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## Group Workshops: Saving Our Writing Center in Japan<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Writing centers in universities across Japan are on the rise. These centers are commonly understood to be for remedial language help, deterring students confident with their language ability from attending. Over the past few years the number of student appointments at our writing center had been decreasing. Students were expressing no need for the center since, in their understanding, it was meant only for correcting grammar. To increase awareness of the writing center, we decided to conduct workshops to provide basic frameworks for learning aspects of writing outside of grammar. Since running the workshops, reservations for tutorials have been increasing, suggesting the workshops to be successful.

*Keywords:* writing center, one-to-one tutorial, writing workshop, independent writing

Last year, the article “English language writing centers in Japanese universities: What do students really need?” (McKinley, 2010) posed the question of whether writing centers in Japan should be based on a U.S. model. The conclusion : The foreign language-learning environment requires a specialized approach. This has become more and more evident in our writing center at Sophia University as the number of student appointments at the center has been gradually decreasing over the past few years. Based on feedback from the students, it seems this may be due to our global citizen students feeling perfectly confident with their English. They see the writing center more as a remedial language center than a place where they could hone and improve their writing skills. The need for specialized approaches is not exclusive to foreign-language learning environments, however. Writing centers in general may suffer from a bad reputation whenever there is a lack of consensus as to their mission and services among the centers, students, and faculty (George & Grimm, 1990).

Our English-language writing center at Sophia University opened in 2004 as one of the "GP" (Good Practice) projects established in the Faculty of Liberal Arts with funding from the Ministry of Education, awarded in recognition of excellence in undergraduate education. The

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students in this faculty must submit TOEFL scores equal to eligibility requirements for admission into most U.S. universities. Therefore, the writing center at Sophia does not serve as an English language learning center. However, a number of students perceive it that way. Based on post-tutorial session feedback from students, the main issue seems to be that students' expectations do not coincide with the services of the writing center. In one-to-one tutorials, students expected tutors (mostly native English-speaking or bilingual graduate students) to read their papers and correct their grammar and were often disappointed when this did not happen, suggesting that tutors who did not correct grammar were *not as good as* those who did. In response, we introduced a "preparation form" (included as appendix in McKinley, 2010) that students could complete before their tutorial. The idea was that it would help them to identify issues that could be discussed and to remind them that the tutors would not check grammar. Later reports from tutors indicated that the students were not using the forms correctly, or at all, and that the forms may have actually deterred students from coming. Our writing center as it had been originally conceived was starting to fade away to become only a blip in the historical timeline of writing centers.

While writing centers in the U.S. date back to the 1930s, the history of writing centers in Japan is comparatively short, dating back only to the 1980s when the first in Asia was started at the University of Maryland campus on Yokota Air Base. At that time the writing center focused on dealing with a diverse range of issues, from the various levels of first and second language ability to the expectations and outcomes of the clientele including discussions on writing, philosophy and literature (McMillan, 1986). However, with funding from the Ministry of Education in 2003-2004 for universities to start writing centers (Johnston, Cornwell & Yoshida, 2008), and the start of an annual writing center symposium in Tokyo in 2009, interest has been growing exponentially. This interest is also reflected in the amount of research presented at JACET and JALT and the addition of new writing centers (Johnston, Cornwell & Yoshida, 2010). In the years leading up to this growth, a number of articles were published describing the situation of these university writing centers and their similarities to those in America (Johnston, 2006; Johnston & Swenson, 2005; Yasuda, 2006). In their 2008 article, Johnston, Cornwell and Yoshida attempted to challenge these descriptions by contending, "Writing centers in Japan are different in from [sic] most writing centers in the U.S.A." (Johnston, et al. 2008, p.182). They went on to discuss the fact that writing centers in Japan are mostly English-only language

centers, and the students using the centers are English as a Foreign Language learners. Although this significant point was emphasized, the description of the general structure of the centers still went back to the U.S. model.

In this paper I will provide an overview of some of the issues, particularly students' and faculty's misconceptions of the writing center service and the decreasing attendance dilemma. This will be followed by a brief discussion of some ideas about promoting the center, including a writing center orientation and conducting large group workshops in addition to individual tutorials. I will then deal with the question as to whether workshops may improve student and faculty attitudes toward the center.

### **Attitudes**

What people "know" about writing centers: A writing center is a place students go to when they have writing problems. At the writing center, a student sits down one-to-one with a tutor to work out those problems.

