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*Theory to  
Practice:  
Building the 21st  
Century Writing  
Community*

*Not too many years ago, right about the start of the new millennium, the TAMU-CC Writing Center began to pull away from the model of a center that focuses mostly on individual consultations and began to build a greater sense of the place of the Writing Center in the larger university Writing Community. In this article, we share how we have built on 21<sup>st</sup> century writing center research and theories to extend the boundaries of the classroom and offer community building opportunities for both students and faculty and how these activities—In-House Workshops, Assignment Review, and THEA Assistance—have helped to build that Writing Community.*

**I** *magine: It's kind of hot in the small space (it's a South Texas summer, fall or spring, and it's 96 degrees outside) with 25 students jammed around four oval tables in a multitutoring space that generally holds three to four other subject tutors who, today, have been relocated by the Writing Center.*

The students were part of a class whose instructor had decided they needed help in their discipline specific writing, so she brought them to the Writing Center, not as punishment, but as a way for them to learn what it is to be part of a larger community of writers. To begin, the consultant at the white board turned, smiled, and welcomed these 25 individuals by saying, "Welcome to the Writing Center! Glad you found us," and the session begins, with the course instructor acting as both a student in the workshop and a consultant on content about topics rang-

ing from how to revise a lab report to how to begin a dissertation. After 30-50 minutes, a hot and usually happy group left, with both students and instructor realizing that the Writing Center does a lot more than just “fix” writing.

The idea of a writing center as a writing “fix it” shop, a tutorial facility for “*those with special problems in composition*” (North, 1984, p. 72), has continued into the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the overheard hushed conversations of graduate teaching assistants who are not happy with our Writing Center because, as they say, “I sent a student over with grammar problems and they won’t help them; if I worked there this would change.” It has popped up again in handouts given to faculty that listed one “best practice” for improving writing was sending students who were having *grammar and mechanical problems* to the Writing Center.

A workshop in the TAMU-CC Writing Center generally begins with an introduction to the concepts of audience and purpose, writer-based/reader-based prose (Flower & Ackerman, 1991) and then shifts to the specific aspects of writing chosen for that session, areas the instructor wants to address. Then students exchange drafts—instructors are encouraged to bring the students during the drafting stage of the writing process—and we invite them to contextualize the information just covered within their own framework. These sessions have been highly energetic, with consultants asking questions, walking around the room, and writing on the white boards. One benefit of bringing the faculty and students to the Writing Center has been that both the students and the instructor have seen first-hand how the Writing Center has created a community where people come together to talk about and learn from each other about writing.

Our most successful workshops have been with instructors who teach the Professional Skills (ProSkills) class in the College of Science and Technology. Traditionally, instructors in that area believed the Writing Center was the place for students to get help with their “fluffy” writing, not *real* writing, and Writing Center Consultants would not understand science writing anyway. In 2006, the Writing Center began working with the ProSkills students. After a meeting between representatives of the Writing Center and the faculty teaching ProSkills to find out what issues the instructors wanted to address during the workshop, we held our first science discipline workshop. The instructors were so impressed that other workshops were scheduled for a time when the students would be in a later stage of the writing process.

We have seen success at the individual level as students who have attended workshops came back to work in the Writing Center. One student came for help with a paper that had been marked quite heavily by his

teacher. At first he was reluctant, but through conversations about the paper and its content, the student began to perk up and take interest, so much so that he brought *every* section of the paper to the Writing Center. By the last portion of the paper, he was an engaged student who was taking charge of his writing and, in fact, became an improved science writer, as his last draft needed little more than some minor revisions.

Would this student have sought help from the Writing Center without the workshop introduction? Perhaps. Would the instructor have viewed the Writing Center as a place for students to get help? Perhaps. However, given the past view of the Writing Center as a place where discipline-specific or technical writers would not come for help, it was probably very unlikely. And we have been seeing a trend where students have been returning to the Writing Center as a result of attending one of the workshops, something that probably would not have happened otherwise. These workshops have been one way we have informed and educated the university that we were indeed all a community of writers, and the walls that keep the Writing Center and the classroom separate not only have expanded but also collapsed.

Through the process of expanding the walls of the Writing Center (literally since we have taken over the tutoring space used by other disciplines when we held the workshops), not only were we able to invite students into our space and make them feel welcome, but also we were able to educate faculty on just what kind of service our Writing Center provided. In addition, the Director of the Tutoring and Learning Center used pictures of the crowded workshops to attempt to try to get us more space, and in 2008, we doubled our Writing Center area.

