

Conferencing In the Writing Center

The Writing Center at North Park University (Internal Version)

-Carol Martin 2007

Faculty members sometimes refer students to the Writing Center on an individual basis; they may just recommend that the student come for a conference, or they may require a student to confer on a paper and then rewrite it. Some faculty members might choose to contract with the Writing Center to send an entire class for conferences, sometimes on a single paper, sometimes on a semester's-worth of papers, depending on the teacher's goals and the difficulty of the assignment. Conferences may concentrate on any part of the writing process: "prewriting" conceptualization and focus-gathering, thesis formulation, organization, paragraphing, revision of a draft, editing, proofreading. Such collaborations work best when a teacher makes the conferences a norm for the whole class; for one thing, good students can stand to refine their skills and weaker students don't need to feel singled out, and for another, national statistics, borne out by our experience, indicate that only 5-10% of students to whom the services of a Writing Center are recommended get around to writing their papers early enough to make voluntary use of a Writing Center. (Many can see the good sense of making use of a Writing Center, in theory, but most have a hard time organizing their calendars well enough to have a draft completed a few days before the paper's due.) North Park faculty who have made use of this strategy have sometimes used an assignment sheet to direct the attention of both students and WA's to particular emphases of the assignment and conference, and some faculty have asked that WA's sign the sheet after the conference and that students turn it in when they turn in their revision. Perhaps a better guarantee that students actually conference (rather than forging a signature) would be to ask students to turn in the draft they worked on with their WA when they turn in the

completed assignment; seeing what the WA suggested and what the student made of those suggestions can be very useful in understanding the student's thought processes, too.

What does conferencing entail, i.e. how is it scheduled, how much time does it consist of, is it individual or as a class, what does "enrollment" mean?

"Conferencing" on a class basis can be arranged in almost any way the teacher wants it to be arranged, with focus on particulars which suits the teacher's pedagogical purposes. Most teachers simply require their students to have a working draft by a certain deadline, then send the students over to arrange their own appointments in the Writing Center. They can sign up on our appointment sheet, posted on the Writing Center door, if they want to reserve a block of time, or they can simply show up with their draft and take their chances that there will be an opening. It helps WA's if we can see an assignment sheet, and it's especially helpful if a teacher can come up with specific instructions for the WA's explaining what the teacher would like them to pay special attention to. I'll attach the default form we use below, but there's no hard and fast rule that you would need to use that form—feel free to redesign it to suit your own purposes, if you like. WA's are immensely grateful for this kind of specific and particular guidance because it makes their work more efficient and makes it more likely that we can collaborate with the teacher's priorities. If we get no assignment/instructions, our default strategy for working on a formal essay would be to begin with thesis statement focus (most people begin drafting with vague ideas, then come up with good ideas as they narrow and sharpen them, making them more specific) and organization, asking does the paper actually follow through on the thesis it established for itself, and does it excise extraneous tangents? Many students cast around, trying to *find* what they want to say—many find it by the end of a draft, but in the usual pattern of things, they then turn in the draft, rather than taking the idea they've found and recasting the paper around that. That's one major advantage of the conferencing process—when they see that someone else finds their idea interesting, they can actually get *excited* about recasting a paper that argues their idea. Writing conferences are designed to last about 40 minutes, because they're not simply editing sessions—the idea is that students and WA's talk through ideas and actually work on how to recast them. WA's don't copyedit, but if a student's paper has grammar difficulties which become distracting, the WA will pick up on one or two of them, help the student figure out whether they know better or were just being careless on a draft, go through the pertinent principles of grammar, and try to get the student in a position to find and adjust other instances of the habit later in the paper. WA's try to tackle first the grammar issues which most disrupt the paper's meaning, and we leave less fundamental issues for later.

We don't work with the entire class at once. We just take the whole class serially, so that everybody gets their 40 minutes. That kind of individualized attention is the basis of our methodology. We do appreciate notice when someone is intending to send a whole class

of students to us, just so that we know how to deploy our resources: “Enrollment” just makes it easier for us to plan ahead and doesn’t require anything specific from the instructor. Knowing in advance what a professor’s intentions are makes it easier for me to warn a professor if he or she is planning to send students in during the last week of classes (when most WA’s are not working, because they’re writing their own papers), and if I know that a class of 45 students is due to come in during a particular week, we may recruit an additional WA or so to help move things through more efficiently. Our usual hours are Sun. 3-7 and Mon. through Thurs. 1-5 and 6-10, though sometimes we have to adjust a little, as when the WA’s have a class until 3:20. Customarily, there will be two WA’s on duty at a time, so there are plenty of hours available in a week for most classes to fit conveniently in our schedule. We don’t do anything different when we get a whole class in, but it can help with compliance by normalizing and de-stigmatizing the process if everyone is doing it. Weaker students are less likely to resist coming when everyone needs to do so. Stronger students—some of whom think they don’t need this process, find out that they still have a thing or two to learn about writing. The process also helps to dramatize that writing is important in all classes—a concept many students seem to have trouble understanding—and so students are more likely to pay attention to their writing and thinking. And the longer the students refine their writing, the longer they’re testing and refining what they think about their subject, so as we see it, it’s not a distraction from the subject matter.

Advantages of Visiting the Writing Center:

- Students cannot write their papers the night before they’re due, so they have to think about them for a longer period of time.
- Since students will have had a reader already respond to what they’ve written, the draft the professor sees is likely to be clearer and better-organized.
- Students who spend more time on their papers--who actually revise a draft--are likely to probe their subject material more deeply.
- Students who must complete a draft before the final due-date find out whether they’ve understood the assignment, and, if not, still have time to ask for clarification.
- Students who need to exercise their writing skills outside of Dialogue classes are more likely to believe that good writing really counts. (One of the loudest complaints we have been hearing from Dialogue students is that they need to work so much harder on their writing in Dialogue than in other classes. We take that with a grain of salt, but it should be our collective concern as a whole faculty to address the perception and, perhaps, tighten the screws.)

Possible inconvenience:

Professors need to plan ahead well enough to allow about 2-3 weeks between the time a paper is assigned and the time it is due. Students need time to think about their assignment, read and research as needed, figure out what they want to say, and craft a

draft. Then, they need time to get to the Writing Center during its regular hours, and time to make thoughtful revisions, which involves editing and proofreading what they've written. So it won't work to hand out an assignment on a Monday and expect to collect the assignment that same Friday, if you want them to conference on it. But don't the advantages outweigh the inconvenience?