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The Connection between Reading and Writing in the Writing Center Environment

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Abstract

The connection between reading confidence and writing ability is heavily supported by the broader framework of pedagogical research, allowing it to be applied to a context specific to the writing center environment. However, writing tutoring through writing center consultations often focuses on the strengths and weaknesses of the writer, which treats writing as an individual, isolated process rather than as a process interconnected with the experience of reading. Specific to the Fredrick Meijer Center for Writing and Michigan Authors, whose mission statement explicitly relies on the crafting of confident and self-sufficient writers, special focus should be placed on the importance of reading assistance. By analyzing writing theorists, education theorists, and writing center professionals, all who connect success in writing with confidence and success in reading, this paper will advocate for the stronger emphasis on reading tutoring within the writing center framework. This analysis points out the limitations in strictly focusing on writing improvement, and discloses the benefits of widening the scope of Grand Valley's Fredrick Meijer Center for Writing and Michigan Author's practice to additionally emphasize reading tutoring.

The Connection between Reading and Writing in the Writing Center Environment

My first week as a writing consultant left me both eager to make a change in students' lives and nervous for the heavy responsibility suddenly bestowed on me as a tutor. Thanks to the hours of training that followed my formal employment at the Fredrick Meijer Center for Writing and Michigan Authors, I felt confident in being able to handle a variety of different hypothetical writing scenarios. However, I recognized that handling a hypothetical writing situation was very different from working with a real student as a tutor, and as I approached my first week of consulting, anxiety overwhelmed me.

One of the first students I worked with in the opening week of my writing center career was frustrated with a paper asking him to analyze the "Allegory of the Cave" from *The Republic*. The "Allegory of the Cave" was not fresh in my mind and, in order to begin the consultation, I asked him a few questions about the content of the piece. I hoped that this conversation would help refresh my memory of the piece while simultaneously sparking possible ideas for beginning the analysis paper itself. However, it became increasingly obvious that, every time I asked the student a question about the piece, he would flip through his notes in order to locate an adequate response. This routine continued for a few minutes before he admitted to me that he had not actually read the text. Instead, he copied down a summary and a list of themes from a study website. He went on to defend that he had truly tried to read the "Allegory of the Cave" on his own, but he did not understand the text. Frustrated and not understanding how to approach the reading, the student resorted to online study guides as a supplement.

I found myself sitting with this student at a complete loss for what to do. I had spent my training as a writing consultant focusing on how to make students better writers, but what was my role in helping students become better readers? This student had sought help for writing

assistance, but I could not begin to help him with his paper until he had a solid understanding of the reading that he was supposed to analyze. I could clearly see the role that I needed to play in terms of reading assistance, yet I had no idea how to approach that role as a writing-specific tutor.

The ability of a student to analyze a text and accurately convey their subsequent opinions through writing is central to many college classes: reading classical works in English courses for textual analyses, writing a response to scientific study, composing a literary analysis to support a research endeavor. Writing centers aim at helping students develop their writing abilities, but what if students are not prepared to critically analyze text in the first place? With many students improperly prepared for college readings, what can the role of a writing center be in terms of helping students strengthen their abilities as readers?

A better writer cannot emerge unless the student is simultaneously aided into becoming a better reader. However, despite the dependency that the two subjects have on each other, both writing center practice and college pedagogy places a heavier emphasis on writing abilities. In neglecting to emphasize the symbiotic nature between reading and writing, college students who are expected to write at a college level may not have the scaffolding necessary for college-level analysis work. With writing centers aiming to make students better, more confident writers, it becomes increasingly important to examine the link that reading has in improving a student's overall writing abilities.

The Fredrick Meijer Center for Writing and Michigan Authors

Grand Valley State University's Fredrick Meijer Center for Writers and Michigan Authors (FMCWMA) is the writing center of focus for the purpose of this paper. The center has a long history, operating for 36 years under a variety of innovative leaders who maintain a

flexible writing center pedagogy, allowing culture changes to accordingly shift their approach to consultations. The flexibility of the center, along with its consistent commitment towards “helping students become better writers,” (Writing Center History, 2014) makes the FMCWMA a prime candidate for analysis. The FMCWMA accepts critique and suggestions from student employees on a regular basis, applying employee input for the betterment of the students that the writing center serves.

