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Time and Productivity: Building Familiarity and Transparency in the Writing Center

There is much to do in those short thirty to sixty minutes in a writing center session. We, as tutors, need to introduce ourselves, make the writer feel comfortable, familiarize ourselves with the prompt and the writer’s interpretation, and decide how best to help the writer not only to improve the clarity, organization, and style, but also to facilitate improvement in their writing as a skill. After all, the goal of the writing center is not product-oriented; rather, it is process-oriented. Our mission is not only to “address the immediate goals of our clients”, but instead, to “further their development as writers” and to “provide [them] with the skills to become their own editors” (“Our Mission”). It seems that such a time restriction of only thirty to sixty minutes is a limiting factor in the productivity of a writing center session.

As a Writing Center tutor, I have often experienced a sense of frustration with the limitations of time during sessions. Reviewing my client reports, I have found that frequently, I reflect that I am unable to adequately help students achieve any sort of improvement because we run out of time. Zalondria, a student that was sent by her teacher to work on the concepts outlined in her thesis, was desperate for some sense of direction. “We ran out of time before too much progress, but she scheduled another appointment on Wednesday so we could expand upon any developments in her paper” (Client Report). One thirty minute session was simply not enough time to address some of the underlying conceptual issues with which Zalondria struggled when constructing a thesis.

Other Georgetown University Writing Center tutors have expressed similar perceptions of time’s limitation on productivity. Andrew Morrison explains this conflict*:*

*I think sometimes I wish there were kids I could spend more time with. Sessions were productive, and we were going forward fixing big problems, and time ran out, and we didn’t get through everything I wanted to reach or everything the kid wanted to reach* (Morrison).

Andrew highlights a key feature of writing center sessions: the writer and the tutor both have expectations for the session. Is there a way to increase transparency of expectations so that the session can use time as efficiently and productively as possible? Andrew explains that expectations are more clearly understood when working with a writer for a second time:

*[In a first time session]* *it’s not always clear what they want, what the expectations are. And I don’t have any experiences with them as a thinker. But with return clients…so there’s this one kid that sees me every time named Andrew. I know what problems he has and how he does in classes. We can just talk about what he needs to fix without any of the handholding that might come if you don’t know what the person actually wants* (Morrison).

Jokingly, Andrew articulates, ““With a first-time client, it’s kind of harder to be like, ‘this is garbage’” (Morrison). There seems to be more room for blatant honesty when a tutor is more familiar with the writer’s style and underlying issues. This honesty is conducive to facing underlying issues without wasting any of the allotted time. A second tutor, Erin, explains that building the foundation for such honesty and transparency in communication is, in fact, time consuming. This time inefficiency can limit the productivity of the session:

*The clients that you’re getting for the first time… you use up a solid five minutes building a rapport with them and getting to know them to make them feel comfortable… If someone came back, you already had a relationship built and you could jump into their current work. They felt more comfortable as well because they knew you* (Desimone).

Andrew and Erin’s experiences in the writing center illustrate that a relationship with the writer creates ease in communication and a better understanding of what to expect during the session. It is clear that building a consistent relationship between the tutor and writer would be beneficial to maximize time efficiency.

In addition to conducting sessions within the writing center, Georgetown Writing Center tutors are paired to work with Humanities and Writing 001 classes. These 001 relationships represent the more consistent, comfortable interaction between two peers, in comparison to a first-time visit in the writing center and variable visits with multiple tutors. Erin Desimone shares her experience in both tutoring environments and explains that the 011 sessions allow for greater allotments of time per session:

*I was a 011 tutor, and I thought that experience was better because we had hour and a half sessions to work on their writing, and they were more effective time-wise because we used the whole hour and a half each time. And also, you get to really know the kids better. I had a lot of the same freshmen in my group during the session and you got to see their development. You could help them based on what you had already learned about their writing* (Desimone).

