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Re-engineering the North American Writing Center Model in East Asia

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by *Adam Turner*

Lessons learned from working with faculty and graduate student engineers, doctors, and scientists in Korea.



Adam Turner

As writing centers spread internationally, the North American mode of operation as a largely non-directive peer-tutoring center primarily directed at undergraduate students will have to be adapted to local needs and cultures. I would like to describe one such unique accommodation: the **Hanyang University English Writing Center** in Seoul, Korea. The English Writing Center, which is part of the Hanyang Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL), was first started as a result of a proposal I made in 2003. The center differs from North American writing centers, not only in practice but even in its purpose. This article explains how and why adapting to local needs resulted in a writing center design that is quite different from North American writing centers.

The process

In meeting the needs of Korean faculty and graduate student clients, even the process of receiving writing center help had to be modified from conventional writing center practice. To get writing assistance, clients email their journal articles or conference papers in English to the writing center. As the only foreign faculty member in the department, I do the editing and conferencing alone; however, I have an assistant who helps create materials for research writing, and the CTL provides organizational support for workshops. I also help with journal article revisions based on reviewers' comments, which many writing center clients have trouble deciphering.

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To help me understand the different types of writing in each field, clients must include a sample article, in a PDF file, from the journal in which they want to publish. Seeing so many sample papers from diverse fields has helped me to better recognize the different characteristics of writing in different fields, genres of articles within a field, and even the different sub-fields in a particular discipline. I now recognize how the structure of the introduction section can differ in civil, chemical, and electronic engineering articles, for example. In North America, it is a common practice for tutors to ask their clients for a description of the assignment from the professor. Those who, like me, often work with students on papers outside of their field might also consider asking clients to bring or email a good example of the type of writing they are doing before the conferencing session begins. This would help the tutor understand what a good example of writing in that field should look like.

With the aid of the editing and comment functions of MS Word, I email the edited paper with suggestions for revision to the clients. In many cases, I follow up the email editing with a face-to-face conference. Often, two or three subsequent revisions are needed before sending a paper to a proofreading service or directly to the journal for consideration. Hanyang University supports this time-consuming process by reducing my teaching load and giving me a quota to limit the number of papers; otherwise, I could not keep up with the demand.

Online vs. traditional writing centers

Unlike the international students who come to writing centers in North America, most who seek help at our center are not attending any classes in English or studying English in a formal program. Some of the students I work with have limited spoken English skills but a high level of reading comprehension in their field. Therefore, many of them prefer to take their time to read, understand, and think about my written comments before meeting me face-to-face in "real-time." This also allows both the client and myself to better prepare questions for a more efficient use of the face-to-face time. Many clients also prefer to discuss the paper only through email. Just as many universities have chosen to move toward a hybrid or blended type of learning that combines online and classroom learning, I have found this combination of online and face-to-face feedback to be the most effective and flexible for writing center work. The common separation between online and face-to-face writing center service may need to be reexamined.

Graduate science students are the main clients

One of the biggest decisions in setting up the Hanyang writing center was to only serve graduate students and faculty. This was done for two reasons. The first reason for the focus on research writing for publication in English rather than writing assigned in class was because Hanyang students write documents such as lab reports in Korean. Furthermore, students will write most types of professional documents in Korean in fields such as engineering when they enter the workforce. They are also more likely than North American students to learn professional writing skills entirely on the job. The academic field of technical writing has not developed in Korea.

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The second reason is that, compared to North American universities, Korean undergraduate students are required to write very few essays, even in Korean. Furthermore, undergraduate students are often not taught or required to have the research and referencing skills required at North American universities. Therefore, the high level of demand for help with freshman composition essays that exists at North American writing centers does not exist in Korea. Where undergraduate writing center services exist in Korea they mostly serve general English programs that build on language skills rather than essays assigned in content courses. Instead, at Korean research universities, the greatest need is for English writing support for international journal publication in English. For example, in order to graduate from the engineering department at Hanyang, Ph.D. students must publish English articles in international journals. In contrast, faculty and graduate students in the social sciences and humanities publish less frequently, are more likely to write in Korean, and are less likely to publish in internationally ranked English journals than their colleagues in engineering and other sciences. Therefore, unlike most North American writing centers, the overwhelming majority of Hanyang writing center clients are not only graduate students rather than undergraduates, but are also from engineering and other sciences rather than the social sciences and humanities.