The FMCWMA conveys the ideology of its writing center in easily locatable sections of its website (gvsu.edu/wc). The website initially displays the role that writing consultants have in the writing process, stating that the writing center consultants are “here to assist you with any writing project, at any stage of your writing process. The center’s well-trained peer consultants can help you brainstorm ideas, organize content, integrate research, polish a draft, and correctly document sources” (Writing Center Home, 2015). The website further details that consultants are formally trained in guiding students through the writing process, stating that consultants take part in “a two day orientation, a one-credit academic course, and ongoing trainings throughout the academic year” (Mission Statement, 2014). These trainings help consultants become more familiar with the writing center environment, guiding them through the process of effectively asking questions in order to solidify writing goals, understand the assignment to the greatest extent possible, and address the writer’s struggles and reasons for seeking guidance (Mission Statement, 2014).

Not only are consultants trained to help students with the editing of texts, the FMCWMA explicitly trains consultants to employ metacognitive strategies during peer consultations. Consultants are told to read texts rhetorically in order to help the consulted student better reflect on the writing process. This reflection, according to Herrington, Parker, and Boase-Jelinek

(2014), is critical to an authentic learning experience, which allows for students to approach a new topic with the intention of improvement (p. 24). Reflection also allows students to gain control over their own learning and, as the authors continue to note, “is intentional and purposeful. It is necessary to successfully complete complex learning challenges such as those required by an authentic task set in an authentic context” (p. 25). Using these rhetorical strategies, consultants are able to model thinking reflectively about the writing process, which showcases that writing is both meaningful and purposeful. Since writing is purposeful, complexly drawing from experience and applying that experience to a new medium, talking about writing improvement requires this consistently reflexive attitude.

By modeling and guiding students through the metacognition of the writing process, writing consultants at the FMCWMA are trained to live up to the center’s mission statement: “The goal of these writing consultations is to help writers help themselves—not just with that single piece of writing, but also to become better writers overall” (Mission Statement, 2014). However, the website’s primary focus is on the goal of writing improvement. The website only refers to students as writers, advertises in helping students with all parts of writing processes, and never focuses on the benefits of coupling reading with writing. This disconnect between students as a reader and students as a writer is evident in the development of the FMCWMA website.

With the FMCWMA aiming towards making students better, more self-sufficient writers, examining any possible way of improving the writing center’s approach with the intent on aiding students with the reading process would serve dual purposes. First, students seeking assistance would be able to receive a broad range of services, both through reading comprehension and writing composition. As an added benefit, consultants would be better diversified in the services they can offer, better individualizing their services for student needs.

Connections with research

Looking at the similarities between reading and writing sets up the groundwork for examining the processes as two heavily intertwined subjects. Cynthia Chamblee (1998), an educator of developmental reading, describes the link between reading and writing by denoting them as incredibly similar processes. According to Chamblee, reading and writing both require a student to construct and reconstruct meaning, and both “include stages of planning, drafting, and revising” (p. 533). Expanding on this comparison, both reading and writing require students to plan by drawing on their prior knowledge. In addition, this planning stage asks students to acknowledge what the purpose of the reading or writing endeavor is, allowing the student to find a concrete direction from which to approach the reading or writing from. As students continue into the drafting stage, both readers and writers self-monitor their progress and understanding of the topic they are analyzing. This self-monitoring allows for both readers and writers to understand what is working in their approach, and what needs to be amended in order to successfully complete the given task. As the drafting stage concludes, students begin revising their work upon its initial completion—whether they have completed reading their piece or completed their first draft of writing. This revision process, for both subjects, requires students to consider and apply new information that may change or deepen their level of understanding on the subject (p. 533).

In further aligning the processes of reading and writing, Gear (2006) points out the qualities of successful reading in ways that align reading to the FMCWMA’s writing-specific mission statement. Most notably, Gear examines the metacognitive nature of reading, which allows students to better “interact with the text and enhance meaning” (p. 9). As with writing, metacognitive awareness while reading allows for reading itself to have a purpose; it allows for

students to “have an awareness, or an understanding, that their brain needs to be doing specific things while they’re reading” in order to make a text more meaningful (p. 17).

However, equally important as the similarities between reading and writing are the differing elements that make the two processes unique. These different characteristics each support each other in complementary ways; the uniqueness of reading helps strengthen writing, and vice versa. Chamblee (1998) further delves into this connection by utilizing the ideas of Pearson (1994), who suggests that reading and writing are also independent, yet heavily interconnected in a variety of aspects. Pearson initially states that reading allows for writers to critically examine their own constructed work, which is seen in consultants modeling rhetoric reading strategies within their consultations. In terms of modeling, Pearson goes on to state that reading further models different applications of genre, style, voice, structure, organization, and miscellaneous grammar rules. Perhaps most notably, he states that “reflection on how meaning is created during writing helps the reader better understand the role he or she must play in the construction of meaning while reading” (qtd. in Chamblee, 1998, p. 533). Reading, then, acts as a model and supplement for the writing process, allowing students to learn new writing applications while simultaneously reflecting on their own writing process.

