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## Sections

Focus  
Columns and  
Reviews  
Consulting  
Training  
News &  
Announcements

[Home](#) » [Archives](#) » [Spring 2006 \(Volume 3 Issue 2\) - Beyond the Humanities](#)

## A Writing Center-Education Department Collaboration: Training Teachers to Work One-on-One

Spring 2006 / Training

by *Jacob S. Blumner*

**An English professor explores the benefits of education major writing tutors.**

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## Archives

Browse past  
issues of Praxis

---

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Jacob S. Blumner

Writing centers regularly work to serve an entire campus community, developing satellite centers to make their services more convenient, and establishing an online presence to serve tech-savvy students. Some units outside of arts and sciences, such as business or health science, establish writing centers to better focus on their students' specific disciplinary writing needs. Many centers do community outreach that varies from providing a "grammar hotline" to collaborating with public schools and outside agencies on projects ranging from high school writing centers to corporate consulting. All of these activities support the main mission of a writing center: helping students become better writers. But writing centers can do more.

An often overlooked or underdeveloped element of the writing center is the professional development of the student-tutor and the place it plays in the student-tutor's education. For many that development is implicit; the egalitarian nature of writing centers has tutors collaborating on the projects listed above, as well as having them present and publish their work. Tutors take on additional responsibilities in writing centers, giving them valuable experience with things such as administration and marketing. This model of active professional development should be closely examined, and writing centers should target student populations who will most benefit from the experience of being tutors. In this particular case, I am advocating for a program that recruits and trains education students from all disciplines to tutor in the writing center.

Education students stand uniquely to benefit from the experiences of tutoring in a writing center. Once these students become teachers, they will need to work individually with their students. Certainly education students have the experience of working individually with a faculty member, and if they are fortunate, through their experiences in school, they will work individually with students through classroom internships or student teaching. But methods classes and student teaching provide little training and practice for working one-on-one with students. Though some programs may train future teachers how to conference individually with students, none provide the opportunity to gain as much experience as working in a writing center. Additionally, writing centers provide a special environment for conferences because peer tutoring dramatically reduces the authoritarian nature of student-teacher conferences, thus enabling the tutor and writer to really focus on what matters — the learning process. Writing center tutors learn how to work specifically on the writing — not the grade,

something on which teachers of writing should be focused. In a writing center, education students will be able to work with a variety of students from diverse backgrounds, and if they intend to teach high school, they can see what kinds of experiences and attitudes students have in and about college. They will also see the diverse kinds of writing demanded in college in all disciplines. So when they begin teaching high school, they will have a better understanding of what the future may hold for their students.

### **The collaboration between education programs and writing centers should be studied to bring another layer of research and scholarship to writing centers . . .**

Collaboration between education programs and writing centers seems natural. They share some common roots and literature. Both education and writing center scholarship draw on Vygotsky's zone of proximal development theory to individualize curricula for students, a theory that also supposes a collaborative process for education. Irene L. Clark and Dave Healy apply Vygotsky's theory to writing center pedagogy, arguing, "tutors should focus on 'functions that have not yet matured, but are in the process of maturation'" (92). Education majors who tutor will learn Vygotsky's theory and extensively practice pushing writers into the zone through collaborative tutoring sessions. This will eventually enable them as teachers to apply the same theory in their classrooms. (See Doolittle for an overview of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development in the classroom.)

Dovetailing nicely with Vygotsky's zone of proximal development is John Dewey's philosophy of education (see Lampert-Shepe). In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey argues against authoritarian teaching methods and for experiential-based education, claiming "When an activity is continued into the undergoing of consequences, when the change made by action is reflected back into a change made in us, the mere flux is loaded with significance. We learn something" (Dewey). Essentially, Dewey claims students learn best through action and reflection, both central practices to writing center pedagogy. In tutoring sessions, writers act by drafting, revising, and editing, and they reflect by discussing rhetorical decisions with the tutor. In every session, tutors must facilitate the action and reflection, maximizing learning by pushing writers into their zone of proximal development. Education majors who tutor can take their developed knowledge of talking and working with writers to their classrooms, finding insightful ways to help writers learn through experience and reflection.