Cultural considerations

Cultural differences also affect the dynamics of writing center work in interesting ways. In Korean culture, which is strongly influenced by Confucianism, age differences of even a year must be respected, which makes a peer model of interaction more difficult to implement. There is also no tradition of peer counseling or organized peer tutoring in Korea. Partially because of these differences, Hanyang and the Seoul National University English Writing Center in Korea, which serves undergraduate students, decided not to use a peer tutor model for the writing center. Another illustration of the importance of age difference is that, at Hanyang, the student English newsmagazine only recruits freshman students so they will not be older than the current student editors. Some North American writing center staff may not realize just how culturally-bound the idea of peer tutoring is for some international students.

The lab is the client

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The working environment of the scientific laboratory was also another important "cultural" influence in designing the Hanyang Writing Center. From working with graduate scientists, I came to see the lab, rather than the individual, as my essential writing center client. Almost all the papers I receive are co-authored, and the ones that are not are usually from the social sciences. Especially in Korea, the research topic is often set or approved by the professor, but a Ph.D. student is usually the primary author who writes the paper while master's students usually help with the experiments. Therefore, when working with science students, I do not need to focus on traditional writing center conferencing priorities such as helping students to narrow down a topic or create a more focused thesis statement. When I sit down with the primary

author, I am really only meeting a representative stakeholder for the paper. The final version of the paper I work on with the client must be approved by the senior supervising faculty member. As a result, I see my role, along with the primary author, the supervising professor, and the final proofreader chosen by the client, as part of a team.

Directive vs. non-directive conferencing

Some of the cultural assumptions that underlie conferencing practices in North America also did not seem to fit the milieu I was working in. In the collaborative, but often very critical, scientific environment of the research lab with multiple "editors" and authors working on a paper before and after I review it, practices such as not marking a student's paper or concern for individual voice in writing did not seem to be as relevant to my working context. Furthermore, rather than a non-directive approach based on a peer model, in Korea clients expect a more directive approach. Similarly, John Harbord has argued for trained writing instructor staff who adopt the role of the teacher as facilitator in writing centers to be a more appropriate model for Europe rather than a non-directive peer tutor model. I have found Harbord's model to also be more appropriate for Korea. Furthermore, as pointed out by Miller, Bausser, and Fentiman, in the sciences there is also perhaps too much difference between the more directive approach of professors and professionals in the field, and the non-directive approach often taken by writing instructors with regards to feedback. Although I follow a writing center model and do not proofread and correct all grammar mistakes, I do flag sentences that are not understandable for revision and may correct some important errors that interfere with communication. Those who proofread the paper after I work with the client must be able to understand the sentences in order to correct the grammar. Therefore, the need to publish the client's paper and not just have it receive a grade has caused me to adopt a practice that is somewhere between editing and conferencing.

In conclusion, some of the practices of the typical North American writing center model need to be adapted to fit international contexts and needs. This is especially true when working in fields beyond the humanities. Furthermore, as writing centers spread, dialogue between international and North American writing center staff may also help to foster a greater understanding of the cultural backgrounds and experiences of international students in their home countries. This understanding may ultimately help North American writing center staff better serve their international students.

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Center in Seoul, Korea. He teaches graduate writing classes in engineering and in English education and two writing classes for undergraduates in the Department of international Studies at Hanyang. He is currently writing a guide to engineering research writing in English for Korean graduate students at Hanyang. This is his seventh year in Korea. He can be contacted at adamturner7@gmail.com.

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