

Expanding the writing center audience

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We often remind our students that an awareness of audience is central to the writing process. From the initial prewriting stage, when an idea has merely begun to emerge, to the final stages of revising and editing, writers must consider the needs of their readers. And as writers ourselves, we know that our audience determines to a great extent the purpose, form, and content of what we write. In writing this paper, for example, I assumed that my readers would primarily be writing center directors who are knowledgeable about tutorial programs. This assumption played an important role in shaping the content and form of my discourse.

A writing center also has an audience—the students and faculty whom it serves. And this audience, like the writer's audience, determines to a great extent the purpose of a center and the role it plays. The concept of audience awareness is, in fact, as basic to the directing of a writing center as it is to the writing of a paper.

Writing centers were born, for the most part, during the back-to-basics movement that dominated education in the 1970s. These early labs were primarily remedial programs, designed to give failing freshmen assistance with their writing. Today, although we have not relinquished our responsibility to developmental students, they no longer constitute our sole audience. It is not that we have given up on the basic writing student with his Pandora's box of language deficiencies. Rather it is that our audience is not exclusively limited to these students. We have moved, as William Stull points out, "beyond remediation."

But we have grown in other directions as well—not just beyond remediation but also, in a sense, beyond composition—out of the English department and into the university community as a whole. As long as we view ourselves only as adjuncts to a composition program or an English department, our audience is obviously limited. If, on the other hand, we perceive ourselves as university-wide centers, serving instructors and students from every discipline, our audience expands dramatically.

In moving beyond the confines of remediation and composition, we are, in effect, identifying ourselves with the writing-across-the-curriculum movement. The recent emphasis on multidisciplinary writing programs affords us an opportunity to expand our audience in a way never dreamed of by those who established the first writing centers. As our colleagues from other disciplines become increasingly interested in writing and increasingly willing to assume responsibility for the teaching of writing, we are in an ideal position to assist them in their endeavors.

Presented with this opportunity to expand our audience across the curriculum, we must modify our programs to serve the diversity that such an audience represents. The primary modification is merely the realization that a multidisciplinary writing center serves not only students but also the instructors who teach these students. Unlike centers

that function only as support services for English departments, university-wide multidisciplinary centers must share with instructors as well as students their knowledge of the process of writing and the skills involved in that process. Thus our role becomes a dual one: to offer students instruction that is specifically related to their academic and professional goals and to provide instructors assistance in using writing to stimulate learning and to improve the writing skills of their students.

Students who are enrolled in composition courses are frequently interested in writing only as an abstraction. Asked to produce certain writing assignments that are designed to teach writing as *writing*, they fail to see the relationship between their composition assignments and their professional future. Many, in fact, have no definite career plans at the time they take freshman composition. Thus, they write as in a vacuum, their discourse having no meaningful context. For these students, writing is an academic exercise rather than a means to an end. But for the student who has determined a major and is involved in the preparation required for his or her chosen profession, writing has some significance. The education student, for example, needs to be able to explain subject-verb agreement to the students she will soon be assigned. She must also be able to recognize errors in their writing and to submit coherent, correct reports to her principal. The journalism student, on the other hand, is concerned about punctuation and spelling. And the social work student must write case studies and reports. Even the science major must be able to write descriptions of her experiments. Writing has real meaning for these students. As a result, they are more receptive to instruction at this point than they were as freshmen enrolled in a general studies English course.

Instructors who are interested in improving the writing of their students and in using writing as a tool in their classrooms also need the writing center's services. Although all instructors are familiar with writing as a means of evaluating what students have learned, many need assistance in devising assignments that use writing to generate learning. For example, such heuristic strategies as journals, free writing, brainstorming, and mapping can stimulate thinking in a political science or management course as well as in a composition course.

Most instructors outside of the English department are also naive about the process of writing and they need assistance in devising assignments that are realistic in terms of that process. They need to know that prewriting activities facilitate composing, that an incubation phase helps students formulate ideas and achieve focus, that an informal outline is often more conducive to good organization than is a formal outline, and that several preliminary drafts are necessary to produce a polished final draft. Most important, instructors need to recognize that allowing students to revise and rewrite papers enables them to learn from their writing experiences. These insights into composition theory, as simple as they may seem to one who teaches writing, can be a valuable addition to the teaching of an instructor whose background is in another discipline.

