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Shawn Andersson, Osaka University, Japan

Maho Nakahashi, Osaka University, Japan.

Corresponding author: [andersson@fsao.eng.osaka-u.ac.jp](mailto:andersson@fsao.eng.osaka-u.ac.jp)

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## **Discovering Methods of Bettering our Writing Desk: A Report on Visits to US University Writing Centers**

Shawn Andersson, Osaka University, Japan.

Maho Nakahashi, Osaka University, Japan.

### **Abstract**

English writing centers in Japan are a somewhat new phenomenon. The purpose of this study was to gain a perspective of actual operations of writing centers abroad. We visited the English writing centers of three universities in California with well-established, large centers to get a perspective of the day-to-day operations and best practices on how to run a writing center. The universities that we visited include the Hume Center for Writing and Speaking at Stanford University; the University of California, Berkeley Student Learning Center; and the University of California, Davis Student Academic Success Center.

*Keywords:* US universities, Japan English writing centers, higher education

### ***Introduction***

With the future prospect of the world becoming more globalized and interconnected, it becomes necessary for Japanese students to have the ability to share their research results with the rest of the world through such means as international conferences and research papers. Even if research demonstrates outstanding results, it would have no meaning to the rest of the world if it were not appropriately expressed in English. This issue has become a reality for Japanese students, and there is a real struggle in this regard. Given this situation, there is a significant need to provide English writing support at Japanese universities. If students can gain the support they need to better their writing skills in English, it will promote not only more sophisticated theses, but it will also motivate students to be confident and positive towards global interactions. Students in universities with access to frequent writing support can gain the necessary competencies to lead in the international society.

Even though writing centers have only recently been implemented in Japan since 2004 as a means to supplement Japanese students' writing capabilities, the first writing centers started in the United States during the 1930's (Williams & Severino, 2004). In Japan, there are now over 15 university writing centers, and their popularity keeps rising. However, there have been some startup issues. For instance, Japanese English writing centers have had trouble attracting users through advertising (Johnston, Yodisha, & Cornwell, 2010). It is also hard to find a single approach to operating writing centers, as each center differs from each

other and follows their own university needs within the available budget (Johnston, Yodisha, & Cornwell, 2010). There is even debate regarding the teaching methods that should be employed. Originally, it was believed that all writing centers should copy the US model of trying to guide students instead of acting as their proofreaders (Shamoon & Burns, 1995). However, researchers are now starting to believe that the US model can only be used as a guide, and cannot be directly imported into Japan.

With the above issues in mind, we expressed a goal of increasing the English research output ability of engineering students by opening our Writing Help Desk in 2015 within the School of Engineering at Osaka University. The purpose of establishing the desk was to allow us to address the individual strengths and weaknesses of each student, which would otherwise be difficult to accomplish through group learning methods such as class lectures. Since its opening, the desk has been very popular and is adding a lot of value to the students' university experiences. However, the Writing Help Desk has experienced various problems with the available budget, scheduling for tutors, location, effective advertising and general management. Currently, the desk is small, but due to its importance and the significant needs of Japanese students, we are now searching for a way to expand in the future.

We wanted to get a better fundamental idea on how to run a writing center and unique ways of thinking about best practices. Given that the United States was the birthplace of writing centers, we chose to visit three famous universities within California with well-established centers. We contacted each of the centers, and our visits were accommodated in August of 2016. After touring the facilities, we were able to sit down with and interview the staff.

While much of the current research has focused on the teaching methods of writing centers, the purpose of this report was to focus on two criteria: First, we wanted to look at management and administration practices regarding staffing, reserving, offered services and ways of advertising and promoting the centers. Second, we wanted to observe and question the center staff regarding unique strategies, special approaches and perceived purpose. The contents of this report include observations by the authors that were made throughout the tours, and do not necessarily constitute as official policies of the universities.

### **The Hume Center for Writing and Speaking, Stanford University**

The Hume Center for Writing and Speaking at Stanford University is centrally located in the middle of campus in the historical section. It opened in 2001 as the result of a merger of the writing and speaking centers together into one single center. Previously, the locations

of the departments were difficult to find. The facilities consist of a two-story building with several small to medium-sized rooms where sessions are conducted. These rooms were designed for the purpose of providing students with a more comfortable feeling and sense of privacy that comes from having one session per room rather than multiple sessions occurring together.