The roots between English education and writing centers are particularly extensive, including the scholarship of James Britton, Peter Elbow, Donald Murray, Nancy Atwell, Stephen Tchudi, and Mike Rose. In fact, Irene Clark and Joyce Moyers have written about writing centers participating in English teacher training. But the collaboration should not stop with future English teachers. In her 1989 article, "Writing Across the Curriculum: The Second Stage, and Beyond," Susan McLeod advocated integrating writing across the curriculum into the fabric of a university so it will become an ingrained, accepted component of the academic curriculum. Once integrated, Writing Across the Curriculum will be better placed to help shape writing instruction. Writing centers also need to strive for integration into the curriculum, instead of remaining on the academic periphery. For many institutions, the writing center is what Muriel Harris calls the de facto WAC center. Faculty and administrators turn to the writing center for assistance with writing issues that range from improving a writing assignment to helping a program develop a curricular map for writing throughout a major or program. Writing centers have much to offer, and if they are better integrated into the academic fabric, they will be better positioned to serve faculty and students in ways that move beyond traditional tutorial sessions.

Writing centers have much to gain from education programs and students, as well. First, much of the research that writing center scholars rely on comes from education or English education scholars. An infusion of education students as tutors will bring an infusion of that theory and practice. The collaboration between education programs and writing centers should be studied to bring another layer of research and scholarship to writing centers, something writing center scholars, such as Beth Boquet, note is vital to writing center legitimacy and survival. The collaboration will add to the diversity of majors in the writing center and will lay the foundation for connections to the public schools and the community. With education majors as tutors, and in collaboration with schools of education, writing centers can reach out beyond the university walls. Writing centers can collaborate with local schools to develop writing centers within them, drawing on graduated tutors who become teachers. Potentially, the collaboration can serve as another training ground for education major tutors who, while still students, can work in the local schools' centers. Tutors can serve as mentors for

students in the public schools, and the university writing center can host workshops or other programs for local schools and the community. Additionally, education major tutors can lead community outreach projects involving Head Start programs, adult and community education programs, and community writing groups, as well as hosting workshops for community members. So it seems perfectly sensible to create a bridge between education and writing centers.

**Writing centers need to move beyond the traditional role of a physical entity providing services to students who come through their doors or bringing their services to the occasional classroom.**

What might such a program look like? I think it could take many forms, depending on local contexts and conditions, but here are some possibilities. Despite the heavy course load education students already have, programs could include a tutor training course as an elective because these courses are based heavily on pedagogy and on integrating practice (i.e. tutoring). If this is not an option, students could participate in an intensive tutor-training workshop so they would be adequately prepared to work with students and their writing. Education programs could make tutoring an elective internship or a service-learning component of one of their courses. This would enable education programs to add educational components that would tie the students' experience in a writing center to what they will be doing in a classroom. Some education programs may be fortunate enough to create these kinds of collaborations with local high school writing centers so their students would have the experience of tutoring the student population they may be teaching in the future. The programmatic possibilities are endless and exciting.

There are challenges that are real, but they can be overcome or avoided. Education programs, through state mandates, allow for few elective courses, so fitting a tutor-training course into the curriculum would be difficult. Strong arguments would have to be made to demonstrate how tutoring writing would benefit all education students, not just those intending to teach English. Peggy Broder's "Writing Centers and Teacher Training" is a good starting point for demonstrating the benefits to education students. In her essay, Broder details how working in a writing center provides valuable experience for future writing teachers and extrapolates some of the benefits to all teachers. WAC scholarship and state mandates for writing success could also be harnessed to argue for such a program. The National Commission on Writing released a report in April 2003 entitled, "**The Neglected R,**" in which they wrote, "We strongly endorse writing across the curriculum. The concept of doubling writing time is feasible because of the near-total neglect of writing outside of English departments" (31). Support from reports like "The Neglected R" and innovative programs, such as mentor programs in which tutors go into public schools to work with students, will entice education majors from disciplines other than English to participate. Ultimately, this will positively affect education at the primary and secondary levels, and potentially contribute to a seamless move for students to move from public school to the university.

With the success of these programs, writing center directors would have to safeguard against the writing center becoming an arm of the education program, designed only to serve education students and those writers seeking help, but I think with attention, that can be avoided.

The benefits of enriching writing center activity and personnel while developing a meaningful interdisciplinary collaboration with education programs outweigh the risks described above. As universities adapt to changes in student populations and curricular demands, writing centers need to follow suit. Writing centers need to move beyond the traditional role of a physical entity providing services to students who come through their doors or bringing their services to the occasional classroom. Changes in general education programs, the continuing push for greater accountability through assessment and accreditation, an increasing emphasis on interdisciplinarity, and more coursework in online and electronic environments make the need for integration and collaboration within a university more important so campus communities can create more integrated educational experiences for students.

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