peers and colleagues for feedback, in addition to enabling valuable course work discussions between readers and writers. Furthermore, promoting meaning-construction is an efficient way of allowing learners to critically analyze issues and reflect on problems that affect their roles as readers and writers. Lastly, Mullin (2001) [9] emphasizes that the writing prompts should lay out the rubrics, grading criteria, and course outcomes that allow students to understand their role in the whole writing process.

Barbour, Burns, Hoffmann, Klompien, and Lenker (2009) [10] elaborate on the significance of fostering extensive collaboration between writing centers and academic libraries within the same institution. According to Barbour et al. (2009) [10], writing is a naturally research-intensive process that requires cooperation between personnel managing the two entities to attain the set writing standards. The interrelatedness revealed by numerous researches is an indication of the possible significance of unifying the programming of writing centers and university libraries as critical learning resources for students. For the past one and a half-decade, the use or significance of libraries has continuously deteriorated due to the predominant perception among college students that libraries provide only superfluous information as compared to online educational sites. A successful technique for becoming accustomed to the merger between the roles of the library and that of a writing center involves offering an interactive and holistic environment in which learners receive the necessary assistance from academic coaches, IT professionals, and librarians. Contemporary scholars posit that when writing centers and

libraries operations are aligned, they gain an increased capacity to offer advanced presentational, insightful, and explorative support to students.

Besides supporting intellectual exchanges between librarians and writing center administrators, Barbour et al. (2009) [10] suggest the sharing of central meeting space to allow learners to benefit access necessary assistance between both groups. The intertwined nature of writing and research raises increased opportunities for peer tutors and instructors to present and discuss frequently asked questions regarding reading and writing best practices, among other topics. Barbour et al. (2009) [10] suggest that “it is much easier to make an effective referral if the desired service is a few feet away rather than in another part of campus. Furthermore, writing centers, in particular, stand to benefit from having a presence within the learning commons” (p. 189). In most colleges and universities, libraries are often situated in central locations from where they can be accessed by all students, tutors, and other faculty members. Therefore, establishing writing centers within the libraries have the potential of providing convenient and visible services, which include a wide range of academic support for students. Even though physical proximity between writing centers and libraries promotes the chances of collaboration between students and faculty members, Barbour et al. (2009) [10] insist that the failure to integrate these facilities does not necessarily mean that each is likely to fail in achieving its set objectives when operating as a single entity.

Researchers, including Elmborg and Hook (2005) [11], and Johnson, Clapp, Ewing, and Buhler (2011) [12] have also demonstrated their support for partnerships between institutional administrators, educational coaches, and students. According to these authors, having a joint mission towards improving information literacy among learners is a fundamental step in attaining academic competence. Elmborg and Hook (2005) [11] assert that both writing centers and libraries are spaces that traditionally supported outside-the-classroom learning. Rader (2019) [13] also cited that encouraging valuable partnerships between peer tutors, librarians, and administrators improves the chances of one engaging in community programs that require collective participations. However, Johnson et al. (2011) [12] note that academic institutions must also balance collaboration with individual-based content understanding and use. At times, it is crucial for learners to make the first decisions concerning whether or not to use the WCs. As identified by Salem (2016) [14], voluntary engagements with the personnel and use of services provided in these centers increase the likelihood of learners to use these facilities. Thus, the success of WCs depends on the level of personal ownership and involvement that each party associates with these educational centers.

V. THE ROLE OF INDIVIDUALIZED ASSESSMENTS IN WRITING CENTERS

The last five years were marked by a growing demand for university writing centers as the institutions needed to develop and examine the learning outcomes for their students. Consequently, there were reports of idea based activities and increased student engagement among the writers compared to consultants. The results suggest that the student learners have understood the concept of the high level of development essential for their writing. The outcome also illustrates the application of social cognitive theories during the writing and emphasizes the significance of conversations in establishing the link between language and thought that are combined to develop knowledge. Increased knowledge about the writing conventions and terminologies is also evidence to prove that the student writers utilize their high levels of cognitive development as a catalyst for thinking and learning.

Professional writing centers have conducted surveys to assess the papers done by students before and after the completion of the courses. A study by Neaves (2011) [15] proposed the assumptions that should guide the assessment of writing centers emphasizing that process should be based on whether or not the institutions have played a role in improving the learners writing knowledge. However, the use of outcome-focused approach to the examination may not be objective in gauging the level of support offered to the students by the learning centers. A different strategy that incorporates the evaluation of learning goals in the writing process is required. The new approach will enhance the student's communication, critical thinking, and content generating abilities. The learners will, therefore, be strengthened as holistic professionals rather than mere writers.

