

RE-ENVISIONING THE BROWN UNIVERSITY MODEL: EMBEDDING A DISCIPLINARY WRITING CONSULTANT IN AN INTRODUCTORY U.S. HISTORY COURSE

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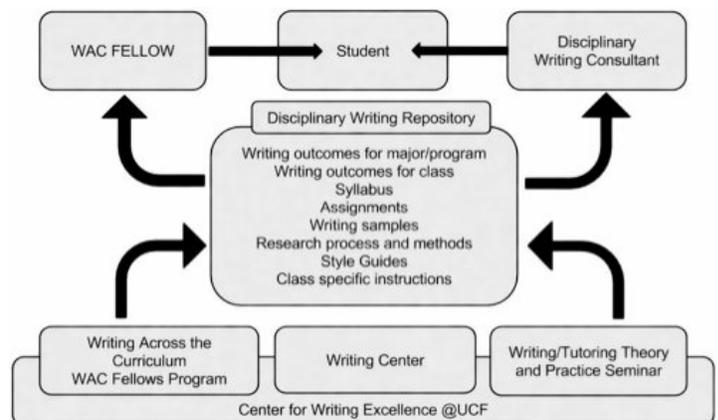
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College writers often wish for a sympathetic reader who can offer feedback on a draft or assist during the invention or revision process. Established in 1982, the Brown University's Writing Fellows Program was the first to formally pair small cohorts of students with a writing tutor to receive individual assistance for the duration of a course. According to the university website, today the Writing Fellows Program is a student-driven initiative in its 32nd year, in which students "work in a spirit of collegiality, helping to extend intellectual discourse beyond the classroom." Inspired by the success of Writing Fellows Programs that have emerged across the country, the Disciplinary Writing Consultant (DWC) Program at the University of Central Florida (UCF) was designed to offer individual support to student writers without mandating participation. Diverging from the Brown model, only one DWC was embedded in a course of approximately 50 students and offered *voluntary* writing assistance both in class and in writing center consultations. The goal was to bring the writing center into the classroom to encourage ongoing collaborations between students, instructor and the DWC. Building and maintaining such complex partnerships in higher education is a challenge. Condon and Rutz insist that "successful WAC requires a complex partnership among faculty, administrators, writing centers, [and] faculty development programs—an infrastructure that may well support general education or first year seminar goals" (359). This assertion outlines one of the driving questions at this major research university: How can a network of partnerships between faculty, administrators, and writing consultants benefit students and support their learning? Specifically, how can this work be done effectively at the second largest public university in the country?

In 2012, the newly formed Center for Writing Excellence became home to the existing University Writing Center (UWC) and the newly formed Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program. Both programs moved into a renovated space in a centrally-located academic building. At UCF, faculty members who complete semester-long WAC training in writing instruction, assessment, and assignment design successfully earn the designation of a WAC Fellow. Writing tutors who have completed a three credit-hour course in theory and practice in tutoring writing through the writing center and have tutored at the UWC for at least one semester can become DWCs.

Figure 1: To support student learning, faculty complete a one-semester WAC fellowship and writing tutors complete a three credit-hour course and internship in the writing center before becoming a Disciplinary Writing Consultant in the University Writing Center.



Both WAC Fellows and DWCs contribute materials, including writing outcomes, syllabi, assignments and sample texts for the major/program and writing

intensive course(s) to a web-based Disciplinary Writing Repository. Currently, these files are stored on the WAC and UWC websites, allowing faculty and students to access the repository at any time. Our overall mission is to support student learning while fostering a culture of open communication among faculty and writing consultants.

Once WAC Fellows have taught at least a semester using the updated assignments and assessment techniques, they can request a DWC. These writing consultants bring their training and experience as generalist tutors in the University Writing Center to their work with the DWC program. In spring 2014, our third semester of forging relationships across campus with Chemistry, Nursing, Political Science, and History, a DWC was embedded in an introductory U.S. history course (AMH 1010). In this article, we will focus solely on the “history course model.” Drawing on results from surveys, the authors will describe, analyze, and evaluate the program’s design, implementation, and effectiveness.

