Writing Centers In High School:

Potential and Practical Considerations

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When you hear the term “writing center,” you’re likely to envision a tutoring program somewhere on a college campus. However, writing centers can be utilized in the high school setting as well, although this is a far less common practice. While it is not yet a widespread phenomenon, there is growing evidence that writing centers are necessary and desired appendages to high school English departments. I visited one such high school– the Appomattox Regional Governor’s School– to interview the full-time English teachers and determine if there was a need, interest, and unified writing philosophy to support the implementation of a writing center. There are several challenges inherent in opening a writing center in a high school like the Appomattox Regional Governor’s School, but there are solutions and resources available to address these concerns. There is enormous potential for the development of writing centers in high schools, and despite the challenges, high schools can and should make the effort to provide this service.

There is a common misconception that writing centers exist to correct mistakes. Some imagine them to be a source of remediation or copy editing. Making this mistake severely underestimates the breadth of the services a writing center can provide. Writing centers supplement the classroom experience by providing individual conferences, offering benefits to writers of all levels that teachers likely want to provide but simply don’t have time for (Childers et al., 2004). Scimone (2009) notes that teachers rarely play a role in the actual drafting stage of student writing, which he refers to as “real time instruction,” as opposed to pre-writing or teaching after the fact (p. 1). Writing centers provide this real time instruction, allowing guidance to students throughout the writing process. They separate writing from the expectation of judgement, since there is no grade, and therefore create an environment where “writers can bounce their ideas off others, questions can lead to new ideas, writing for self or publication can

blossom, and resources on writing abound" (Childers et al., 2004, p. 3-4). This environment leads not only to the improvement of the material students bring in, but to the improvement of student comprehension of writing as a process and thus the strengthening of the writers themselves.

Writing center conferences are not limited to discussion of in-class material, but can expand to assist students with a range of literary pursuits including independent work, college application essays, and scholarship entries. Sessions can include work on brainstorming, research, drafting, and revision. Exposing students to this process early on can enable them to conduct their own research and take the initiative to add their voices to existing literature with their own experiences as young writers (Tobin, 2010).

High school writing centers provide an additional source of preparation for important stages in their students' education. For one, writing centers can help prepare students for standardized testing, which may serve as an incentive to administration to support their development. For another, beyond helping students apply to college, writing centers help prepare students for college itself. Not only does the writing center help high schoolers achieve the level of writing that is expected of them in collegiate settings, but it allows them to become familiar and comfortable with utilizing a writing center, a service that will likely be available and useful to them in college.

Implementing a writing center teaches students that individuals other than teachers can give constructive feedback, which promotes positive peer discussion even outside of the center (Tobin, 2010). Students, both those who staff the center and those who attend, improve their listening and reading skills as well as their writing. The most important part of developing a

writing center and attaining these benefits is the support of faculty and staff who believe in its usefulness and in a shared writing philosophy, and therefore a mission for the center.

I visited the Appomattox Regional Governor's School for the Arts and Technology (or "ARGS"), a governor's high school in Petersburg, Virginia, to interview the full-time teachers of the English department in order to determine if there was already a shared writing philosophy among them. Since ARGS' student body is comprised of diverse students from fourteen different counties, I felt that the teachers would offer a perspective that, while unique to them, could be relevant to a broader base. I asked questions about what makes a good writer, what problems they encounter most often in student writing, and furthermore, if there is a need for or interest in opening a writing center at their institution (as well as what challenges they foresee). All the names used are pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of the participants.

Five separate interviews were conducted, but the teachers had almost identical descriptions of what makes a good writer. "I would say a good writer is someone who can convey their thoughts with a unique voice" (Nancy, personal communication, March 5, 2019), one teacher told me. Another teacher added that "...there's some sort of vague notion about beautiful sentences, and beautiful sentences, if they don't say anything, don't matter… So I think clarity is the first thing I'm always after" (Mary, personal communication, March 5, 2019). In every interview the participants emphasized the importance of voice, as well as clarity in the writer's thoughts and conviction in their delivery to the intended audience. Even without consulting one another, it was clear that there was already a shared writing philosophy within their department.

The writing center is meant to help students become better writers, but this is not possible unless there is a clear definition as to exactly what that means. While not every teacher may

choose to have a role in guiding the writing center itself, clarifying its purpose guarantees that it becomes a universal tool with the ability to help students in every class. Additionally, having a unified philosophy translates into a goal for tutors (to help their peers become "good writers"), increasing the likelihood of success.