In order to establish a writing center program that encompasses a diversity of disciplines, we must, therefore, modify our public relations approach somewhat so that instructors as well as students are involved. Good public relations are important to any tutorial program but are especially vital to one that is expanding in new directions. Although most public relations efforts are student directed, aimed at students who might use the center, a multidisciplinary program must direct its efforts primarily toward instructors. Once we go beyond the English department, where most writing centers are housed and where nearly all have very close connections, we no longer have direct, easy access to the instructors with whom we are dealing. A definite ef-

fort must be made to contact those instructors who belong to other disciplines. In addition, communication with these instructors is more difficult because they do not share our background in composition as do the instructors in an English department, where even those whose interests are decidedly literary have had exposure to the teaching of composition and are familiar with the terminology used to discuss writing. Any contact we have with instructors outside of departments of English must involve to a certain extent our educating them about the writing process and how it can be used to advantage in their classrooms. Thus, as we expand across the curriculum-out of our comfortable, but restrictive role as support services for departments of English and into the challenging world of science, business, and education, we must be willing to make contact and communicate with instructors whose backgrounds and interests differ from our own.

One of the most effective means of accomplishing this task is to arrange individual conferences with instructors. Whereas group presentations and memoranda are obviously a more efficient means of making contacts, they are far less effective. Individual conferences, time-consuming though they may be, afford the opportunity of not only communicating suggestions and ideas to instructors but also of gaining valuable information from them concerning the types of writing assignments that are typically made in their disciplines. In order to facilitate this exchange of information and to identify in advance those instructors who might be amenable to suggestions about writing assignments, a preliminary survey or questionnaire can be sent to instructors in each discipline or, if possible, to all instructors. This questionnaire, which should be as simple and brief as possible so as not to require much time on the part of the respondents, can elicit from instructors the types of writing assignments that they make in their classes. Then, using this information, a writing center director can make informed decisions about which instructors to approach and can enter the conference prepared to make specific suggestions concerning the assignments already used and to introduce appropriate new assignments and techniques.

Faculty writing workshops are another effective means of establishing contacts for a multidisciplinary writing center. These workshops can be made available to instructors from various disciplines but work better if they are designed specifically for a definite department or organization. Thus a workshop for business teachers might focus on new or changing rules of punctuation-for example, the use of the apostrophe in forming the possessive or the use of the hyphen in compound modifiers. Or a workshop for graduate teaching assistants might deal with the writing of resumes. If a general workshop seems more feasible, it should be devoted to a specific aspect of the writing process, such as prewriting activities or revising.

Once instructors are interested in the possibility of improving their students' writing and in using writing more effectively in their courses, a director can suggest a content-specific program that the writing center can administer to supplement a particular course. Such programs should be specific and focused, using, if at all possible, materials from the course involved. For instance, a supplementary program for a social work course could involve the students' learning how to write abstracts using appropriate journals from that field. Or a program for a language arts education course might concentrate on a review of sentence structure, using an elementary textbook. Although some new materials will obviously need to be developed for such programs, this task can be vastly simplified by using existing materials from the discipline in question. Not only does this simplify the problem of providing adequate materials but

also ensures that the materials used are appropriate to the purpose and content of the course that is involved.

Thus writing centers can play an important role in ensuring that students continue to receive instruction in writing after they complete their English courses. By working individually with instructors, offering them specific suggestions as to how writing instruction may be used in their courses and how we can supplement their course content with writing programs designed for their courses, we can expand our audience to include students from every discipline.

Writing center administrators were once portrayed as lonely figures, battling against the insurmountable odds of improving writing skills in a sea of illiteracy. If allies existed, they were thought to be found only in departments of English, where instructors were involved in the same task of attempting to teach students everything they needed to know about language, composition, and rhetoric. Other faculty members were all too often thought to be either sitting in judgment on our efforts, shocked by our inability to produce students who were competent writers, or to be themselves ignorant of the skills that we deemed of such importance.

So long as we continue to pursue our goals alone, we shall remain lonely and, for the most part, unsuccessful. Successful writing programs are those that involve the entire university community. Writing instruction, in order to succeed, must be reinforced in every course students take during their college careers. Just as writing proficiency is not attained in one English course, nor in two or three, neither can writing centers, no matter how illustrious their reputations or how dedicated their staff, effect a permanent improvement in the quality of a student's writing skills if these skills are not reinforced by writing experiences in other classes. If students are to learn how to write effective, literate prose, they must continue to receive instruction in writing and be encouraged to produce good writing throughout their *college* careers. As Richard Lanham observes, "Good prose does not come from a one-time inoculation,"²

In order to sustain the success that writing centers have enjoyed thus far, we must be willing to redefine our roles and expand our audience. Not forgetting our obligation to the remedial and freshman composition student, we must also look beyond these students to those who are not failing and are not taking an English course, but who are, nevertheless, interested in improving their writing skills. If we stop growing, if we cease to explore and expand in new directions, we become self-satisfied at best, stagnant at worst. Our expansion is limited only by our lack of imagination, our inability to recognize that an audience can change and grow.

Notes

¹ William Stull, "The Writing Lab's Three Constituencies," *Writing Lab Newsletter*, Vol. VI, No. 5, p. 1.

² Richard Lanham, *Style: An Anti-Textbook* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 7.