This seems like a valuable service. Why wouldn't students want to use such a service? The most common reasons provided by my students in their feedback are "no time", and "I don't have big writing problems. My English is fine." Those who did use the service gave mostly very positive feedback, but the overwhelming negative evaluation was, "It's not always worthwhile. It depends on the tutor." One student wrote, "Some tutors at the writing center just say 'it's good' and don't tell me how I can improve my essay. I won't be going to the writing center as much as I did last year" (from English Composition 2 class student-needs assessment, 12 April 2010). It has become clear that students' expectations of the writing center service and what a tutor is supposed to do for them reflects a desire for more direct language teaching, rather than discussions of the writing.

The success of our writing center is invariably dependent on the ability of the individual tutors to "do magic." The value of individual sessions is obvious – it gives students a chance to have an in-depth discussion about their writing. At many writing centers, individual tutorials are the only service offered. Even The Writing Lab Newsletter carries the tagline, "Promoting the exchange and voices of ideas in one-to-one teaching of writing" (see e.g. Durhman, 2003). Until last year, our writing center only offered individual tutorials, but it seems shortsighted to conclude that individual tutorials are the only way.

### **The Writing Center “Service”**

Our tutors are trained to maximize benefit by asking critical questions that help the students to focus on their writing needs (the “preparation form” referred to above was meant to help with this). For the most part, the discussion typically does not go beyond the immediate task for which the student has sought guidance. However, students and tutors alike will on occasion report on a session that allowed the student to develop as a writer. Normally this development is in areas of writing such as developing a thesis, using outside sources, and organizing and structuring an essay. But again, this happens only on occasion.

What is the mission of a writing center, and what services should it offer? Is it a remedial writing skills center? Is it a proofreading service? In Japan, is it simply English language assistance for non-native English users? Often these are the perceptions faculty and students have about a writing center – a place to go when students need help fixing their writing problems, usually grammar. However, the tutors in our writing center have all been instructed not to check grammar but instead to “talk about it.” This presents a myriad of issues. Students sometimes reported disappointment when the tutor refused to check grammar. At other times, students reported disappointment because the tutor only checked grammar!

Stephen North’s 1984 essay “The Idea of a Writing Center” revealed some important frustrations he experienced while serving as director of a writing center. He explained that for much of the history of writing centers, many faculty and students have understood them to be remedial skills centers or “fix-it shops” – ideas that carry on today. He described some of the misunderstandings he experienced:

The new faculty member in our writing-across-the-curriculum program, for example, who sends his students to get their papers “cleaned up” in the Writing Center before they hand them in; the occasional student who tosses her paper on our reception desk, announcing that she’ll “pick it up in an hour”; even the well-intentioned administrators who are so happy that we deal with “skills” or “fundamentals” or, to use the word that seems to subsume all others, “grammar.” (North, 1984, p.433)

This emphasis on grammar may be a result of the history of writing centers. In the early days, a writing center was more often called a Writing Laboratory or Writing Clinic. North

(1984, p.436) reported that in a 1950 article in the *College English Journal*, the author, Robert Moore, wrote:

Writing clinics and writing laboratories are becoming increasingly popular among American universities and colleges as remedial agencies for removing students' deficiencies in composition. (Moore 1950, p.388)

At the time Moore wrote this, he was unaware of how this statement would be part of the early stages of an entire academic discipline dedicated to writing center education (Lerner, 2001). But these early stages begged for a clearer definition of what “the writing center” was meant to be. Were they really for “*removing students' deficiencies in composition*”? It is significant that I have chosen to focus on North's article, which was published nearly three decades ago and refers to articles published three decades before that. I point this out in order to draw attention to the irony of the fact that even though such frustrations were being expressed in the hope of improving attitudes toward writing centers then, these attitudes appear to have changed very little, if at all. In January 2011, a student of mine, after a semester of reminders, explanations, and ample opportunities to use the writing center told me that he was a good writer, and did not need it. He explained that none of his other classes had writing tasks (an issue that needs more attention and is raised as a central problematic issue in the American higher education context by Arum & Roksa, 2011) and that he was a fluent writer who did not have a problem with grammar. No matter how many times I explained, he did not seem to understand how he would benefit from using the writing center service.

Overall faculty support is difficult to ascertain. Outside those who teach the required English courses, very few professors promote the center. In these courses, all teachers at least mention the writing center to their students, but generally no more promotions of the Center are made. In April 2010, three of the four teachers of the English Composition 1 classes, myself included, decided to make writing center appointments mandatory. Two of the four teachers of English Composition 2, myself included, decided to make it mandatory as well. The result was a slight increase in the number of appointments made, along with an increase in the number of cancellations and no-shows. There was no penalty for cancellations, either in the courses or from the writing center, indicating that some students may have had the understanding that they

simply had to *make* an appointment, and not concern themselves with attending that appointment.