Neaves (2011) [15], also suggests that student-oriented learning outcomes should be the primary focus for writing centers. The approach incorporates the process, attitudinal, cognitive, and affective goals that steer the tutors away from the assessment of levels of confidence and final student outcomes. The author also emphasizes the significance of evaluations at the learning center using different methods and up to two research questions every year. On the outcome-oriented assessment, that author proposes that the evaluators should shift the attention from outcome measurements to documentation using indicators or evidence. Suitable tools include satisfaction surveys, exit interviews, and observations.

During the creation of assessment tools, the contributions by Neaves (2011) [15], are significant in guiding the process and providing the principles to be followed by the writing centers. Firstly, the evaluators should begin by understanding the audience and setting clear assessment goals. Secondly, they should ensure the activity adheres to the institution's objectives and values. Thirdly, the investigator should be inquisitive and

proactive during the evaluation exercise. Fourthly, the assessor should also be flexible and remain open to the answers that he/she did not expect. Lastly, there should be a presentation plan.

According to Neaves(2011) [15], the evaluation process should be context-specific and situational. Most institutional administrators require quantitative data to examine the broader variables. However, the approach does not often provide an in-depth reflection of the quality of learning among the students. Neaves(2011) [15], additionally emphasizes the proactivity of the professional institutions in the assessment process. The author suggests that the evaluators should control the process rather than rely on the principles borrowed from outside. Additionally, the institutions should be prepared for unexpected findings and build on the outcomes to improve their writing centers.

The assessors should also seek the services of consultants to help them in developing research questions that are relevant to the issues that affect the particular writing center. Neaves(2011) [15], also recommends that the professionals should coordinate the survey activities and data analysis processes to support the evaluation efforts. A tutor-led evaluation conducted by Neaves (2011) [15], composed research questions for different participant groups that included the faculty, consultants, and clients. The stakeholders were asked about their opinions regarding writing and the learning institution. The author further requests the consultants to examine the records of the writing centers and assess the practice to gather insights about the learning experience.

Additional findings by Neaves (2011) [15], reveal that the differences between the students and the consultants concerning faculty expectations and confusion among the tutors regarding the writing process, limit the assessment of a learning center. In some cases, the anticipations of the writing center are varied and not aligned with the vision and goals of the organization. The consultants play a significant role in helping the learners at different writing stages by assessing their progress and offer advice for improvement. Since the institutional administrators focus on the growth of writing by analyzing the outcome of the assessments, the professionals in the field need to evaluate the product and the process that develop the students writing skills.

Lastly, the evaluation of the writing products that are affected by other factors such as external reviewers, classroom sessions, and tutor feedback may be difficult and does not yield accurate outcomes of success. Moreover, the assessment of a learner's writing from the perspective of the writing center can produce misleading results. The association of student performance to the learning institution overlooks the diverse nature of writing and the contributions of the instructor as well as the peers who encouraged the learner outside the institution. Professionals attached to the learning centers have a critical role in establishing and differentiating the product and process assessments; to promote the development of students into skillful writers.

VI. CONCLUSION

For decades, both academic libraries and Writing Centers have been used by institutions of higher learning to prove a safe, inclusive, and supportive environment for learners who need to conduct course-related studies. The primary advantages of the writing center are their ability to develop learners' intellectual capabilities by providing the necessary resources required to sustain logical debates, research vast topics, and maintain positive interpersonal interactions with colleagues. However, the original idea of establishing Writing Centers was to improve ESL students' communicative skills and language proficiency. WCs became increasingly important due to the increased need by academic institutions to foster out-of-class learning and support learners' self-actualization by allowing students to explore their ideas in an educational context. The first step to ensuring the efficiency of WCs, particularly for international non-native English-speaking students is to help learners understand that writing is a process that comprises different stages including brainstorming, listing, drafting, and revising. The success of one process dramatically determines whether or not the works submitted by students meet universal standards for excellent, insightful writing. Writing Centers require students to take part in one-on-one discussions which cannot be conducted within the fixed lesson schedules. The most affected in their capacity to provide reading and writing assistance to ESL learners are high school teachers who are required to offer an extensive scope of course contents within a restricted time.

This paper also extensively examined best practices for the integration of Writing Centers in higher learning institutions and ensuring their effectiveness in facilitating students' academic achievements. The main themes that emerged following an intensive literature review included the need to set operational goals and objectives that govern the operations of the writing centers. Learners must understand rules and regulations that guide their actions within these educational settings. Other educational scholars whose works have been examined in this analysis proposed the formulation of performance expectations for each learner. Other recommendations for the integration of WCs in universities and colleges have urged for partnerships between academic libraries and writing centers, to create a convenient one-stop-venue where students quickly access necessary study resources.

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