Each of the small rooms is furnished to have multiple accommodations including a large mounted television monitor to connect to computers. This is to provide a more interactive experience instead of both the tutor and tutee staring down the whole time at printed copies. The monitors, along with video cameras, also play an important role in helping with presentation sessions; the television can display the presentation slides while the sessions are recorded to provide feedback for later. The walls of each room are made of corkboard and whiteboards, allowing the students to write and tack papers on the walls for essay brainstorming.

The center provides various writing services for research, classes and even outside assistance for things like job-hunting applications. Staff are willing to help students with almost any type of writing support that they need. For speaking sessions, the center usually assists with public speaking presentations. The writing sessions are reserved for 30-minute sessions, while speaking sessions are 45 minutes long. However, students have the option of booking a double slot to make the sessions longer if needed.

Besides the individual small rooms, there is also a larger room that doubles as the Cafe and Drop-in area. The intention of this room is to provide a relaxing environment as seen in a real cafe with comfortable chairs. Students can come in for drop-in tutoring assistance, or they can just relax and write by themselves. Should they have a question, a tutor can be there to assist them. While most of the time this room is used for drop-in tutoring services, there are other times where the staff hold events to celebrate writing and speaking excellence with awards ceremonies for top speeches or essays.

Most of the students that are using the writing center are undergraduates, with occasional graduate and PhD students attending as well. Remarkably, the center services around a quarter of the entire undergraduate student population every year. In addition to the writing and speaking sessions, the center also frequently holds workshops with themes ranging from public speaking to writing methods for setting up arguments, brainstorming and more.

To reserve sessions, there is an online booking system where students can choose their own tutor, usually within their same major. Students are actually encouraged to try

different tutors at first, and once they find a tutor that they like, they can set up reoccurring sessions to meet on certain days every week. This allows the tutors to be familiar with the students' work and encourage them to keep returning. Reoccurring sessions can only be reserved one month in advance, but can be extended month-to-month.

The writing center tutors consist of both current Stanford University students for drop-in writing and speaking services, and well as professionals who provide appointment-based writing services. Hiring takes place once a year, and the tutors spend one quarter going through a training class. The department tries to hire for all majors so that there will always be someone with the appropriate knowledge for tutees.

At the time of applying, tutors choose their preference in becoming either writing or speaking tutors, and attend a training session based on this after being hired. Training sessions include learning about writing or speaking methods, and how not to be biased among other things. The tutors receive college credit for attending the training sessions, and training continues throughout the quarter through periodic workshops. The center eventually wants to offer tutors the opportunity to conduct both writing and speaking sessions in the near future, but this will require additional initial training time.

With regards to advertising, the Hume Center creates brochures to hand out and engages in social media. However, the main method of advertising is through word of mouth and partnerships with the faculty. It is imperative for the center to get the faculty to believe in the services so that they can promote the center. The Hume Center staff is invited by professors to visit their classes often where they hand out the brochures and free pens while talking about the center's services. Many faculties also put information about the Hume Center in their syllabi. Additionally, the Hume Center partners with the Undergraduate Advising and Research (UAR) department whose purpose is to help students choose their classes. The department often talks about the Hume Center when meeting with students. However, the Hume Center makes an effort to try not to compel students to use their services. Instead, they want the students to come on their own free will.

A current issue that the center is having is in regards to some students not using their services because they believe that a peer student working as a drop-in writing tutor cannot help them with their essay. Conversely, some students may be intimidated by the appointment-based tutors with high credentials. The center staff addresses this by trying to humanize the tutors by posting 'Tutors of the Week' articles on their social media page. They also portray their tutors as people that want to help them with their essay and not judge or tell them what they are doing wrong.

When it comes to the Hume Center's approach for tutoring, they promote the idea that they are there to guide students, but not there to be editors. Each tutor is trained to recognize and handle situations where students are treating tutors like editors. Additionally, the center tries to act as coaches, not judges. In this way, they are there to help students improve their English, not discourage or embarrass them. Students are not able to submit their work in advance for the center to check ahead of time. One reason for this is because it is hard to determine how long it will take a tutor to edit these. But more importantly, they want to promote a learning environment with active sessions and provided feedback instead of just explaining mistakes. They focus on the guidelines of literature called "Talk About Writing", which promotes students to think critically and build confidence through teaching rather than telling.

As a means to evaluate its performance, the Hume Center is assessed entirely based on its usage. This means that the more students that participate, the more it shows that they are doing a good job and that their services are meaningful. Questionnaires are used to help the tutors get feedback, and students are asked to fill out a form when they finish each session.