A particularly discouraging case was one involving a teacher who seemed to see no value or relevance in the services of the writing center. In February 2011, in response to an email I sent to the teacher informing him that none of his students had made an appointment and requesting that he help promote the center and its services, he explained that because he assigned specific writing assignments, he handled all his students' writing needs. He acknowledged that the students were made aware of the writing center, but refused to require or encourage his students to attend. In a follow up email he further emphasized that he had been teaching writing for over 35 years and therefore he could handle all his students' writing needs.

This communication was indicative of the resistance of experienced teachers incorporating the writing center into their course and task designs. Since the writing center did not exist ten years ago, those teaching at that time designed their courses accordingly. Astonishing, however, was the lack of flexibility or openness to finding a way to benefit from the writing center service now that it has been running for eight years.

### **Promoting the Writing Center**

What are we still doing wrong? Is it just poor marketing? North provided an example from a promotional flyer that described his writing center as "a tutorial facility for those with special problems in composition". In consideration of this, North then asked, "Is this hint of pathology, in some mysterious way, a good marketing ploy?" (p.434)

The question has been raised repeatedly: How do we promote the writing center? Unless they get straight As in their writing classes (not a remarkable achievement in Japan, really<sup>2</sup>), students understand that they have some issues with their writing that might make a visit to the writing center worthwhile. But then, for those students, do they really understand how the writing center can help?

What is more, students do not rush in to make appointments. Students taking the required English courses make appointments, which means we get many first and second-year students.

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<sup>2</sup> Japanese universities have traditionally been given "academic freedom," meaning courses and assessments are made by individual teachers with no external evaluation. Because of this, students have grown disillusioned and some stop attending classes, yet teachers still pass students out of obligation of duty for the university accepting them (see Goodman, 2005 for discussion). A student may receive an A grade simply for good attendance.

Then the numbers drop off dramatically. How can we save ourselves from the attendance dilemma?

A community college in Arizona published an interesting piece in *The Writing Lab Newsletter* titled “Greatly improving writing center attendance” (Durhman, 2003). The author described how they managed to improve attendance by doing an informational “scavenger hunt.” The students are given a sheet of questions that they can only answer by visiting the writing center, its website, and talking to at least one of the tutors. They describe great success with this practice, as it familiarizes the students with the writing center.

Last year in the first semester, our program held a mandatory orientation session at the writing center for all first-semester students. They came, they met the tutors, they received a copy of the “preparation form”, and all the information went in one ear and out the other. Throughout the semester, my own students asked me where the writing center was and what they had to do there. In the second semester we tried visits from writing tutors to the English Composition classrooms, in which students listened to a tutor tell them about the writing center and what it had to offer. That seemed to have a positive response, so we will try it again, but in the meantime, the most positive response came out of our initiative to try something new with the writing center—workshops.

### **Workshops or Tutorials?**

After commencing my PhD studies at the University of Sydney, I had the very good fortune of finding work in the university’s Learning Centre. This center is run by researchers, most with PhDs in education and/or linguistics, who develop all the materials for a workshop-only program. When the center first started in 2002, they held the usual one-to-one tutorials, but found after many years that it was not working. It was the same story—students came in looking for a proofreading service, and ultimately, that was what the center came to provide.

The director and research team at the center decided to stop the one-to-one tutorials. Instead, they created a full calendar of workshops and short courses (once a week for five weeks) focusing on all the different “needs” areas, even including a short course on combating procrastination. The primary areas of focus were:

- Academic/critical writing (essay writing, quoting, summarizing, paraphrasing, developing an argument, planning an assignment, etc.)



- Pragmatic grammar (basics of grammar, functional grammar)
- Critical reading (reading strategies, for note taking, of research articles, etc.)
- Research preparation (preparing a thesis proposal, overview of a thesis, developing the thesis argument, etc.)
- Oral presentation skills (for native speakers, for ESL speakers)

These workshops and short courses were often full, with students on waiting lists, or forced to wait until the next time they were on offer. Students were given a calendar at the start of each year so they could figure out the best way to join all the sessions they wanted. The success at Sydney may be owed to the workshop-only program, or it may just be that students in Australia are more likely to seek this kind of help.

Last year, I decided to try a similar approach. I conducted three writing workshops with tutors assisting (sitting with groups of students and checking their work) in an attempt to show students a potential advantage of a writing center—the opportunity to focus in groups on one aspect of academic writing. The workshops were held in November and December 2010 and the topics were: thesis statements, academic style, and integrating sources. These topics were chosen based on particular writing needs I was consistently noting in my own students' writing at the time. I regularly commented on vague or seemingly non-existent thesis statements; academic style seemed to escape many students who often used colloquial, spoken English forms and phrases; and as for integrating sources, students regularly struggled with plagiarism caused by a failure to report information and cite appropriately.

