

AS EFFECTIVE AS ASPIRIN OR DARK CHOCOLATE: THE WRITING CENTER AS PREVENTATIVE MEDICINE

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In the fight against heart disease, the popular media regularly report that an ounce of prevention—an aspirin a day, for example, or a piece of dark chocolate—goes a long way. The preventative approach applies equally well in the fight against underdeveloped writing skills among college students: the earlier inexperienced writers seek help, the better off they are likely to be. However, the medicinal value of a visit to the Writing Center is woefully under-reported.

Students and faculty tend to view the campus-writing center as a hospital, a place where specialists are expected to “make things better” (Pemberton 14). Yet, we in the writing center prefer helping to make writers themselves better. As part of ongoing efforts at Queens University of Charlotte to counter misperceptions of our Writing Center as solely a “fix-it shop” (North 35), we have endeavored to raise our profile as a preventative-medicine provider.

Our oft-repeated message to students and faculty focuses on providing “friendly feedback at any stage in the ongoing process of writing” (“Writing Center”). Yet, following writing center maven Muriel Harris’s proposal to use positive “sticky prose” to foster awareness of the center’s benefits is not always enough (49). Sharing this message at student and faculty orientation events, in classroom presentations, and in our internal and external communications to students, faculty, and staff does not guarantee understanding.

To help give the message traction, we have begun cultivating relationships with faculty encouraging them to involve our Writing Center in their students’ composition process. We already enjoy strong support from many in the English department, where the composition courses are readily employing group peer review and encouraging awareness of writing as a recursive process. So, we instead have turned our attention to communications, history, psychology,

anthropology, and sociology faculty to offer our services to their students in a group setting.

Before faculty members set their syllabi for an upcoming semester, I make contact by email outlining the advantage to students of working with our Writing Center tutors early in the writing process. I reiterate this pitch often, verbally, when I have an opportunity in the campus cafeteria or while attending faculty development luncheons.

I propose faculty work with us to schedule group sessions in the Writing Center. They might encourage their students to join tutor-led brainstorming sessions soon after assigning a paper so that tutors can help students work together to identify targeted approaches to their topics. Alternatively, we might work with the students a little later in the assignment cycle, but before drafts are due, to outline papers. For one course, we helped students differentiate between summarizing and evaluating sources through guided discussion and compare/contrast writing activities. In another instance, which also demonstrated the mobility of Writing Center services, a peer tutor attended class on a day introducing the library’s database search tools. The tutor helped students decide how to frame and focus search queries and research questions.

Inviting students to the Center as a group for a session endorsed by faculty and arranged specifically to meet the needs of the students in that course at that moment has many benefits. (The only drawback, really, is the scheduling headache of trying to find mutually agreeable times for student groups and tutors to meet—cause to take the aspirin or chocolate mentioned earlier.) The group setting makes the visit to the Center less intimidating—students are with friends, or at least classmates, when they first venture in. They don’t feel singled out for special help because they see faculty members encouraging every student to

benefit from our services. As a result, we gain access to an entire class of students. If at least a few of them observe that they now have a better grasp of the assignment, greater confidence in their ability to write a paper, or a stronger sense of what they want to say, then the effort is a success. A positive experience with a Writing Center tutor, in the unthreatening group setting, also helps elicit individual visits by students on their own, even when unprompted by their professors. After a group session, a student not only realizes what help the Writing Center can offer early on in writing an assignment, but the student also has a familiar, friendly face to look for when seeking individual assistance.

This group tutoring initiative also raises the center's exposure among faculty members. For instance, faculty members who haven't incorporated our services into their students' writing assignments have still shown greater interest in what we do after receiving my proposal. For example, simply reaching out to suggest group tutoring led to invitations to meet individually with two history professors, esteemed members of the Queens community. We met to discuss how they might better evaluate student writing and address specific writing concerns. One of these distinguished professors later attended a Writing Center workshop on APA style and was enthusiastic about its usefulness. The other began requiring weekly Writing Center assistance for several students. These connections began with the invitation to tailor a writing initiative to the needs of the professors' students.

The tutors benefit as well. Knowing that they had not been trained in group-tutoring when I launched the initiative, I incorporated a new assignment into our Level Two Training program under the College Reading and Learning Association. Returning tutors research group tutoring in general, then provide me with bulleted action plans applying their research. This individual study project refines their knowledge of tutoring, broadens their awareness of relevant resources available online and in the library, and enables them to apply the concepts they've researched. At the same time, it provides the Writing Center, with a resource library for group tutors.

The tutors also respond favorably to working in a group environment. They welcome the opportunity to do something different, interact with students before the "my paper's due in an hour" stage of the writing process, and help students work together as a group to come up with ideas for approaching their assignments. One tutor noted, "As paradoxical as it might sound, I often find that group sessions better provoke self-teaching and self-learning. Instead of providing some of the background to a given problem, I will silence myself and let the other members of the group answer the question" (Johnson). Stepping back and enabling the students to self-learn and think aloud in a group leads to better learning and will likely result in improved classroom dynamics.

Even though students might not self-select for group tutoring, if they are prompted while here to take ownership of the discussion and to work together collaboratively with tutors acting only as guides, their wariness or resentment may diminish. After all, their peers are doing it—and benefiting—so why not join in and get something from the experience too?

Alaina Feltenberger and Allison Carr favor the physical therapist as a fitting medical metaphor for the writing center consultant, as "over time, consultants can help clients learn to stand on their own" ("Framing Versatility"). Yet a patient typically visits a physical therapist only after a diagnosis of injury. If we wait for students to receive such diagnoses from faculty or to self-diagnose their own writing maladies, we are doing nothing to combat the negative perception of the Writing Center as merely a place where writing gets fixed. Instead, a more proactive approach of working with students early on, empowering them to generate ideas they can be excited about pursuing, and helping them to visualize alternative ways of organizing their material, helps alter the proofreading shop perception. Our aim, of course, is not to prevent students from coming to our Writing Center with papers later on, but rather to emphasize the added benefit of early assistance in generating and organizing ideas.

These efforts are in their early stages at Queens, but the prognosis thus far is good. Group sessions early in the writing process benefit both students and

tutors, while raising Writing Center awareness overall. We hope this initiative proves an effective inoculation against writing center misperceptions on campus, helping to spread the word of our tutors' good work in helping students become better writers.

Works Cited

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