The History Course Model

From studying WAC programs and writing center histories, we know that one size does not fit all. Considering our local context, the WAC program developed an approach to training three to five member faculty cohorts from the same department willing to learn about writing pedagogy. The program is limited to three to four cohorts per semester. Among the first to sign up was Dr. Murphree, who continues to participate in ongoing research efforts into teaching and learning in order to offer his students the most effective experience of learning “how to write as a historian” in his classes. In “Writing wasn’t really stressed, accurate historical analysis was stressed: Student Perceptions of In-Class Writing in the Inverted, General Education, University Survey Course,” Murphree describes how the focus on writing in a General Education Program (GEP)¹ lecture class has challenged and changed student perceptions of writing.

Embedding a writing consultant in a history course was a new experience for all. Dr. Murphree decided to be cautious in how he integrated the DWC into the course design and daily class activities. Consequently, he changed very little in terms of format or assignments from his previous flipped courses. The 49 students would study assigned readings and be prepared to discuss historical events, issues, or problems in class on Monday and Wednesday. Fridays were reserved for students to learn to write “as historians.” The DWC was

accessible to students in three ways: she attended the course each Friday so that students could ask questions as they worked on their in-class writing assignments; she monitored a “discussion board” on the course web platform daily, inviting students to post questions about writing for the class; and she was available to consult with students at a drop-in office hour each week on Wednesdays after class, which allowed students to revise the previous week’s essay based on instructor feedback and/or to plan the essay for the following Friday. Furthermore, students had the opportunity to make an appointment with the DWC in the writing center during her regular hours. With eight hours per week on the schedule, availability before, during, and after class, and a dedicated office hour, the expectation was that the number of self-selected students who sought the DWC’s assistance would not surpass her availability. We planned for flexible meeting times, including shorter consultations, and small group meetings. In the event that not all appointment slots were filled with history writers, the DWC was available for drop-in writers in the UWC. The history instructor envisioned the DWC as a supplement to student learning in the course; the DWC would duplicate his in-class efforts to assist students in their writing while being available outside of class to help students better understand their writing problems and improve their efforts.

Student Buy-In

Achieving student buy-in proved more difficult than we anticipated. Despite continued reminders about the role of the DWC in the course, only two students scheduled a consultation before midterms. One student came in for a hurried appointment the day that the first out-of-class writing assignment was due, and the other wanted to review a graded in-class essay. No student dropped by during office hours. Other avenues for connecting with students proved no more fruitful. The first in-class writing assignment yielded several questions about citations and thesis statements, and students approached both Dr. Murphree and the DWC during the class session. Later, however, the number of student questions decreased significantly, and when a student did have a question, they would ask the course instructor directly. In addition to her continued presence in the classroom, the DWC also attempted to assist students by posting inside a secure class management system (CMS) site in a discussion board section titled “Questions for the Embedded Disciplinary Writing Consultant.” This site was widely utilized by the class for other course activities. Despite encouragement,

students did not ask questions. To engage students, the DWC posted entries on common writing issues identified in student essays. By the second month of the semester, the DWC was frustrated. Her first year of graduate school was her fifth working in writing centers (in varying capacities at much smaller schools), and she had never experienced so little student engagement. As a generalist tutor at UCF and elsewhere, she typically encountered the opposite problem: walk-in writers were asked to return at a later hour because the tutoring schedule was so full.

Changing Directions

During the midterm assessment, the low utilization of the DWC prompted the coordinator, instructor, and the DWC to create incentives for learning that would focus on revision. Extra credit would be offered for students who chose to revise graded in-class writing assignments and resubmit the essay with a rationale for revision attached. After spring break, the DWC announced in a new post to the discussion board that revising a graded essay would not only help students to continue working with past concepts, it would also “give [students] strategies to employ as [they] write future in-class essays for AMH 2010.” As a bonus, students were allowed to revise past essays for extra credit (up to 10 points, equaling a letter grade). The revision policy increased traffic during the DWC’s office hours as well as scheduled appointment hours. Several students repeatedly came to revise their work. Overall, within five weeks the DWC had fifteen appointments with nine different students. They were mostly struggling with the idea of evidence-based writing or with formulating a thesis aligned with the history content of the week.

The extra credit incentive seemed to be the deciding factor for the students who responded to the revision challenge. For the most part, they were motivated, not struggling writers. Most had received Bs or high Cs on the original drafts of their essays. Several students disclosed to the DWC that they were committed to getting the full value of extra points available for their revision because they wanted to earn an A in the class. As some students came in several times during the second half of the semester, the DWC saw improvements in their writing and argumentation. Specifically, she saw underclassmen utilize the mini-lessons they had gone over in her consultations, watching as they filled out inverted pyramids to structure background-rich introductions; began to see how topic sentences form the backbone of an organized essay; and realized that they were, in

fact, able to engage with their professor’s assessment of a historical period.

