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Commenting across the disciplines: Partnering with writing centers to train faculty to respond effectively to student writing

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Faculty and writing center tutors bring expertise to writing as practice and process. Yet at many institutions, the two groups work in relative isolation, missing opportunities to learn from each other. In this article, I describe a faculty development initiative in a multidisciplinary writing program that brings together new faculty and experienced undergraduate tutors to workshop instructors' comments on first-year writing. The purpose of these workshops is to assist faculty in crafting inquiry-driven written responses that pave the way for collaborative faculty-student conferences. By bringing together scholarly conversations on tutor expertise and the role of faculty comments in student learning, I argue for the value of extending partnerships between writing centers and programs. Such accounts are important to the field for challenging what Grutsch McKinney (2013) calls the "writing center grand narrative," which limits the scope of writing center work by imagining centers primarily as "comfortable, iconoclastic places where all students go to get one-to-one tutoring on their writing" to the exclusion of lived realities (p. 3). In this case, I describe a writing center where tutors bring their expertise outside the center and into the faculty office, consulting in small groups with faculty with the aim of enriching the quality of instructor feedback in first-year seminars.

Keywords: writing centers, tutors, faculty development, commenting, first-year writing, conferencing

Both faculty and tutors from across the disciplines bring expertise to writing as practice and process. Yet at many institutions, the two groups work in relative isolation, missing an opportunity to learn from each other's expertise. Faculty bring deep experience in the practice of writing in a discipline. Tutors bring insights in the effective response to student writing, given their multiple roles as students, tutors, and writers. In this article, I describe a faculty development initiative in the Princeton Writing Program where faculty from across the disciplines collaborated with tutors to workshop and revise their comments on student writing. The goal was to assist faculty in crafting inquiry-driven responses to drafts and revisions, paving the way for generative student-faculty conferences about writing. By bringing together scholarly conversations on tutor expertise and the role of faculty comments in facilitating students' development as writers, I argue for the value of extending partnerships between writing centers and faculty across the disciplines. Such accounts are important to the field because they incorporate student voices into conversations about faculty responses, while identifying writing centers as useful and dynamic partners in faculty development.¹

Commenting is a labor-intensive practice. In the Princeton Writing Program full-time lecturers write nearly 400 single-spaced pages of comments per year: a full page of comments on three drafts, four revisions, and a portfolio, in addition to shorter comments on lower-stakes assignments along the way. Typically, all of this commenting is followed up with individual or small group conferences on three drafts and a research proposal. Like writing instructors everywhere, faculty invest a tremendous amount of time in responding to student writing with the hope that it helps their students develop as writers. Yet they also often wonder about the effects of this feedback, given its uneven incorporation in revisions and subsequent assignments. This leaves many eager to understand the relationship

1. Special thanks to my former colleagues in the Princeton Writing Program, Amanda Irwin Wilkins (director), Keith Shaw (former associate director for the writing center and current associate director for the writing seminars), and Judy Swan (associate director for writing in science and engineering), who helped envision the revisions to the faculty development program described in this article and read early versions of this article. I served as associate director for the writing seminars from 2010 to 2013, taking the lead on coordinating and refining the curriculum of the faculty development program.

between how faculty respond to student writing and what students learn from this feedback cycle.

Scholarship on commenting suggests this question is difficult to answer. In “What good is it? The effects of teacher response on student’s [sic] development” Anson (2012) argues that one reason we know so little about this relationship is that research tends to focus on the teacher’s role in facilitating learning, while excluding the perspective of students. Surveying the scholarly literature on commenting, he argues for the need to examine the complex social processes by which comments are given and received and to probe assumptions about the centrality of teacher response in student development (pp. 191–193). Perhaps most provocatively he asks: “What would it mean for us to delve far more deeply into the complexities of the relationship between what teachers say to students about their writing and what effect, if any, this has on students’ development in the socially and interpersonally imbricated places where teaching and learning happen?” (p. 194).

