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Secondary Writing Centers: Where There's a Will, There's a Way

Ellen H. Brinkley

Imagine yourself as a high school English teacher scheduled one or two periods a day in a writing center. You're there to provide writing assistance to any student who comes from class or study hall needing help on writing projects or skills. With a little effort and luck, you might actually find yourself in such a situation, for the truth is that writing centers are springing up in high schools all over the country. As secondary teachers attend in-service programs and summer institutes, they're hearing about the value of individual conferences in the teaching of writing and how writing centers, or labs, can make individual conferences possible. They're then looking for ways to create writing centers in their own schools.

Based on my experience teaching at both college and secondary levels, I want to consider (1) how the experience of colleges with writing centers can help us understand some of the challenges of setting up a secondary center, (2) what the problems and promise of secondary writing centers are, and (3) how high schools and colleges might work cooperatively to the benefit of both to establish new secondary writing centers.

Clearly, high school writing centers exist because of the success of college writing centers. Fortunately, high school teachers have benefitted from observing both the successes and mistakes of college models. They have learned, for instance, that there are several college models to choose from, that colleges have set up, according to one researcher, "places as theoretically and functionally diverse as programmed materials-and-tapes labs; peer tutoring drop-in centers; wholesale sentence-combining labs; so-called remedial centers staffed by professional tutors; and so on up to what might be called the full service center" (North 27). Sometimes, it seems, college writing centers have been used to teach almost anything and everything. Those who design secondary centers have discovered, then, that they have choices to make as to what model will work best. They have also learned that college centers sometimes struggle for funding and for recognition and sometimes even struggle with their relationship with the English Department, for sometimes there is disagreement as to the role and operation of the center. Secondary teachers face somewhat similar struggles as they set up writing centers.

They have learned another crucially important lesson from the painful experiences of many college labs that were initially set up as remediation centers. The motives of college writing center directors were admirable, of course, as they sought to meet the new demands created by open admissions, but secondary teachers realize that high school students, like their college counterparts, sometimes stay away in droves when the center focuses solely on remediation. In fact, secondary student writers seem even more sensitive than college students to the stigma attached to remediation programs.

On the positive side, surely the most important lesson learned from college writing centers is that the conference method is the best, most effective way to teach writing. Secondary teachers have caught the enthusiasm of Donald Murray and Donald Graves, who so persuasively advocate teaching writing one to one. They understand that students learn more when their writing gets individual attention focusing on particular strengths and weaknesses, and those in secondary schools want the opportunity to give that individual attention.

Even as secondary teachers learn from the college successes and failures, they also know that the public or private high school has its own set of unique, additional challenges to meet and obstacles to overcome. For example, most high schools have a tight daily schedule which locks students into a routine that seldom allows them to "drop in" to a writing center. When students have a six- or seven-period day, sometimes with no study halls, high school teachers must wonder whether one-to-one help in a writing center is even a remote

Not only do the students have rigid schedules, but teachers do as well. They don't have the luxury of office hours at intervals throughout the day or classes staggered on alternating days with time in between to see students individually. Often high school teachers have six classes a day with just one fifty-minute period for preparation and conferences. Sometimes there are thirty students per class. If we believe that students learn to write by writing, consider as many as 180 students five days a week, all busy writing papers for their teachers to read. What teacher faced with such a daily grind could spare attention to be lavished in a writing center on one student at a time? (I believe,

because of the heavy load and schedule, a strong case can be made that high schools need writing centers even more than the universities.)

What a bleak picture! Fortunately, it often happens that where there's a will, there's a way. Many of the obstacles can be overcome and the challenges met.

In 1984 I was teaching at Madeira High School in a small, middle-class suburb of Cincinnati. Those of us who taught English (I think there were six of us at that time) combined our request for a writing center with a request for a reduced class load and class size. Amazingly enough, our administrators listened! They said to us, teach four classes a day and use two periods a day to be available to give "writing assistance" in a writing center. In addition, they said they'd give us an average class size of twenty. And yes, this meant hiring an additional English teacher.

Perhaps this all sounds too good to be true. But here's how it happened. Our administrators had witnessed the enthusiasm of one middle school teacher's participation in the Ohio Writing Project (Miami University) and had subsequently recognized that there were "better" ways to teach writing. Meanwhile, the administrators had been bombarded with newspaper clippings and journal articles (passed on to them by English teachers--a tactic I recommend) citing a need for better writing instruction. Also, the superintendent, by chance, had heard and been impressed by a speech given at a banquet by Ernest Boyer, who advocates English as the keystone of good education. Consequently, when we as English teachers knew what we needed and articulated those needs, our administrators were ready to hear our requests.

The center at Madeira, and those in other high schools I am most familiar with, resulted from teachers persuading administrators of their need. And word of mouth among teachers has, I believe, played an important part in the development of new secondary centers. Let me cite a personal example. A couple of years ago during an inservice program I did for a high school English department, I mentioned Madeira's writing program and described it briefly. One of the teachers commented that an administrator should be there to hear what I was saying. An hour or so later, as we were finishing up, the superintendent walked in and sat down. At that point the teachers looked at him and looked at me and said, very aggressively, "Now, tell him what you told us!" And yes, a year later they did begin a writing center. I believe there are other similar stories and that many high school centers have been created because the "word" is spreading.