Much beyond the mere limitation of time, Erin highlights the positive impact of consistency, familiarity, and building upon past sessions to tangibly observe progress in the writer’s development.

Client reports, my fellow tutors’ comments, and my own experiences point toward the trend that productivity increases with familiarity. Return appointments and 011 tutoring sessions tend to be more productive for the writer’s overall improvement in writing as a skill. Erin highlights the fact that “you (the tutor) can see their development and judge whether your strategies are working or not” (Desimone).

In “Revisiting ‘The Idea of a Writing Center’”, Stephen M. North proposes a model to build familiarity in the tutor-writer relationship. He says:

*I want a program in which we’ve gotten to know the writer and the writers have gotten to know us; a situation in short, in which talk-about-writing is so common that we can, in fact, carry on such talk, get better at and even fluent in it- not fence, or be forever carrying on those quickie fix-it chats between people who talk twice for a total of an hour…and then never again (*North, 16).

His solution to implement such ease in communicating about writing is to tie the writing center to the English major. Because of practical application, North’s proposal limits the clientele of a writing center to about 250 undergraduates who interact with faculty and graduate students, discussing writing comfortably and frequently. Therefore, North’s model poses many glaring disservices to the university’s student body. It not only limits the skill of writing to one discipline; it also rules out some students as hopeless and incapable of improvement. Although North’s methodology of implementing a system of greater familiarity is inadequate for the fulfillment of the Georgetown University Writing Center’s mission, it does highlight the need to build consistent interaction and to facilitate ease in discussing writing.

Just as Stephen North proposes an alternative system to the typical writing center, so too have some other liberal arts institutions. For example, in addition to “writing partners”, Yale’s equivalent of peer writing tutors, the writing program provides residential college writing tutors. Within the course of a week, residential students cans schedule up to ninety minutes of tutoring time with their specific residential college writing tutor. The Yale writing program’s website explains that the “benefit of the Residential College program is that you can develop a long-term relationship with the tutor in your college, learning how to work well together over several years” (Yale College). Furthermore, many of these tutors are willing to read drafts before the session so that they can plan an agenda and effectively build a meaningful conversation with the writer. This mentorship system embodies the same principles of familiarity and continual conversation that North highlighted in his proposal. Yale’s system, however, seems much more practical in application than that of North.

Structurally, Georgetown University is not identical to Yale. We lack residential colleges and exhibit an infrastructure undoubtedly different from that which supports the Yale Writing Program. However, a glimpse at Yale’s system provides Georgetown and other universities’ productivity problem with hope; North’s idealistic conceptions of a Writing Center can actually be applied in a realistic system that incorporates intuitional norms of familiarity and ease of discussion. However, is it realistic or even helpful to alter the Georgetown Writing Center’s system of appointments? A system of greater familiarity might pair students with specific writing tutors to build a relationship and break down comfort barriers, but the size of the tutoring staff and the availability of appointments make this possibility impractical. How then can we create a mechanism that increases familiarity, makes expectations transparent, and facilitates productivity during the session?

To restate the developments of this study, it has become clear that student writers would benefit from a consistent relationship with a tutor. This relationship would build familiarity, transparency of expectation, and a more observable development in writing that would facilitate time productivity. This relationship would provide greater potential for substantial improvement in writing skills over the course of several appointments. Although The Georgetown Writing Center’s infrastructure is not currently compatible with a consistent tutor-writer relationship, an alternate system can be proposed to achieve these same goals. Two requirements must be made: (1) we need a system that increases transparency in both parties’ expectations, and (2) we need a system that allows the tutors to understand the writers’ development and areas in which they need improvement.

