

# Writing Center Philosophy: Spencer Todd Bennington

## Harnessing Potential Energy

Writing centers should operate as material proof that writing doesn't have to happen painfully or alone by the dim blue light of a tortured insomniac's laptop. Instead, in writing studios, the stages of the writing process are dynamic, recursive, dialogical, and alive. In this way, writing centers have the power to create strong communities, groups united by the knowledge that *we all* can struggle with putting our thoughts to paper. Additionally, writing centers teach and affirm a process mindset, one that helps us escape the suffocating paradigm of good/bad writing, and, instead, promotes a worldview encouraging a life-long dedication to practice and mastery.

In short, Writing Centers have the potential to do the following:

- Enhance multiple disciplinary curricula toward more writing for learning
- Assist writers in the margins who may not have their needs met in traditional classrooms
- Provide data and research opportunities integral for improving student writing

These can only happen, however, if the writing center's mission is shared by administrative leadership and its services are truly integrated on a pedagogical level.

## Learning by Writing in Any Discipline

It is the role of the university writing center to serve students in a variety of instructional capacities (brainstorming topics, practicing grammar or elements of style, revising drafts, etc), by teaching them good writing habits specific to their needs. While many scholars still hotly contest the ways writing should be practiced "across the curriculum" or "in the disciplines," most people seems to understand the value writing has for teaching and learning in any subject. As such, a good writing center be attuned to the multifaceted communication and composition needs of different academic backgrounds. In addition, it must offer workshops and resources for instructors of all disciplines who would like to include more writing in their course, but are unsure how. For example, I previously served as a technical liaison to the Chemistry department at the University of South Florida specifically for the purpose of helping their teaching assistants develop feedback strategies for evaluating lab reports in large lecture halls. In this case, the strategies we developed involved a digital tool and a feedback technique known as the "community comment" (feedback housed in a sort of modular wiki-page) which allowed the instructors to deliver a higher volume of thoughtful feedback for more of their students in a shorter amount of time. Similar initiatives might include creating online modules tailored to different disciplinary writing needs, developing assessment tools to be used by instructors to isolate specific issues for correction, and collaborating with instructors to offer embedded tutoring.

## Serving Audiences with Diverse Needs

The reality of teaching writing in a classroom setting is there's never enough time to adequately assess and improve all levels of language proficiency. As a result, many students in higher level courses routinely make stylistic, grammatical, or mechanical errors. The writing center is the one place where these students can spend as much time as they need improving these basic skills without fear of ridicule. Grammatical errors like these are not higher-order concerns for writing in progress, and that's precisely why most classroom instructors cannot take the time to address them. Similarly, non-native speakers and English language learner student populations rely on the Writing Center as a site for routine conversational and compositional practice that they may not get in traditional classrooms. Of course, the writing center must be prepared to assist writers at the other margin's edge as well. After all, faculty are writers too, and the writing center should be available to help advanced writers through their process as well. This could include academic research publications or professional reports for faculty, or even employment documents like resumes and cover letters. The point is, a wide variety of university stakeholders need help improving their writing. As a result, writing centers are responsible for determining how best to assist these different groups, as well what can be learned from them.

## Assessing the Needs of an Institution

Because writing centers are not granted infinite resources, it's paramount that a writing center director collect important data about what kinds of clients routinely request services and which services which are most popular. This allows the center to allocate resources to those who need it most, but it also makes clear which services and what content can be off-loaded to asynchronous learning environments or more appropriate university resources. For example, as a junior writing center administrator, I noticed that client intake records showed an overwhelming number of clients asked for help revising employment documents. This was a problem because our institution also had a Career Services office which provided this same service. Therefore, the data revealed that many students either were unaware of career services or simply wished to work with our tutors because of past familiarity. As a result, we collaborated with Career Services to create a referral system, one which ultimately created more appointment times for our studio to serve a higher number of students overall. This same kind of data can help writing centers select which kinds of reusable educational materials are most needed. For example, perhaps records indicate an overwhelming amount of students across disciplines have routine issues with incorporating evidence. If that's the case and the issue is truly pervasive, this indicates that materials need to be created to reinforce basic skills and, perhaps, curricula and course outcomes need review. Knowing the most commonplace issues and which concerns are the most relevant for the specific student population is key to promoting evidence-based pedagogy, more precise written feedback strategies, and student knowledge transfer. Research like this is what keeps the writing center fresh, alive, and alert to the specific needs of its patrons, as well as an inviting space for creative collaboration.