### **UC Berkeley Student Learning Center**

The UC Berkeley Student Learning Center assists over 7,000 students each year with over 2 million transactions. It has been serving students for over 20 years, and tutoring takes place mostly in a single, large open room with additional private rooms for particular needs. The Learning Center's services are solely for undergraduates only, as there is another center available for graduate students and above.

The sessions are set at 50-minute timeframes, and include all forms of tutoring from writing, math, science and engineering. The staff also periodically hold various workshops on common mistakes. While students are not able to choose their tutors using the normal services, they can sign up for scheduled weekly sessions with the same tutor that are arranged for entire quarters at a time.

The tutors all consist of currently enrolled students with various majors in the abovementioned disciplines. There are also a couple coordinators who work underneath the director who are responsible for putting together the workshops, managing tutor scheduling and training sessions and working on innovation plans for the center. Training sessions for the tutors include practice sessions and reviewing literature about writing centers. They also

focus on avoiding things like racial profiling and stereotyping. Grammar training is done as well, but this plays less of a role than being able to create clear ideas.

The center's performance is evaluated on several aspects including the number of visitors they receive and the results of exit surveys for each session. They also have the ability to track students' grade changes over time to show how much of an impact the center is having on academic performance.

With regards to teaching approaches, we discussed their concerns to address a wide gap between so-called 'disadvantaged' students who struggle with English writing, and 'advantaged' students that have little difficulties putting their thoughts into essays. As a means to try and bridge this gap, the center has several approaches in the way they look at writing betterment. These include stressing that writing can be considered a social activity where people should talk about their ideas with others. Also, they try to focus on tutoring as a means of making students better at writing instead of fixing deficiencies. Finally, they are currently trying to reach out to students whose native language is not English. This is because the population of international students has significantly increased in the last few years. And when helping these students, they focus on not treating their multilingualism as a disadvantage, but as an advantage.

Like the Hume Center at Stanford University, the Learning Center follows the approach that the tutors are not editors. Documents are not usually submitted ahead of time because they want to make the students independent writers as apposed to just giving them the answers. This is also too challenging to manage logistically. However, an exception to this is for students that sign up for the weekly reoccurring sessions, and the tutors are also able to track the students' progress over time and provide feedback on reaching goals.

Lastly, the center's current challenges include getting the students to get excited about and engaged in writing, and not just coming in to get their paper corrected. They are also trying to boost their attendance rates at the workshops that they host. To overcome these issues, they believe outreach to faculties is important and that creating partnerships is key. They are also considering enlisting a communication assistant to work on social media advertising.

### **UC Davis Student Academic Success Center**

The UC Davis Student Academic Success Center offers a variety of services for undergraduate students who need assistance with such things like writing, math, science and engineering. For writing, they have drop-in writing services with several tutors on duty at any

given time during business hours. On average, about 80 drop-in sessions are being conducted each day, and most of the students using their services speak English as a second language.

Sessions are scheduled for 30 minutes at a time, but students can rebook as many times as they want per day depending on availability. Students can get assistance for many types of English writing ranging from general essays to help on personal statements for getting accepted into a college program. There is also weekly reoccurring tutoring where students meet twice a week and set this up once a quarter. When a student does not make it to the appointment, or if there is downtime, the tutors create learning materials.

Tutors are hired once a year and consist of currently enrolled students at the university. The tutoring position is very competitive with hundreds of applications being submitted, and the center proactively searches for students who demonstrate excellence in writing-related classes and asks them if they want to become tutors. They have an essay test as part of interview process and then do a mock tutoring session. The training for the tutors runs two times a week for the first quarter. Students are paid for the training, but are not given class credits. In addition to the initial training regime, they also have specialists who sit in on tutoring sessions to take notes and provide feedback.

Along with the part-time tutors, there are several fulltime specialists that usually have PhDs in their field of expertise. They too hold 30 minute, appointment-based sessions, and also teach some support classes. Additionally, the center has a few tutor coordinators that are in charge of coordinating hiring and scheduling for all of the tutors.

We observed an emphasis on the importance of bringing tutors and specialists back together after they are finished with training to share best practices and exchange ideas on a regular basis. This can be seen in group events such an exchange class held once a month to for specialists to voluntarily join. Collaboration also takes place once a quarter between the Academic Success Center and the Masters degree writing center.