In “Across the Drafts” Sommers (2006) is interested in precisely those interstices and is more optimistic about what students can learn from faculty in the process. Drawing on data from the Harvard Study of Undergraduate Writing, she argues for the vital role of instructor feedback in students’ development as writers and their socialization into the intellectual life of the university. Like Anson, Sommers acknowledges that scholarship neglects the role of students in what she calls the “vital partnership between teacher and student” during response transactions (p. 249). Her research fills an important gap by bringing students back into the equation, exploring not merely teacher response but the mentoring relationships that can develop between students and instructors during the feedback cycle (p. 249). She argues that “feedback plays a leading role in undergraduate writing education when, but only when, students and teachers create a *partnership* through feedback—a transition in which teachers engage with their students by treating them as apprentice scholars, offering honest critique paired with instruction” (p. 250; emphasis added). Students report developing most as writers when faculty deliver focused and constructive criticism that is forward-looking and when students indicate they are receptive to that feedback, believing it will help them do well not just on a local assignment but on the many writing challenges ahead (pp. 250–252).

The question then becomes how can faculty craft comments that offer not only “honest critique paired with instruction,” but facilitate the collaborative partnerships essential to long-term learning. How might faculty comments lay the groundwork for inquiry-driven draft conferences with these same students? And how might faculty be trained to do this work in a way that brings student perspectives back into the conversation?

In the Princeton Writing Program, directors surmised that writing center undergraduate tutors would be particularly strong resources for helping faculty begin to address these questions. Although it does not specifically address commenting practices, recent research suggests that faculty development can be enhanced through collaborations with writing centers. In her critical review of recent publications dedicated to writing center work and faculty development, Bergman (2008) argues that writing programs, and writing centers in particular, may be especially well-positioned to envision faculty development as “collaborative processes of education and reflection,” which gives them the potential to “encourage faculty to rethink their practices, not just conform to changing laws, rules, and pet projects of administrators” (p. 524). The reflective practices cultivated in writing centers offer a powerful alternative to the often top-down models of faculty development adopted by many institutions.

Malenczyk and Rosenberg (2011) propose one way of encouraging such rethinking of practices through a collaboration between writing center tutors and first-year composition faculty at Eastern Connecticut State University. In an initiative foregrounding tutors’ expertise as brokers between students and teachers and their own experiences as writers, Malenczyk and Rosenberg invited tutors to participate in faculty workshops about peer review and students’ rights to their own language. They argue that “inviting tutors to take part in such workshops is a way to probe traditional faculty perspectives and to represent students’ voices” in ways that “acknowledge tutors as seasoned experts who can offer insights into their peers’ motivations and writing blocks that sometimes exceed faculty knowledge” (p. 8). Peer tutors possess a special form of agency through their “hybrid role as mentors and students,” which has given them deep experience negotiating “between students and student concerns, between student-faculty concerns, and their own individual concerns” during consultation sessions (p. 8).

Their training builds upon Harris's theory (1995) of the special role tutors play in acting as mediators in educational institutions. Tutors, she argues, "inhabit a middle ground," helping students decode the meaning of academic language, often playing the role of "translator or interpreter, turning teacher language into student language" when it comes to deciphering assignment prompts or instructor feedback on writing (p. 37). This leads her to conclude that the writing center functions as an "institutionalized mechanism to facilitate the flow of otherwise impeded communication" (p. 38). In other words, tutors' double experience as tutors in the writing center and students in the classroom gives them access to perspectives often unavailable to faculty because of their more hierarchical positions as teachers. As Healy (1995) argues in "A Defense of Dualism: The Writing Center and the Classroom," "Tutors can be present [to students] as fellow pilgrims in a way that faculty cannot" and this can be "important as a catalyst to students' developing sense of independence and their own authority" (p. 184).

Just as this special perspective gives tutors authority in conversations about student responses to faculty comments, instructors possess expertise that may benefit undergraduate tutors. Having been socialized into their fields through many years of training and research, faculty members in the disciplines have developed a comprehensive knowledge base, can recognize and enact the conventions of academic argument in their fields, and have written and revised often enough to have developed effective approaches to the writing process. Their experience has given them a strong command of the knowledge domains that Beaufort (2007) ascribes to expertise: subject matter knowledge, discourse community knowledge, procedural knowledge, genre knowledge, and rhetorical knowledge, which allows them to adapt their writing to specific purposes and audiences in their fields (p. 221). At the same time, these expert faculty sometimes struggle to make the implicit explicit to their students, since their modes of argument and analysis have become almost second nature to them through their long process of disciplinary socialization. A significant part of training in responding to student writing is focused on creating space for faculty to discuss and articulate how disciplinary ways of knowing manifest themselves in ways of doing on the page.