I was not surprised to find that there was also a clear consensus on what troubles high school writers most. While most mentioned separate, particular elements of grammar they often see misused, they all indicated that their primary concern was a lack of clear and organized thought. Several worried that students were not able to find their own voice, choosing instead to imitate an "elevated tone that ultimately says nothing" (Mary, personal communication, March 5, 2019), failing to make their own inferences and arguments. Some expressed sympathy, knowing that for many students, high school is the first time they are asked to think independently and support their own unique opinions. One teacher ventured that "they don't trust themselves" (Carol, personal communication, March 5, 2019), and another echoed her, proposing that "maybe that problem is a lack of trust in their own minds and in their own abilities to have an opinion" (Mary, personal communication, March 5, 2019). The teachers assessed that some of their students' papers seemed more like freewrites, or places where "murky" thinking translated into murky writing (Mary, personal communication, March 5, 2019).

In other words, students misunderstood the process of writing: either stopping in the drafting stage or skipping the process completely and trying to artificially manufacture a product without putting in the time to develop it. This is precisely what the writing center exists to combat. Writing centers are meant to help students understand and appreciate the process of writing, and one of the most, if not the most, important aspect of that is the focus on global issues: the thoughts, ideas, and opinions that shape every essay. Discussion strategies in

individual conferences may encourage students to develop opinions, consider different arguments, and organize their thoughts, and then translate those into written form.

The trend of continuity between responses persisted, and I learned that each teacher believed a writing center would be beneficial to their school. In fact, they told me they had been considering opening one, but "we've just never sat down to work out exactly how we would put it into place. It would be awesome, and we all have ideas, we've just strayed off the path" (Susan, personal communication, March 5, 2019). They explained that "we always have these great ideas at the beginning of the year and then, like, you know, we get super busy" (Carol, personal communication, March 5, 2019).

Some expressed that the idea of collaboration and the opportunity to talk through ideas appealed to them, recognizing that writing is not done in isolation. One teacher added that "it wouldn't be simply the English classes that would benefit" (Mary, personal communication, March 5, 2019), noting that many classes outside of their department assigned papers and projects that could be taken to the writing center.

Not only did the teachers agree that a writing center would be beneficial, but they agreed that it would be beneficial to staff the center, at least in part, with students. Some even argued that peer tutoring offered assistance beyond what they could provide, saying "the language between students is something that teachers can't replicate," and "the ability to discuss things student to student can be so much more valuable than what we can do in terms of a tutoring situation" (Karen, personal communication, March 5, 2019).

In addition to the need for the writing center, it became apparent that there was also a student interest, both to attend and tutor in the center. One teacher told me that her students had access to a nearby community college's writing center, and when she revealed that to her

students “they seemed excited to know about it” (Mary, personal communication, March 5, 2019). Another told me that she already had students offering to help others with their writing, specifying that:

> A lot of lit arts kids will go around, I watch them do it, say like “hey, how is your college essay coming? Do you need help with it? I’m happy to proofread it.” And they’re kind of like already offering their services so I think it wouldn’t be too hard, to, to tap into that energy. (Nancy, personal communication, March 5, 2019)

Considering this, it seems that the ARGS English department is far closer to establishing a writing center than they even realize. There is a need, an interest, and a guiding philosophy already in place to support its development.

The teachers did express concern regarding some of the inherent challenges, and one of the biggest things they worried was scheduling. However, most of the teachers suggested that lunch might be the best time to open their center, due to the nature of the school (since students are pulled from fourteen different counties, some would have trouble coming in early or staying late because of the length of their commute). One teacher mentioned that they were equally concerned about the time restraints for faculty, explaining that “we already sponsor different things” and they simply may not have time to invest in a project of this magnitude (Karen, personal communication, March 5, 2019). The existing literature suggests that this is a common hesitation, but Ziegler asserts that:

> For me, the running of the Center doesn't monopolize my time, mainly because I've chosen and trained well a group of trustworthy, self-sufficient consultants. In fact, it offers stress relief because I know my students will be able to confer with someone about their writing, regardless of how busy I am before or after school. (Ziegler, 2009, p. 44)

This was not the teachers' only reason for concern. Some teachers wondered where they would find space to house the center, while one seemed confident that they could simply use one of the unoccupied labs during the center's hours. But perhaps the most immediate issue was determining who exactly would staff the center. Of course, they would have to decide who would oversee the center. But they would also have to choose what students they wanted to become peer tutors, and develop a system to "get a sense of– how are they giving feedback and how is that working" (Mary, personal communication, March 5, 2019). There is no standardized way of determining these things, but based on the existing literature and my personal experience, I can offer some suggestions.

The existing literature strongly suggests that a teacher be responsible for directing and leading the center, as well as recruiting, training, scheduling, and even tutoring if the situation demands it. While teachers can have varying levels of involvement and oversight, and the workload can be distributed in an infinite number of ways, experts agree that teachers should be in charge overall. There is less agreement when it comes to what kind of student should be recruited to become a peer tutor.