Noting these latent similarities and connections between reading and writing, it is no surprise that many educational theorists oppose the separation of these two processes in both educational practices and rhetoric. As advocated by Salvatori (1983), reading and writing should not be taught as separate functions, since such separation could be potentially dangerous to developing writers who may see the two subjects as contrasting elements (p. 657). Students who lack the ability to note the interplay between reading and writing cannot benefit from the increased comprehension and composition abilities that result from that interplay. Subsequently,

without the proper scaffolding that results from the simultaneous development of both subjects, students will become stunted in their ability to develop their skills within the realms of reading and writing. Salvatori continues to advocate that both processes utilized together will allow for both reading and writing to be developed in a properly scaffolded way that exceeds the individual teaching of the subjects. Specifically, Salvatori states that instructors should explicitly focus on “how to teach composition so as to benefit from the interrelationship of the two activities” (p. 659).

However, despite these obvious connections, reading and writing are weighted differently within the educational sphere. A lack of integration of reading and a heavier focus on the product of writing causes students to fall behind in their reading abilities, which further limits their growth as a writer. This lack of explicit integration begins as early as middle school, and continues on through secondary education. As stated by Penny Kittle (2013), a high school English teacher and educational theorist, “[Teachers] think that about 20% or fewer of their students actually read the literature assigned” (p. 15). Although many secondary schools are working towards correcting this problem, placing heavier emphases on reading programs and library funding, students are still entering college at a disadvantage in their literacy scaffolding.

Moats (2012) further states that the Common Core State Standards, enacted in 2009, place higher emphases on complex reading skills. However, this shift towards rigorous standards subsequently leaves 40% of students classified as “at risk” for reading performance (p. 16). These struggling students become further left behind, since the standards provide no guidance on how to individually accommodate for variations in reading comprehension. As Moats states, “The implication that these students will learn to read better if they are simply handed more

complex and difficult texts, and asked to function like students who learn to read easily, is wishful—and harmful—thinking” (p. 16).

As Salvatori (1983) states, “The reading of elaborate texts remains the province of knowledgeable critics whose expertise inexperienced students can only vaguely imitate through the memorization of an empty literacy nomenclature, achieving at best knowledge *about* rather than *through* literature” (p. 658). College students are expected to have the reading skills necessary to adequately produce college-level writing, yet the lack of proper reading scaffolding leaves students at a disadvantage. With students falling behind in reading comprehension early on, they lack the linguistic scaffolding required to tackle college level texts. Equally detrimental is that, due to the interconnectedness between reading and writing, this lack of reading ability further damages the scaffolding required for students to confidently engage in college level writing tasks.

Suggestions for FMCWMA improvement

How writing tutoring is approached by consultants, then, must reflect the interrelated nature of reading and writing, since a student who struggles as a reader will also struggle as a writer, and a struggling writer will struggle as a reader. Further, with students’ writing largely focusing on the comprehension, analysis, and integration of multiple readings, this interrelated nature becomes further multi-layered in the college environment. Consultants must constantly analyze a students’ abilities as both a reader and as a writer

Since the two processes are so inherently interlinked, a student cannot succeed in one without simultaneously succeeding in the other. A primary job of a writing tutor should be to scaffold both processes to be on a similar level of ability, which will then allow students to improve their abilities as both a writer and as a reader. However, due to this interrelated nature,

diagnosing a student as needing a heavier tutoring emphasis on reading instruction rather than writing instruction is a difficult task, especially in a tutoring environment traditionally focused on weighing more attention towards specific writing strategies.

In order to help bring confidence to the task of aiding students in a reading environment, the FMCWMA can address and critically evaluate many different reading-instruction oriented options. What will best apply to the FMCWMA environment will vary depending on the time available for training, funds available for training experiences, and the assistance that student clientele ask for from the writing center. However, by proposing these suggestions, the FMCWMA will have many options to analyze for the sake of expanding their reach as a writing center. As all writing center environments are incredibly variable depending on their student body, the FMCWMA would be able to adapt its own practice based on the experience of other writing centers in the area who embrace reading in a more in-depth manner. However, based on the scholarly theories presented and the examples from other writing center environments, it would be beneficial for the FMCWMA to examine a few preliminary possibilities for the integration of reading emphases. These possibilities have been developed based on the previous theories presented in this proposal, and have theoretical groundwork based in both educational and tutor-specific ideologies.