The workshops were considered a success, with an average attendance of 58 and overwhelmingly positive evaluation from the attendees. Adding these numbers to the attendance records provided a significant increase for that semester, making it the highest number of students making use of the writing center (although not specifically tutorials) in years.

### **Maximizing Student Benefit**

An important question remains: How do we get students to *want* to come to the center? Students attending the writing center were given a survey to complete. In it, we asked the question, "What aspects of the tutorial system were most beneficial to you?" There were many responses about the benefits of "face-to-face" discussion of writing. Responses from first-year students in spring semester 2010 included:

Grammar/language use:

- *When the tutor edited my paper, and explained to me what I need to check and correct.*
- *Gaining the other's perspective and can my grammar checked before due.*
- *Grammatical errors and miss-organization*

Instruction or doing the work for the student:

- *My tutor pointed out things that the English teacher didn't advise me to do for the final draft.*
- *The tutor gives me new idea that I wouldn't be able to think of.*
- *The tutor helped me to come up with things I could talk about in the essay.*

Becoming a better writer:

- *The revising aspect*
- *I can understand the weakness in my paper.*
- *Clarified my thoughts and questions.*
- *I found it beneficial that tutors help students together, not only giving notes or memo, but addressing what needs to be improved. So students can understand why the work needs to be revised and how.*
- *The fact that we have people and facility dedicated to improve students' writing is beneficial.*

On improved organization and structure:

- *I was able to organize the essay better.*
- *The tutor showed me which way to structure my paper.*

Clearly, students have a wide range of expectations of the writing center. In responses to some other questions, students expressed some frustration with limitations of the tutorials such as not being able to focus enough on certain features of writing:

- *I wanted to talk more about how to make my paper more persuasive.*
- *Didn't get to improve my vocabulary that I really needed to do.*

This issue requires careful consideration. The policy of the writing center in terms of the limitations of a tutorial are based on the philosophy of collaboration (i.e. not correcting or doing the work for the students), but the frustrations expressed here suggest there may be a call for some further discussions in tutor training sessions about meeting students' needs. In the case of improving vocabulary, as much as tutors can suggest certain language, this does not help students to become improved vocabulary users. As for persuasive writing, tutors are advised not to *give* students ideas, but rather help them shape their own, something difficult to achieve if the student is working on multiple issues in a single tutorial. Both of these cases suggest the need for specialized sessions, such as workshops, where students can target these skills and work toward improving them.

Feedback from the English Composition teachers was positive, saying they liked the idea of a calendar of workshops so they could send students to work collaboratively with other students with similar needs. Feedback from students included a lot of "thanks", and asked for more workshops on other topics, especially in smaller groups with more attention from tutors.

The workshops helped create some awareness of the writing center. Some students who attended those workshops then made appointments to discuss the specific aspect covered in the workshop. (The most common case of this was from students who attended the workshop on incorporating sources).

### **Conclusion**

As our writing center at Sophia University was at the start of the growth of such centers in Japan, we are at the point now where we can look back at the model on which it was based and make adjustments according to our needs. The focus needs to be on those issues that are specific to our learning environment in Japan. Attitudes toward the writing center are very

diverse. The fact that English is a foreign language in Japan permeates even our English-only program at Sophia University, where students and faculty continue to see the writing center as a place for remedial language learning. We need to try to encourage more positivity by helping students and faculty better understand the actual services provided and the overall benefits of the writing center. Promoting the writing center through visits by writing tutors to the English Composition classrooms proved to be only somewhat helpful, but we will continue on this path for now.

The biggest step toward changing the misconceptions of the writing center and improving attitudes was brought about through the implementation of workshops. It seems clear that the workshops are a solution to increasing student interest in—and benefit from—our writing center. We will continue running the workshops each semester and will try adding new ones. In order to get a clearer idea of our attendance problems, we will put a more precise system into place to track students' attendance to the workshops and their follow-up tutorial sessions. As for the cancellations and no-shows, we are going to uphold a strict policy where any student who misses an appointment will only be able to come for “walk-in” sessions for the remainder of the semester. In terms of student and faculty attitudes and understanding of the writing center, we will watch for changes as the workshops continue. We maintain hope that they will save our writing center.

#### Notes on the Contributor

Jim McKinley is an Assistant Professor of English and co-director of the Writing Center in the Faculty of Liberal Arts at Sophia University in Tokyo, Japan. His research interests include EFL writing curriculum design and implementation, and critical writing pedagogy.

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