Figure 1 TAMU-CC Writing Center



## Assignment Reviews

A second approach we have incorporated focused on working directly with instructors to assist them in developing better writing assignments. Unlike the traditional approach for doing this, where the Writing Center Director leads a workshop just for faculty to talk about designing assignments, or where faculty meet with consultants and explain what to look for when working with students, or where assignments are discussed as interdisciplinary exercises using the Writing Across the Curriculum approach (Haviland, Green, Shields, & Harper, 1999; Petit, 1997), we chose a different approach. Building on the success of the specialized in-house workshops discussed in the last section, we began to wonder: *Why not have Writing Consultants use those same strategies and collaborate with faculty on their required writing assignments?*

Since we have done such a good job working with students one-on-one to help them produce better writing products, we took those same skills and helped faculty one-on-one in the same way, and at the same time, “construct[ed]...roles that are more collaborative and intersubjective” (Haviland et al., 1999, p. 46) between instructors and consultants and helped to build that sense of a writing community where “the traditional idea of the writing center disappear[ed]” (Soliday, 1995, p. 68). Our Assignment Review extended the space of the classroom into the Writing Center and blurred the boundaries for consultants as they became more teacher-like and for faculty as they became more like collaborators with us.

Visit any Writing Center on any given day and you are likely to hear conversations such as, “Did you see that assignment from Dr. G? What was she thinking?” Or, “What the heck does the assignment mean?” And “I can’t understand the assignment so I don’t even know what to tell the student.” The veritable Assignments From Hell (AFH) reminded us that as Muriel Harris (1999) said, “The source of the AFH problem, of course, is the teacher, not the student, and to start draining the pond, we need to find ways to help teachers master the complex art of designing effective writing assignments” (p. 94). Working in collaboration with the instructors within our writing community permitted us the freedom to let faculty know they have written an AFH.

Faculty members were encouraged to submit writing assignments for consultant review through information that we sent out at the beginning of each semester. Once a faculty member expressed interest, the Writing Center Director contacted the faculty member, and began talks with the faculty member on what his or her desired goals were and how the assignment could best meet those goals. We then gave the assignment to two consultants and had them respond in two ways: first as a student,

and second as a consultant. The feedback was then shared with the faculty member. As with the specialized in-house workshops, we then had discussions on which we could build further conversation, to take the work to the next level and address what really went on when teachers assigned writing and when students tried to do that writing. This writing community discussion could also lead into developing specialized in-house workshops as well as other opportunities for growth.

The Spring 2007 semester was our initial assignment review with two faculty members. The first faculty member didn't get much beyond asking what kinds of services we had to help students and would we check out their grammar. After explaining how we work with students when they bring in assignments, she responded that she would send students with the assignment so that the consultants could review the assignment with these students. Our second taker was a professor from the theater arts department. In explaining his assignments, the instructor noted that his first assignment was a diagnostic, writing to learn activity. So again, as we would do with a student, we used some of the terms we used when we talked to students about writing. Two of our consultants provided feedback for the instructor, as students and then as consultants. The instructor found the feedback to be very helpful, saying, "I see what they are talking about with their comments," and he was very open going to the next step of working with us to improve the assignments.

Through the Assignment Review activity, we wanted to help faculty understand that "all assignments *are* negotiated, whether faculty members or students are aware of the processes" (Haviland et al., 1991, p. 51). But rather than consultants working "in the middle" roles, as Haviland et al. argued, consultants provided for teachers the same kind of support they provided for students who came to the writing center for help. And we drew instructors into the type of relationship that went on in a real writing community.

### **Opening the Gate for THEA Students**

In the early days of undergraduate coursework, one of the authors placed herself in a remedial algebra course and jokingly termed the course "dummy, dummy math." While not placed in the course based on an assessment test, she recognized her area of weakness and sought to develop the skills needed to be successful in College Algebra. The author assumed that the basic algebra class was the place to refresh her skills but did not know about the accompanying issues that were to come with enrollment in this type of course. After the first few days of classes and mandatory labs, the author realized that there was a stigma attached to

being enrolled in a basic course; she noted how many students hid their textbooks from their peers and sneaked in after all the other students in the hall had disappeared into their respectable college level math class. Classmates seldom spoke to one another; all maintained a general sense of failure. And like her classmates, she found her initial zeal for college was replaced by this sense of embarrassment.

In order to free students labeled as basic or remedial based on a standardized assessment tool, Writing Centers could open the gates that were put in place by the testing/sorting mechanisms by bringing those assessed as basic writers into a writing center space and thus facilitating equal access to the accepted academic discourses.

McNenny (2001) explains that "many writing professionals...find fault with both [standardized testing] reliability and validity as a measure of student writing ability" (p. 7). McNenny further added, "Some scholars<sup>2</sup> [such as Shor; Shaughnessy, and Gleason] note the inability of some students to perform well in artificially situated testing situations...whereas others [Elbow, for example] note the arbitrariness of the cut-off points selected for placement" (p. 7). Though the THEA Exam is required by the State of Texas, those working with the students who failed this standardized test recognized the need for supplemental instruction, support programs, and for more than simple placement of the student in a remedial or basic writing course. David Bartholomae (1993) noted that "[b]asic writing,...can best name a contested area in the university community, a contact zone, a place of competing postures" (p. 9). This contested zone concerned administrators of the First Year Writing Program (FYWP), Tutoring and Learning Center (TLC), and Intervention Program<sup>3</sup> who worked together to create a program that addressed the needs of THEA liable students while maintaining their status in mainstream classes. These administrators, too, believed that basic writing courses that separate mainstream and "basic" writers act as gatekeeping mechanisms. In an effort to open these gates that separate and marginalize basic writers, to enfranchise students in the academic community, the partnership between the FWYP, TLC, and Intervention Program was fused by the collaboration with the Writing Center, a program operating under the umbrella of the TLC. Under the new program, students were strongly encouraged to seek help for issues in their writing through writing center consultations; the model was based on students' own initiative to seek help (Lalicker, 2007). Another alternative, the Studio-model (Lalicker, 2007), allowed students to be mainstreamed into the standard composition class and required that students attend supplemental instruction facilitated by either the course instructor or teaching assistant.

