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Before You Start: I Used to Think That Writing Centers Were Fix-it Shops

By Tamara Sleiman

The scariest moment is always before you start.

– Stephen King

I was never told that good writing can still be improved. During my junior year of college, one of my professors offered tutoring for a writing course and I decided to register for it since her courses were beneficial, entertaining, and enlightening. Taking the course allowed me to learn more about writing centers and writing tutors’ practices through readings, mock tutoring sessions, and live observations at the writing center. During that time, I realized the writing center is not only a department in an academic institution, but also a learning experience.

I thought that writing centers were fix-it shops. “The Idea of a Writing Center” would not have been written by Stephen M. North if people thought otherwise. This article was the focus of my tutoring for the writing course. North explained that the purpose of a writing center is beyond fixing lower-order concerns in writing. The purpose of the center is to show students that anyone can write. But as I started this tutoring technique of focusing on the person in front of me rather

than on their piece, I learned that writing consists of varying levels. It was not easy to learn that writing is a process of thought, organization, writing, and editing, and it was difficult to teach that to a new writer.

Subject-verb agreement, punctuation, and verb tenses are all lower-order concerns that writers consider as main obstacles to their writing; however, these are not the only obstacles that writers should work through. Having difficulty expressing oneself causes writer's block and prevents them from producing new work, but most of the time, the problem lies elsewhere. I have experienced having clients tick the 'grammar' box on the scheduler when making an appointment with me. The clients would come to the session believing my job as a tutor is to edit the paper word by word. But I do not blame the writer for thinking this when their professors tell them to go fix their paper at the writing center.

With time, I reminded myself of North's words. I am not an editor. I am a tutor, and my job is not to mark the paper with my red pen, but to make the person in front of me a better writer who can transfer the skills taught at the writing center to other writing pieces. Suddenly I was less interested in the paper, and more interested in the writer: their intentions, train of thoughts, experiences, and ideas. I became determined to help them brainstorm to develop their piece. Now, I can't deny that part of my job does help students with basic grammar, but only focusing on lower-order concerns would get the writer nowhere. The writer needs to absorb the nature of the writing by understanding the prompt, outlining the main ideas, organizing the sections, and providing enough supporting evidence.

My interest in writers rather than their pieces has also made me examine their own patterns of thought. Whether in person or online, I always advise the writer to read their piece out loud to me or allow me to read it for them. This technique helps the writer hear if there is an

issue to be fixed. The writer would often come to the session with a page or two to go over and I start by asking them to read. As they are reading, I listen to them noting some grammar mistakes or organization issues by themselves, without having to intervene. If they cannot find anything that needs to be improved, I push them to be more skeptical by asking them multiple questions: *What do you mean? Says who? So what?* After they try to answer my questions verbally, I reply with, *So, why didn't you write that down?* Reading and carrying out a conversation with the writer are techniques that never let me down and always improved the writer's understanding of their own work.

The writing center did not only teach me techniques and methods to use during a tutoring session, but it also taught me transferable skills. Our writing center administration has come up with the idea of allowing tutors to prepare and execute a project related to writing throughout each semester. I personally had the chance to work on several projects during my time as a writing tutor. I published a guide that includes definitions, outlines, structures, and tips on academic, professional, and casual writing for tutors and writers. I also developed an electronic note-taking form for writers, to better their experience at the writing center. As I am currently preparing another guide on how to deal with writing-specific situations such as plagiarism and fluffing and on how to deal with writer-specific situations such as writer's block and insecurities, I come to realize that, as a tutor, it is my duty to provide writers with the appropriate resources to help them grow as writers. These projects have also taught me to prioritize my audience, whether faculty members or students and to produce forms of knowledge that can benefit them and ease my practice.

Within this extensive learning experience, the writing center taught me collaboration; and by collaboration, I do not mean among team members only. As an undergraduate and graduate

student at AUB, I never felt motivated to be part of clubs and societies or take part in campus activities. The writing center changed that. In the summer semester of 2020, we took a decision, that has been ongoing for three semesters so far, to hold weekly workshops and writing series. The workshops included sessions on personal statements, statements of purpose, resume, storytelling, and blogs, whereas the weekly writing series focused on imagination, creativity, determination, and compassion. Taking part in these sessions continues to show me how the writing center has evolved to be a pillar in university life instead of a fix-it shop. We have mostly worked with University Libraries, Department of Communication Skills, Writing in the Disciplines program, Graduate Council, among others. The workshops show that writing is a collaborative process between the writing center and the writers, and even extends to departments and programs across campus. Instead of only directing writers to other facilities that would help them in their work, the writing center creates a liaison between departments to better the writer's writing experience even during difficult times for interactions such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

The writer center helped me grow as a tutor and writer. It taught me how to explore options in writing and present them in a way that would improve the writer's writing. The writing center provided me with a sense of the available resources around me through workshops, class visits, on-campus activities, seminars, and writing groups. It also taught me to be responsible and punctual, and without these two skills, I would have not been able to guide the writers who continue to visit me multiple times a semester, and even throughout the years. I became a responsible reader who had to provide the writer with adequate and information and a punctual mentor who writers seek before critical deadlines.

Work experiences influence employees' behaviors and attitudes toward the job. The writing center is situated at the heart of the university body/life. It helps its tutors engage in several projects and activities and with different facilities at university, which allows them to gain important skills that can be valuable in their lives as students and after they graduate. The writing center has taught me collaboration, leading conversations, responsibility, and punctuality. The center has also changed the way I approach tutoring practices. The tutor is not merely an editor, proofreader, or computer. The tutor is a supportive peer, a reliable reference, and a guiding mentor.

Permission received from the editors and Routledge