Methodology

At the end of the spring 2014 semester we gauged student perceptions of writing assignments and course content through an IRB-approved survey. This survey added nine questions specifically focused on the role of the DWC in the course to 32 existing questions (six of which required a written answer; the remainder consisted of multiple-choice responses) from previous semesters (2013) in which Dr. Murphree researched student perceptions about instructional techniques, required assignments, and student engagement. Specific questions addressed the effectiveness of the course in terms of student learning of history content and student improvement in writing (informal and formal). All students had the option of completing the survey for extra credit points, and the survey was administered by a colleague with no direct connection to the courses taught.

Figure 2: The three courses and number of survey respondents.

2 sections of flipped mode without embedded DWC (2013) AMH 2020	n=85
1 section of flipped mode with embedded DWC (2014) AMH 2010	n=42

Not all students responded to every answer (for unknown reasons), making the number of question responses inconsistent.

Writing Assignments and Student Perceptions

In terms of final student grades, few differences are evident between the Flipped, GEP courses taught with a DWC and without one.

Figure 3: Average overall grade for number of enrolled students.

	AMH 2020 without DWC (AMH 2020)	AMH 2010 with DWC (AMH 2010)
Enrolled students	n=107	n=49
AVG student score	79.7	81.1

Since the numerical difference between scores for the two groups was only 1.4 points, the grades themselves reflect little difference in student performance. Moreover, according to the GPA guidelines established for these courses, the 2013 and 2014 course averages both equated to a grade of “B.” In

sum, the various differences in both groups render these numbers useful primarily in an anecdotal sense, without sufficiently demonstrating that an embedded DWC caused a student grade increase. Results from pre- and post-tests administered in all courses confirm this conclusion.

Comparing student responses to certain questions administered in 2013-2014 surveys provides information not only on teaching strategies across semesters and courses but also on how students view the role of writing. Several questions pertained specifically to student perceptions of assigned writing in the course.

Figure 4: Student perceptions of assigned writing.

	AMH 2020 without DWC 2013	AMH 2010 with DWC Spring 2014
"Do you feel that the in class essay assignments improved your <u>understanding of course content</u> ?"	81 (96.4%) Yes 3 (3.6%) No	40 (95%) Yes 2 (5%) No
"Do you feel that the out of class essay assignments improved your <u>writing skills</u> ?"	74 (88.1%) Yes 10 (11.9) No	31 (74%) Yes 11 (26%) No

These responses indicate that students in all sections believed that in class and out of class writing assignments improved both understanding of course content and student writing skills, though more students in the 2013 courses did so than in the 2014 course.

Surveys for both years also included questions that allowed students to respond in their own words about the value of the writing done in the course.² In response to the question "Do you believe the writing exercises you completed in this course will benefit you in other UCF courses? Why or why not?" one student from a 2013 section (no DWC) enthusiastically wrote: "Absolutely! I have written so much now that I feel like I will be able to structure essays for other classes better and write efficiently and effectively." Another from the same group stated "Yes," reasoning, "While not all classes require a brief overview of content like history does, some forms of writing such as summaries & analysis papers have overlapping qualities w/ history-based writing." Similarly, one student taking the same course opined, "Yes because the in class essays were timed so it required you to be organized before you start writing." Students in the 2014 section (with DWC), expressed comparable opinions, at times with matching enthusiasm. "Yes it pushed me to read and study more so it sticks in my mind," wrote one student. Another noted "yes, the course helped me become a better writer and would be useful in other classes." However, some students had mixed views on their writing experiences. One student in a 2013

section (no DWC) wrote: "The in-class essays were difficult for me to finish but ultimately increased my skills as a writer." A student in the 2014 section (with a DWC) seems to agree that the course structure was "Very effective, writing improved due to the amount of essays." Another student taking the 2013 course remarked: "Although tedious, it challenged me as a writer and encouraged me to use the UWC [University Writing Center]." Similarly, a student in the 2014 course offered, "Although writing was extensive, it definitely helped in improving my writing skills" Students generally placed great value on the writing assignments in the course.