To advertise their services, the center has handouts and bookmarks that they give to students. Also, a quarter of all students must take a particular entry-level writing course, and the center visits this class to talk about the center. They also have connections to the school library where they post their advertisements on the walls. They sometimes even send the center's specialists directly to various departments where students are struggling in order to hold office hours and be available for assistance. Finally, proactive analytics are used to assist them in finding students who are at risk of dropping out of the university to reach out to them directly.



Instead of relying on surveys as a means to judge the center's performance, surveys are usually only filled out when the students have something important or particular to say. Usage of the center is an important way to evaluate their performance. The center also runs extensive analytical research on the students' grade changes over time after they use their services.

### **Summary of Ideas/Suggestions**

We received some helpful ideas by visiting the three centers, and we can hopefully use some of them to apply to our Writing Help Desk to add more value. As mentioned already, writing centers differ from one another, and they are changed depending on the needs of the university and the allotted budget. While our budget is nowhere near these writing centers', some of their fundamental approaches can still be considered.

In regards to advertising, getting faculty on board and engaged through partnerships was very important. Additionally, it was important to relay the message that the writing centers are not only for people who struggle with English, but everyone can benefit from their services.

In terms of focus, we saw an emphasis on creating writers out of students and not just correcting their papers. Centers can try to give the students the tools to be able to complete essays on their own. However, the debate on how to actually accomplish this is still ongoing. Creating a comfortable environment for the students to enjoy and getting them excited about writing was important to Stanford University. UC Berkeley saw writing as a social process where students do not have to be alone when they write; they can instead meet with tutors to brainstorm together.

With regards to evaluating the performance of centers, surveys appear to be the easiest way for assessing how a writing center is doing. A more sophisticated method is to use a computerized sign in system for when students check in to each session. By swiping student ID cards, additional information can be collected fast and can result in greater benchmarking through analysis. Center staff can also identify which students are at risk of failing or really need to catch up on English skills and reach out to them. Stanford University relied on surveys and usage for their benchmarking, while UC Davis and UC Berkeley implement computerized analyses as well to draw correlations between attending writing center sessions and the effects on grades over time.

Administratively, all three Writing Centers were managed in different ways but with some similarities. Employing current students to be the tutors was key to filling employee

positions, and a couple advisors working under a director are in charge of scheduling, hiring and workshops. Unfortunately, in Japan there are fewer native English speakers to choose from amongst student populations, and many Japanese writing centers must therefore hire students majoring in English to be the tutors. Employing international exchange students is an option, but all three of the California universities hired just once a year, and there is a dilemma raised regarding either hiring only long-term exchange students, or managing the logistics of frequently rehiring. Once hired, training for tutors could consist of a quarter-long class, and can be seen as an ongoing process thereafter with the addition of having meet-ups for tutors to exchange best practices.

### **Conclusion**

As we also discovered at UC Berkeley, a gap exists between 'advantaged' and 'disadvantaged' students in that some students can communicate in English effortlessly, while others must struggle to catch up. For Japan, it is important to close this gap so that by the time students graduate, they are able to publish papers in English, participate in international conferences or be capable of conducting international business. Students can use writing centers as a means to meet these demands as a supplemental service to increase their English academic writing skills and gain the tools that they need to succeed.

Through the visits to the established writing centers, we learned that there is a focus on instilling the ability for students to observe and judge their own academic writing skills while getting them have a positive attitude towards writing. By using the writing centers, students can gain an understanding of their actual English writing level, and therefore gain more of an understanding of themselves. Through this, they are not simply gaining English ability; they are obtaining a deeper recognition of the thought processes that go into writing and logical thinking.

On the world stage, providing research results and taking a significant role in academia or society can lead to great results, but this requires the proper English writing skills to be able to interact with most of the world. Going forward, we hope to continue and expand our writing desk, which will require us to address issues such as the budget and operations long term. But we feel the desk is adding value through its ability to address individual needs, and as the significance is increasingly understood and recognized in Japan, we predict that there will be a continued gradual growth of writing centers being opened. With this increase, further research on effective writing methods and ways to run writing

centers will play a larger role. Therefore, the collaboration of academic research in conjunction with practical studies can lead to positive results.

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### **Notes on the Contributors**

Shawn Andersson is an Assistant Professor in the Center for International Affairs, the Graduate School of Engineering, Osaka University, Japan.

Maho Nakahashi, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in the Center for International Affairs, the Graduate School of Engineering, Osaka University, Japan.

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