There are a fair number of sources (Tobin and Silva, for example) that recommend hiring the strongest writers available: the best and the brightest of the honors students. While at first glance this seems like a completely logical thing to do, there are several potential drawbacks that should be taken into consideration. Depending on the student, strong writers may have "difficulty letting the author take the lead and maintain ownership" (Childers et al., 2004, p. 4). Being a good tutor is dependent on the tutor's ability to listen much more than their ability to write. Additionally, if a writing center were to hire only the most academically honored students,

it may promote the misconception that the center is a site for remediation, for the challenged students to be corrected by the smart ones (Childers et al., 2004).

I believe the true solution lies somewhere between. In the case of the Appomattox Regional Governor's School, there is a specific answer to this problem. The school is divided into majors, much like a university. Hiring only literary arts majors may make the rest of the student body feel alienated and unintentionally encourage the perception of the center as remediative. I would suggest making an effort to staff the center with students from multiple disciplines. One teacher specified that she would feel more comfortable hiring students who had taken her junior year course, as they already understood her expectations. I take no issue with this, nor do I see a problem in hiring honors students, so long as they are chosen for their skills in listening and assisting others rather than their composition skills.

While some schools do pay their tutors, it is not a common practice. There are several methods of incentivizing students to apply to become tutors. The most compelling practical incentives are volunteer hours and resume building. The National Honors Society requires a certain number of volunteer hours, and working in the school writing center can help students reach their goals. Furthermore, being selected for and serving in the position is an impressive addition to a resume when applying for college, jobs, and internships. Monetary compensation is not, by any means, a necessity when developing a writing center. Feltenberger (2008) asserts that "students will willingly participate in writing center work as long as the school has supportive and passionate adults who believe in the writing center and its goals" (p. 3). ARGS seems to meet these requirements already.

Then comes the issue of how to train the selected students. Again, there is a wide variety of suggestions from the existing literature; some recommend creating a class to train tutors, some

recommend meetings before or after school for varying lengths of time, and some spend one long day covering the basics of tutoring. The optimal practice will be different for every school based on what they are willing or able to do, all other factors considered.

In the case of ARGS, it is unlikely that it would be possible to introduce a new course to train tutors, and the aforementioned problem of long-distance commuter students would make before or after school training difficult (although this could be explored). Likely, the best practice for ARGS would be to conduct an intensive, day-long training session for the selected tutors (perhaps on a Saturday early in the year, or even a week day before school begins). Considering that tutors would likely be selected at the end of their junior year, I also believe it would be reasonable and prudent to expect them to complete reading over the summer. I would suggest *The Oxford Guide for Writing Tutors: Practice and Research* by L. Fitzgerald and M. Ianetta, although there are other supplemental materials that could serve nicely as well. This material can be discussed in the training session, which should include a few basic things:

> Training typically includes building awareness of how collaborative learning works, what composing skills are, how writing needs can be diagnosed, and what strategies tutors can use. Training also includes reviews of grammar and help with learning to keep records and to communicate with classroom teachers. (Kent, 2017, p. 159)

Training is where the previously established writing philosophy is most important. If teachers can provide even a basic handout detailing guidelines for tutors based on that philosophy, it can help keep peer tutors on track throughout the year (and can be recycled from year to year if proven effective).

Additionally, the development of a record-keeping system, whether paper or electronic, can help teachers oversee exactly what happens in sessions without observing so closely that

students feel uncomfortable. It can also serve as proof of the specific benefits that the writing center offers students, and allows teachers and administration to track appointments. If a lot of students come in with the same problem, having a record will allow teachers and administration to recognize that issue and adjust accordingly.

There is much more to be said regarding the resources high schools can use to support the development of writing centers– from partnering with nearby colleges to working with the community and alumni– but the brevity of this examination does not allow me to delve into these. For a more comprehensive discussion of the topics touched upon in this essay, as well as additional considerations, I would recommend *The High School Writing Center: Establishing and Maintaining One* by P. B. Childers and *A Guide to Creating Student-Staffed Writing Centers, Grades 6-12* by R. Kent.

Writing centers are not meant to serve the college community exclusively. While high school writing centers are a less common practice, they have the potential to be implemented anywhere. Every school has teachers who know how to teach the writing process and how to respond to student writing, and every school has students capable of listening to and learning from one another. Writing centers can offer boundless benefits, without requiring excessive sacrifices. The advantages the center offers students and staff most certainly outweigh the challenges. If there is a common writing philosophy, a need, and an interest, teachers and administration have the power and every reason to develop a writing center that fits their school and their students.

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