The alternative model used by TAMU-CC was a hybrid of the mainstreamed and studio model. Students indicated as THEA liable were mainstreamed into composition classes and were additionally required to attend weekly sessions with a consultant at the Writing Center. Writing Consultants, the Faculty Partner to the Writing Center, and Intervention Specialists all worked closely together to ensure the success and retention of the students, adhering to Blumner's (1999) notion of "non-punitive advocacy" (p. 39). Students who were THEA liable in writing were not required to take a developmental class, but as part of their contract with the university, they were required to work on their regular class assignments during weekly visits to the Writing Center. While the Writing Center tracked progress for THEA liable students, the administrators did not punish them, for the test and its ramifications were punishment enough.

The basic principle of this THEA program was that these students, like any other student, visited the Writing Center to get help with writing assignments. THEA liable students were given the same opportunity for success, with the use of the Writing Center as one of their tools. This program invited these students to become equal partners in the writing community, and this partnership helped create a writing community in which no one was excluded or pushed to the margins. The benefits of this program were remarkable. The students were not labeled basic because they were not placed in a remedial course and thus disenfranchised from the mainstream academic community. They did not feel the shame discussed earlier, such as the negative associations with dummy, dummy math. Rather than residing on the outside, in a marginal space, the students were welcomed as members of the academic community.

The Writing Center functioned as a support system for the students; they were given Individual Success Plans that outlined their responsibilities for making and keeping weekly appointments as terms of their enrollment in the mainstreamed course. If the student failed to meet his or her commitment of a minimum one 30 minute visit per week, then the student was contacted by an Intervention Specialist. After each visit, the writing consultant logged the session and input session notes that were then accessible to others who worked with the student. The consultants worked to build a relationship based on egalitarian practices and to engage the student in whatever writing assignments he/she had in an effort to retain the student.

This model has been most effective for the students who regularly attended sessions. Eighty-two percent of students who attended the Writing Center consultations through Fall 2006 passed not only the THEA retest

but also their first year composition course with a C or better. Based on the success of the program, the University decided that a THEA retest was unnecessary, and beginning Spring 2007, THEA liable students needed only to make a C or better in their composition courses. The number of students successfully mainstreamed rendered THEA retesting unnecessary. Additionally, many of the students continued to use the Writing Center services well after their first year, just as students who attended the In-House Workshops were more likely to come back.

The new program has only been in place for a few years, and some logistical issues still need to be worked out. As with students in a basic writing class, the ones who *did not attend* rarely passed the course, but the students who did attend were very successful in passing both the THEA and their courses. But rather than focusing on weekly attendance, we preferred to engage the students using our idea of community so that their results were long-term changes for them as learners and not just short-term checks on whether they were following a prescribed formula. But just as the Center did with “regular” students and faculty, the Center’s focus with the THEA students was to help them understand that we were a community of writers and that we invited them to be just as much a member of the community as everyone else.

### A Real Writing Community

The TAMU-CC’s Writing Center is developing these programs with the goal of reaching outside the boundaries of the center and the classroom. Subscribing to a belief that writing is a social process, the center reaches out to other disciplines, faculty, and at-risk students. Specialized Workshops specifically for the course and the instructor encourage students and faculty from all disciplines to enter into a collaborative writing space. Assignment Reviews by Writing Center personnel reinforce the social nature of writing and the ways that meaning is made between a student and a teacher. The THEA supplemental instruction empowers rather than marginalizes students who may need a little extra help. This system of ensuring student writing success embodies the very basis of TAMU-CC’s Writing Center mission of making better writers—not writing—which ensures the growth of our university writing community.

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## Footnotes

1. Texas Higher Education Assessment, the state mandated high stakes test in reading, writing, and math.
2. For more discussion, see Shor's "Our Apartheid: Writing Instruction and Inequality." *Journal of Basic Writing* 16.1 (1997): 91-104; Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations*. New York: Oxford UP, 1977; and Gleason's "When the Writing Test Fails: Assessing Assessment at an Urban College." *Writing in a Multicultural Setting*. Ed. Carol Severino, Juan C. Guerra, and Johnnella E. Butler. New York: Modern Language Association, 1997. 307-324.
3. The First Year Writing Program Administrator, the Faculty Partner to the Writing Center, and the Tutoring and Learning Center Director developed the THEA model in 2003 based on the Texas Success Initiative Plan and it was first implemented in the Spring 2004 semester.