Training opportunities and pinpointing struggling readers

Many writing consultants at the FMCWMA do not feel confident in addressing readers' needs. Many employees do not fall into the disciplines of English, Writing, or Education, and rely on their current writing-specific training in order to work with students. A primary concern for the writing center, then, would be the integration of reading-specific training in terms of professional development workshops and initial staff training. This training would

simultaneously allow a reading-based discourse among consultants, who would be better equipped to discuss different ideas about how to approach reading-centered consultations. For instance, specific workshops could focus on reading scholarly essays, reading narrative works, and comprehending works in order to approach an analysis assignment.

In terms of initial training, consultants could focus on the ability to specifically pinpoint whether the student they are working with is struggling with a reading-focused or a writing-focused problem. Initially identifying a student as struggling in reading proficiency would immediately require the consultation to focus on comprehension strategies. Vacca and Padak describe specific characteristics that pinpoint the struggling reader, noting that these students have a tendency to avoid reading whether or not they should have developed cognitive skills (as cited in Chamblee, 1998, p. 532). Additionally, Vacca and Padak note that struggling readers also feel as though they lack control over their own reading, and have little metacognitive awareness about the reading process. They struggle to understand what it means to be a reader, and have an even lesser understanding about how to use material that they have read. Their self-efficacy is reflected in their inability to see themselves as a ‘good’ reader, and due to this lack of self-efficacy, students do not believe that they will be able to develop into better readers (p. 532). Supported by Corkett, Blaine, and Benevides (2011), students who lack confidence in their own reading abilities suffer from lower performances in reading overall, while students with increased confidence and positive views of their reading performance exert fewer difficulties with reading.

Modelling reading through the use of model texts

The integration of model texts within the writing center can help struggling students become more familiar with multiple types of writing, as well as allow consultants to guide

readers through the reading process. At Grand Valley State University, students in the introductory writing class (WRT 150) are required to purchase a handbook filled with essay examples from previous students who have taken the course. However, providing additional reading in a multitude of genres would allow students to experience a variety of readings that can influence their work and scaffold their reading comprehension and endurance. The length of the texts would need to remain within the constraints of the consultation time limit while simultaneously ensuring that they are at the reading level of the student seeking assistance. Most importantly, this model reading should be engaging for the student; the consultant should individualize the text in order to reflect the student's needs and interests. By working with students through reading these essays, the consultant can trigger metacognitive activity, guiding the student in reflectively thinking about and improving their own writing abilities.

Asking the right questions

Penny Kittle's (2013) work, *Write Beside Them*, adapts questions from Katie Wood Ray's *Wonderous Words* (1999) in order to create questions that help students read with writing in mind. These questions, added to the lexicon of writing consultants, would aid in helping students reach a metacognitive reading mindset. Kittles original questions have been modified in order to better apply to a college-level reading scenario, yet still retain the basic principles of the original questions.

What do you notice about how this text was written?

This broad question can help a consultant analyze how the student they are working with sees themselves as a reader. The student is given an opportunity to relate to the text as much or as little as they feel is necessary. If the student were to respond with an in-depth analysis that they are able to relate to the purposes of their writing, then the student has already achieved a

high level of metacognition with their reading process. However, a student who is unsure about the methods a text uses in order to convey its message would need further guidance from the consultant in order to reach a level of metacognition necessary to think about the purpose of his or her own reading.

What are some repeating phrases or repeating images in this text? What are some examples that support the ideas in this writing? How are they written? Where is the support?

A question about the specifics of a text require rereading—or Chamblee’s “revision”—in order to fully comprehend. This question allows for consultants to model the importance of this rereading strategy, guiding readers into examining a text multiple times for multiple purposes. Not only does looking at repeating ideas or phrases help a struggling reader easily pinpoint the main ideas in an article, but the questions allow for the structure of the text to be examined as well. By analyzing the craft of the author’s writing, the consultant is simultaneously able to model reading strategies while using the text as a writing model.

As a reader, why do you think the author chose to organize the piece this way? Why do you think that the author used the words they used? What did you notice that you might try in your own writing style?