A complex, rhetorically framed writing assignment challenged students and engaged them, but only when they recognized the value of the assignment beyond the classroom. One student in a 2013 section (no DWC) simply wrote "I don't feel like my writing has improved." Another from this cohort responded, "No, I am not a history major." A third 2013 student offered, "Maybe. I'm a business major, so writing in this format or this content isn't particularly relevant in my opinion." Some students from the 2014 cohort (with embedded DWC) echoed these sentiments. In response to the same question, one stated, "No, Because not much of my major is writing based." Another offered, "No because writing about history cannot be applied to my other courses." A respondent from a 2013 section commented, "Although my writing has improved it was never a strong point of mine. Being an engineering major my future at UCF is one filled with math and physics not history and writing (unless of course it's a lab report)." Based on these comments, one's chosen major seems to have an impact on perceptions of writing exercises' utility and student engagement in this history course. These responses also have implications on how instructors and DWC should talk about the value of writing transfer with their students, in order to ensure that they can apply writing strategies learned in one educational context to other disciplines and professional contexts.

Nine questions in the survey administered to students in the 2014 course specifically addressed the DWC, five of which were multiple-choice questions:

Figure 5: Student perceptions of the DWC.

Survey Questions	Yes	No
"Do you feel the Embedded Writing tutor improved your writing skills?"	19 (45%)	23 (55%)
"Do you feel that the Embedded Writing tutor improved your performance on in class essay assignments?"	19 (45%)	22 (54%)
"Do you feel that the Embedded Writing tutor improved your understanding of course content?"	13 (31%)	29 (69%)
"Do you feel that the Embedded Writing tutor improved your performance on out of class Discussion postings?"	13 (31%)	29 (69%)
"Do you feel that the Embedded Writing tutor improved your performance on out of class essay assignments?"	14 (46%)	27 (66%)

Based on these numbers, about 2/3 of students did not regard the DWC as beneficial to their writing skills. Moreover, most students contended that the DWC did not advance their learning in the course in other areas as well. However, the DWC did benefit more than 1/3 of students in improving their writing or learning historical content. Considering that the incentive was not implemented until after the midterm, the numbers appear encouraging.

Other aspects of the survey responses indicate that student viewpoints of the DWC are a bit more complicated. Four students used the margins of the survey paper itself to comment that they had never used the DWC. Other student comments on the survey seemed to indicate that regardless of their opinions on the DWC's role in the course, many students never approached the DWC for assistance. In response to the question "Specifically, how did the Embedded Writing tutor assist you in this course?" sixteen of the forty-two respondents admitted to never meeting or asking the DWC for help. Among the responses in this regard are, "I did not at any point speak or communicate with the Embedded Writing Tutor"; "I did not seek assistance, but we did receive a handout with writing tips for the future"; "not at all, never asked for help"; and "I never asked for help & therefore never received it." Two of the multiple-choice survey question responses reflect the lack of student engagement with the DWC.

The following numbers suggest that either students did visit the writing center but did not seek out the embedded writing tutor or their perceptions are exaggerated. When asked, "How many times did you consult the Embedded Writing tutor during in-class writing sessions?" 1 (2%) responded "More than 5 times," 6 (14%) responded "2-5 times," 8 (19%) responded "1 time," and 27 (64%) responded "0 times." Self-reported student use of the DWC outside of class reflects comparable numbers/percentages. In response to the question "How many times did you

make/keep an appointment with the Embedded Writing tutor outside of class?" 2 (5%) answered "More than 5 times," 5 (12%) answered "2-5 times," 11 (26%) answered "1 time," and 24 (57%) answered "0 times." These data do not match records in TutorTrac,³ where our logs show that actual numbers are lower.

Students' final comments reflected the seemingly contradictory responses in the survey assessing the DWC's benefit to students. While many students did not utilize the DWC for writing assistance, some valued the presence and skills of the DWC in the course, at least according to their written responses. One student reported that the DWC "helped me improve my introduction paragraphs for in-class essay revisions." Another appreciated the DWC for "Helping me revise my essays mainly with the organization aspect of them, and overall helping me become a better writer." Those students who did approach the DWC for help seemed to have improved their writing in multiple ways. "The tutor helped me develop a thesis for history papers and to build a stronger argument," one student explained, adding: "Also, she helped me with appropriate citations." Speaking for the class as a whole, one student claimed, "She helped guide students in the right direction. When it came to in class writings she helped identify the structure of how the paper should be as well as helped the student how to get more out of the reading to help the in class essay." Another student expressed their appreciation for the assistance obtained from the DWC, concluding, "The writing tutor helped me so much in revising my in class essays. She showed me how to structure my introductions, topic sentences and information, and I ultimately became a better writer."