When faculty see for the first time students' drafts in response to their prompts, they are often confronted with the distance they must travel to

teach academic moves that may seem natural to them, like asking a good question, engaging a scholarly conversation, and using evidence to support a claim in a given field. If tutors inhabit a “middle ground” between faculty and students, faculty inhabit a middle ground between their disciplines and their classrooms, seeking to build bridges between the two.

The different positions of tutors and instructors create special challenges that can be addressed through collaborative faculty development workshops. Healy (1995) writes that the gap between the writing center and the writing seminar classroom can lead to “envy, mistrust, and misunderstanding between residents of the classroom and the center” (p. 188). As writing center tutors, peer consultants see many faculty members’ assignment prompts but don’t have much context for how these teachers prepare students to do those assignments through class activities and discussions. They often are eager to hear more about how and why faculty design the assignments, and how their disciplinary orientations inform how that work is taught and evaluated. The commenting workshops offer writing center tutors a rare opportunity to peek behind the curtain and learn more about the pedagogical principles informing professors’ assignments and comments, which may help tutors strengthen their expertise in writing and foster trust between tutors and faculty as partners in the enterprise of teaching and learning. Faculty, on the other hand, gain a clearer sense of the practices and values underwriting the writing center conference, including its approach to responding to student writers and writing.

Given the synergies between these two groups, how might they collaborate to strengthen the quality of faculty feedback on student work? How might tutors help faculty imagine how their suggested revisions can encourage the kind of forward-looking gaze that Sommers (2006) describes as critical to a strong writing education? And how might these workshops cultivate the forms of speculation, or reading for potential in a draft, that Moneyhun and Hanlon-Baker (2012) argue is characteristic of the productive writing center conference? Moneyhun and Hanlon-Baker have shown that composition faculty who undergo writing center training gain “priceless first-hand knowledge and a richer understanding of how students interpret assignments and use feedback” (p. 5), yet they focus exclusively on conferencing techniques, missing an opportunity to explore how faculty comments can set the stage for inquiry-driven conversations about writing.

In fall 2010, the Princeton Writing Program launched a faculty development initiative to begin to answer these questions. While the writing center and writing seminar program collaborated on some initiatives, there was renewed interest in strengthening ties between both program wings. The writing seminar program consists of 30–35 postdoctoral lecturers and several graduate student fellows from across the disciplines who teach theme-based writing seminars. The writing center comprises up to 65 undergraduate and graduate student tutors.² Each year about 30% of the faculty are new teachers either because veteran faculty have reached the end of their five-year limit on contract renewals or, as is more often the case, they leave to pursue other opportunities (most often by joining university programs or departments in their disciplines). This rapid turnover makes continuous professional development essential to building and sustaining communities of practice around the teaching of writing.

Commenting has been a long-standing focus of the program's faculty development initiatives. In the past, faculty attended several hours of workshops led by other faculty on diagnosing and responding to student writing as part of five full days of training in writing pedagogy. New faculty also attended two or three one-to-one meetings with a program director in the fall to discuss the comments they had made on a set of student drafts and revisions. A writing program director offered feedback on the strengths of the comments while also pointing towards opportunities to better diagnose the paper's strengths and weaknesses and help the student prioritize revision tasks. Faculty had been trained in Haswell's (1983) "minimal marking," which recommends highlighting but not correcting sentence-level errors in order to focus on higher-order concerns (pp. 601–602). Faculty also practiced organizing their comments according to key terms taught in all writing seminars as part of a shared lexicon for describing academic writing.³ This strategy makes comments clearer by structuring them around three or four major concepts (e.g., motive, thesis, methodology, analysis) and is designed to facilitate transfer so students can track their development as writers across drafts and revisions.