Interestingly enough, I'm discovering that some secondary centers appear to be mandated by administrators and school boards. One high school teacher in Akron, Ohio, writes, "At an inservice meeting our principal announced to the English Department that a writing center would be established" (Baltrinic, 1987). You might wonder what could inspire administrators to seek such a program that surely will end up costing them money. Actually, the sentence which precedes the one I just quoted reads, "With competency tests in composition imminent, the Akron Board of Education directed each high school in our system to offer intervention programs to help students improve their composition skills." It will indeed be interesting to trace the impact that testing might have on the development of secondary centers.

In another case closer to home, a guidance counselor from the high school in East Grand Rapids brought back from a college tour information about writing centers. Consequently, they (I believe the administrators were most instrumental) applied for and received a \$30,000 grant from the East Grand Rapids Foundation, and the writing center eventually became a reality.

In both the Akron and East Grand Rapids cases, the teacher tutors were trained at nearby universities after learning that a center would be established. Whether the training comes before or after the idea of a secondary center is conceived, college writing center directors and English education faculty can often help to establish new centers. In most cases they know not only the how-to's of starting a new center but also how to intervene into students' writing processes without taking possession of the students' writing and how to nudge student writers to find their best ideas and to organize and express them effectively.

Staffing can be the single most significant and expensive stumbling block to be overcome. To school administrators, who honestly believe that six classes a day is a reasonable load, the idea of using teachers to staff a writing center can be almost impossible to sell. Consequently, some schools--even secondary schools--use peer tutors instead. And I respect their choice. As Kenneth Bruffee (1980) has shown us, peer tutors can be very effective if trained carefully to serve as non-threatening reader-responders. Indeed, for many schools peer tutors seem the only feasible way financially to staff a center. Those just beginning a center should realize, however, that peer tutors need training and supervision, both of which can require considerable teacher time and expense. When peers are used as tutors, one of the objectives of the program becomes

improvement of the writing of the tutors as well as the writing of students they work with. As long as this objective is compatible with the overall goals of the writing center, peer tutors work well.

My personal bias is to provide, as in Madeira's case, a center staffed by full-time teachers who are professionally trained and have considerable experience. I say this because--for myself, after having been trained, having done research, having trained others, having years of experience working individually with students' writing--still there are occasions when I'm uncertain how to respond to a student and when I have to draw on all my resources to be genuinely helpful. I believe, then, that students benefit most from highly trained staff. Another important advantage of using teachers as tutors is that of necessity such a plan means a reduced class load for the English teachers who staff the center. (For a persuasive argument in favor of reduced class loads for high school English teachers, see James Biehl's "A Manifesto Against the Dying of the Light" in the October 1985 English Journal.)

For school districts which aren't willing or able to afford using teachers full-time to staff a writing center, there are some other staff options. One way to provide partial staffing and to ease into increased conference time is to swap an extra-duty assignment for a period or two of conference time. Even if there's no official place for a writing center, sitting at a table in a corner of the library offers visibility and availability to students who might seek help.

Another possibility for staff is to use preservice teachers from a nearby college or university at least as supplementary writing center staff. Student teachers, for instance, could be scheduled to spend one period a day in a writing center. Such a plan makes available additional staff that won't cost the

high schools a lot of money. I realize that student teachers are placed for a limited time and that depending heavily on them might leave several weeks out of the year when the center would be minimally staffed. Even so, I would use them in a center for whatever time they are available. Teachers in the building might even be able to schedule major writing projects, such as research papers, to coincide with the weeks that the college tutors are there.

Will the schools reap all the benefits of such an arrangement? Not at all. As writing centers become more common in the school, they offer an ideal setting for the experience preservice teachers need, the experience of working with individual students and their writing. In fact, I believe that teacher education programs should recommend, or even require, that preservice teachers understand the work of writing centers and actually work--briefly at least--in either a college or secondary writing center.

There are other collaborative possibilities involving colleges and the secondary writing center which could provide mutual benefit. College writing methods courses might include at least a limited assignment as a writing center tutor. Universities with large numbers of teaching assistants might work out an arrangement whereby TA's could work as tutors. Doctoral students in both education and English could find fertile ground for research in the high school lab. For instance, education students might research the effectiveness of different questioning techniques, while English students studying composition theory might study revision strategies used by students. Eventually, of course, the secondary schools would also benefit from knowing the results of the research conducted in their labs.

Secondary writing centers face severe problems in becoming a reality, but once established, I believe they hold great promise. One student response from Madeira tells the story:

The teacher was able to bring ideas out of my head without telling me directly what to write my paper on. She was then able to help me put my ideas in an order that would benefit the paper . . . The teacher was able to make me work to get my ideas down on paper.

Such comments reflect the purpose and effectiveness of secondary writing centers, which can provide a time and place for the kind of interaction and intervention needed to produce better writing and better writers.

I've noticed that those who work in both college and secondary writing centers are a determined, committed, and creative group of people. I believe that we will soon see more secondary centers appearing and that the professional journals will describe a variety of approaches and programs. If this occurs, it will mean all sorts of good things are happening: it will mean that secondary students are doing a lot of writing, it will mean that more and more teachers and administrators recognize the value of teaching writing as process, and it will mean that school districts value teaching writing one to one.

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