The word choice and organization of a piece are deliberately chosen by the author. By asking these questions, the consultant shows the student that writing is a deliberate process that can continuously be improved on, aiding the student’s self-efficacy in terms of their own writing abilities. The students are given agency and are made responsible for analyzing the tactics that the author uses and applying those tactics to their own future writing process. In terms of reading, these questions similarly put students in the role of a critical reader, further aiding in their self-efficacy for reading comprehension abilities.

Referring to the student as a “reader”

At a more strategic level, explicitly referring to the student as a *reader* leaves the student no choice but to see themselves as a reader, as well. Word choice within a consultation can make an impact on whether or not the student will be developing as a writer or as a simultaneous writer and reader. Peter Johnston, in his book *Choice Words* (2004), points out the weight that language utilized by an author or a speaker has on its intended audience. For instance, referring to the student as a “reader” in the questions above gives the student no choice but to identify as a reader in that given situation, submerging them in the metacognitive reader mindset. Furthermore, an important feature of each of the above questions in their lack of literary jargon, which would alienate struggling students from entering the reader-based discourse. Scaffolding students with simpler definitions and terms for literary ideas allows struggling students to ease into the idea of becoming an active reader.

Reading centers

In order to address the lack of fundamental support for college-level readers, college writing centers across Michigan are beginning to adjust accordingly, aiding reading alongside writing tutoring. Megan Ward, former employee of the FMCWMA, shifted the Northwestern Michigan College (NMC) writing center into a Writing and Reading Center, placing emphasis on both reading comprehension and the drafting and revision of written work. The NMC Writing and Reading Center homepage explicitly states that consultants are available to aid in “all types of reading and writing,” which include articles, textbooks, class papers, and creative writing (Writing & Reading Center, n.d.). According to Ward, “Reading and writing are often intertwined, but we never discuss the reading portion. Many times students actually need reading assistance before they can even begin the writing” (Personal communication, February 2014). In

addition, Grand Rapids Community College aids students in a broader writing center environment called the Language Arts Tutorial Lab, a space which “provides support to all GRCC students who have questions related to reading, writing, or language studies” (Academic Support Center, n.d.). With this broader approach to tutoring, all language assistance is able to be approached under an umbrella consultant environment.

The FMCWMA has recently partnered with other language arts-based tutoring centers on the Grand Valley Campus—namely the Speech Lab and the Research Center—in order to form the Knowledge Market partnership within the new Mary Idema Pew Library. The trifecta of tutoring centers form a chain of knowledge accumulation and guidance through the creation process. Under the Knowledge Market ideology, students begin with research consultants, finding proper research in order to help them begin a new project. Then, students move onto writing consultants who help them outline, draft, and produce a written product. Finally, with their research and paper complete, students move towards speech consultants who help the students translate their writing into a presentation. This Knowledge Market atmosphere would be an ideal place to possibly integrate a Grand Valley Reading Center, allowing students to obtain specific reading-oriented consultations. Fitting into the current Knowledge Market ideology, a specified Reading Center would fall into place after students meet with research consultants, helping students make sense of their reading before moving onto meeting with the specific writing center tutors.

Conclusion

As the student left our consultation, an attempted outline of an “Allegory of the Cave” analysis in his hands, I felt shocked to the point of emptiness. Any confidence that I had retained from my initial training as a writing consultant felt like it had been turned on its head, and this

new anomaly of reading assistance hovered in my thoughts like the nagging voice of doubt. How was I supposed to help students become better writers without knowing how to help them become better readers? What did my job as a writing tutor ultimately mean to me and to the students I helped? After careful consideration, I began to see that, more than being able to help students with the writing process, my role as a writing tutor at the FMCWMA revolved around being flexible, open to change and individualized instruction. It involved constantly researching how to be better at my job, and engaging in thoughtful discussions with my colleagues in order to get feedback on my consulting techniques. The research in this paper is the culmination of my personal investigations, my conversations with fellow consultants, and my interests in helping students in all aspects of their literary careers.

The FMCWMA has more university, faculty, and student support than many writing centers in the state of Michigan. It is in a position that encourages evolution in accordance to the needs of its students, providing everything possible in order to remain relevant and influential to its student clientele. Distributing its focus to better take the needs of student readers into account would make the FMCWMA a stronger, more influential force on campus. Students would be able to easily find assistance for their reading needs, and strengthening reading skills would become as normalized as strengthening writing skills. As a writing center, it is the FMCWMA's duty to consider all avenues possible in order to strengthen its impact on Grand Valley students. The implementation of reading-based strategies would increase the writing center's outreach, and would pave the way towards even more possible developments in the future.

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