Further evidence that the DWC conformed to student expectations of assistance came in the form of responses to the question "What could the Embedded Writing tutor do differently in this course to improve your writing skills?" Of the 42 student respondents, only 19 provided a response other than "nothing" (the majority of this group left no response at all). Three others responded "I don't know, I found her very helpful," "She did a lot already," and "She was great. No complaints." Some students did offer suggestions, however. Seven students responded in a variety of ways that they wanted the DWC to devote more time to students in the course: "The embedded writing tutor could be more accessible [sic]." Expanding on this theme, seven other students wanted the DWC to have a greater role in the course as a whole ("Be more involved with the actual content"), provide more teaching materials and classroom presentations and

“Directly grade/comment on written essays.” Two other students made more specific comments along these lines. One suggested making it “mandatory to see” the DWC. Another agreed, advocating making it “required to see her for at least one essay. I’m sure it is extremely helpful.” So despite the general lack of student engagement with the DWC, some students requested a heightened role for the position in the course in the future. Although the program was intentionally constructed without requiring visits from all students, these responses indicate that for some students, making consultations mandatory constitutes the necessary motivation for using the services of the DWC.

Moving Forward

Undergraduates in all sections indicated support of the flipped structure and related assignments, and in general preferred this technique to the lecture/exam model traditionally used in GEP History courses in U.S. institutions of higher education. Student grades in the courses indicate that their favorable perceptions are matched by increased knowledge of content as well. Use of the DWC in the 2014 course, on the other hand, prompted divergent student perceptions. Survey responses indicate that even students who did not use the DWC valued the assistance, or potential assistance. One student claimed that they did not seek help from the DWC but admitted that “I could have approached her and made appointments to critique my writing.” Another student remarked, “I never used it but it was nice reassurance if I ever needed the help.” A third student offered, “If I would have looked for the help it would have helped me better organize my paper but I didn’t really meet much with her.” A fourth student seemed to regret not seeking assistance from the DWC, writing “I didn’t ask help from the tutor, but I would have liked to.” Another student contended that she/he did not work with the DWC due to time constraints: “I loved how she was there to help and there should be someone available everytime. However, I did not use her to my advantage because I have a busy schedule, but I know I should have!” At least one other student acknowledged that the DWC may have helped improve her/his writing skills, noting “I didn’t seek out her help this semester but it seems that everyone who did improved in their work!” While not all students utilized the DWC, those who did seemed to have benefitted from the experience. A few lamented not using the expertise of the DWC, and some believed the DWC should have a greater role in course instruction and assessment. Overall, it appears that students appreciated the potential advantages of

having a DWC in the course but rarely took advantage of the resource.

In terms of embedding a disciplinary writing consultant in a GEP class, requiring every student to meet with a writing tutor for a prescribed number of consultations is unfeasible, given the consultant-student ratio of about 1:50. However, more research is needed regarding how best to engage students throughout the semester. Some students also suggested embedding a writing consultant only in upper division classes. Nevertheless, the student perceptions included above illustrate that while they value the expertise and assistance a DWC can provide, they do not appear to be sufficiently motivated to use this resource on a voluntary basis. Motivation can be encouraged by:

- course design that stresses revision and reflection
- instructor feedback that includes a specific referral in final comment on writing
- extra credit incentives that reward students for reflective revision (e.g. letter to instructor about revision plans or revision log attached to revised draft in collaboration with writing tutor)

In short, the DWC offers options for improving student course performance, but the tools’ effectiveness depends on close collaboration and student motivation. The issue of student engagement is one that none of the authors could solve alone. Our limited success emerged from being able to assess the needs of this particular class of students once the semester was already underway, and to adapt the program to meet those needs.

Notes

¹ Students at many American universities and colleges have to complete a required set of coursework during their first two years of college, which is referred to as the specific university or state’s General Education Program (GEP).

² Student-written responses from the survey have not been edited, so as to preserve the original style and voice of the authors.

³ TutorTrac is the online management software platform this writing center uses for making appointments, logging students tutoring services, and communicating with tutees by sending reminders, summary session notes of consultations, and information about additional resources useful for revision plans developed during the consultation.

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