The first issue, lack of transparency, can be remedied by making expectations clear through the setting of an agenda. In “The First Five Minutes”, Thomas Newkirk explains the benefits of such an agenda, or plan: “both student and teacher need to come to a meeting of minds early in a writing conference; they need to set an agenda, agree to one or two major concerns that will be the focus of the conference” (Newkirk 303). By increasing transparency and communicating goals for the session, the tutor and writer can best “focus” the session to maximize time productivity. As Newkirk explains, the writer often explains what he or she expects from the session:

*The opening minutes of the conference are critically important in guiding the conference direction- they act as a kind of lead. The student’s contributions in these opening minutes need to be used to give the conference mutually agreeable and mutually understood direction* (Newkirk 313).

Although students have expectations, Michael Pembleton explains in “Student Agendas and Expectations for the Writing Center Conferences (Part IV Again)” that these expectations may be unrealistic. Student writers may feel that the writing center can remedy all of their concerns:

*Students often expect that when they bring a draft of a paper into the writing center for a conference, the entire draft and all of its attendant problems will be discussed, leaving them with a comprehensive and clearly defined list of items that need to be “fixed” before turning the paper in* (Pemberton, 10).

With a time limitation, these itemized concerns must be prioritized. The tutor must narrow the focus of the session to maximize productivity and create a meaningful conference with the aim to improve writing as a skill. Pemberton tells us, “A tutor’s agenda for a writing conference will be based on a rapid assessment of…issues and a dynamic…evaluation of the rhetorical priorities for the paper under consideration” (Pemberton, 11).

The effective implementation of an agenda strategy in the writing center curriculum would help improve that lack of transparency in expectation that often leads to a restriction on time productivity. I propose that during training, the writing center tutors practice prioritizing issues with the goal to create improvement in the process of writing.

Alongside transparency in expectation, the second requirement of a time efficient system is the ability of the tutor to observe the writer’s development and to cater the sessions to that individual’s specific needs. The challenge of the Georgetown Writing Center is implementing the virtues of a consistent tutor-writer relationship without necessitating that a writer work with the same tutor each time. As discussed earlier, assigning students with a specific tutor might limit the amount of writers that would have access to the writing center, so an alternative would provide more equal opportunity for writing consultation. This alternative should somehow make the tutor more aware of the writer’s progress and ideally, his or her underlying problems in writing.

According to the Georgetown University Writing Center online wiki, tutors should optimally follow this advice:

*at the beginning of a shift, look through your appointments on the online schedule; click on each appointment on the schedule to view the information that each client has entered about his or her assignment. Within the window, click on the link that allows you to “View” session notes that have been written about this client, and read the most recent note or two to get a sense of what kinds of writing issues he or she has been working on in past sessions* (“The Tutoring Session”).

The current client report system is extremely helpful in reflecting upon a tutoring session in order to help a tutor gage his or her progress in tutoring strategies and their effectiveness; however, client reports are not currently used to their full potential as a preparatory tool to stimulate writer development.

Currently, the client reports take on a journal format. Tutors tend to write the reports as a stream of consciousness, reflecting upon the writer’s assignment, what happened during the session, and thoughts about the writer’s writing skills overall. However, in the short time that tutors have to look over a few client reports before the session, anecdotes about past sessions might not serve to make the writer’s current session more productive. Therefore, it would be more beneficial to reorganize the client report template to prioritize a succinct description of underlying issues and effective strategies before the tutor’s journal-like entry to create ease and speed in a tutor’s preparation before the session. This organized communication of information would allow the tutor to obtain a better perspective of expectation to best address not only the writer’s short-term goals for a certain assignment, but also the writer’s long-term goals (conscious or otherwise) in his or her writing development.

Together, the implementation of an agenda-setting strategy paired with a more effective form of communication between tutors (through an improved client report system) could increase transparency in expectation as well as create greater familiarity of the writer’s unique needs and of comfort levels with different tutoring strategies. These improvements in the areas of expectation and familiarity would help to best model a consistent tutor-writer relationship and therefore increase time efficiency in the writing center. Ideally, these changes would facilitate the development of writing as a skill, thereby fulfilling the writing center’s mission and serving the student body to its full potential.

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