2. Tutors are called "fellows" in the program to acknowledge the competitiveness of the positions and students' expertise in writing consultation.

3. This lexicon was developed by writing program administrators in the writing program and is based on the key terms developed in "Elements of Academic Argument" by Harvey in the Harvard Expository Program: <http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic1359379.files/elements.pdf>.

In these consultations, writing program directors and faculty also addressed the important interpersonal dynamics of comments, which faculty are encouraged to compose in the form of a response letter. Issues addressed included establishing a collaborative tone in the letters, balancing honest praise with constructive criticism, and raising questions or modeling avenues of inquiry that enable students to see the potential of their ideas, while preserving agency over their essays. Comments on drafts and revisions are important because they typically precede one-to-one or small-group conferences between faculty and students, where papers are discussed. In conferences between writing seminar faculty and first-year students, faculty and directors have witnessed firsthand how comments invite or close off avenues for establishing collaborative conversations. The response letters pose opportunities for developing partnerships with students by raising questions and establishing common ground that can be investigated together in these conversations.

There is evidence to suggest that this model of faculty development was successful in the program. According to student evaluations of the first-year writing seminars, faculty comments and conferences with students were ranked as the strongest aspects of the course. Yet the large number of new faculty entering the program each year made the one-to-one model of faculty development difficult for writing program administrators to sustain. We were also eager to experiment with less-centralized and more-collaborative models of training so that faculty could serve as readers for each other and start partnering with tutors, who worked in isolation down the hall. In fall 2010, these workshops were revised so that faculty no longer met one-to-one with directors. Instead, training was restructured as a series of small group conferences, which included three or four new faculty members, a writing center undergraduate tutor, an experienced faculty member, and a director. Each new faculty member brought two student papers and their written comments on those papers to the sessions. Each group met for two hours to skim the papers and read the comments from what was imagined to be the student's perspective, listening for clarity, diagnostic acumen, and a collaborative tone and approach.

To focus our conversation, we asked ourselves questions like these: If you were the student reading these comments, what about them would seem particularly helpful to you as you revised the draft or approached

the next assignment? What seems potentially confusing or discouraging? How might the comment—or commenting strategy—be revised to make the feedback more helpful to the writer?

This model of faculty development seemed much more effective, fulfilling Bergman's criterion (2008) that good faculty development "encourage faculty to rethink their practices" (p. 524). Instructors reported finding it helpful to hear students' perspectives on the writing process. Pens were scribbling as tutors offered advice on how they would pose questions or frame for students why a claim was perplexing or how it might be re-focused. Students also offered perspectives that challenged those held by experienced faculty and directors. One seasoned teacher reported learning from a tutor about the value of "not overwhelming the student" with comments beyond a page because the student body tended to be perfectionistic and some students were likely to interpret such responses as defeat. The tutor reminded faculty of those who might be struggling to become engaged in the seminar and how faculty could articulate comments in ways that involve those students and activate their imaginations.

Such workshops also highlight the social dimension of teaching. Most of our work as tutors and teachers in the writing center and classroom is about creating conditions that encourage active student learning. When we consider the role of feedback on drafts and revisions in that process, interesting discussions emerge. The workshops give faculty a perspective on how their peers tackle commenting—an exercise that's ordinarily done in private—and through tutors they learn more about how students respond as readers to that feedback. Both faculty and tutors practice diagnosing and finding ways to facilitate the learning of higher order argumentative issues; and they often learn to borrow ideas and even sentences from each other that make their way back into faculty comments and tutor conferences.

Despite its value, there are some challenges to facilitating such workshops. In order for the workshops to be most useful, they should be timed to target those moments in the semester when faculty receive drafts or revisions and are about to begin their responses. The collaborative workshops are designed in part to review what faculty learned in their weeklong training. These follow-up workshops occur at a time when the challenges of commenting seem more "real" because faculty are confronted with their own students' responses to their assignments. This immediate relevance to

their classrooms lends the workshop urgency as faculty are learning about their assignments, their students' responses to those assignments, and their class dynamics at the same time. To institute a program-wide faculty development workshop that allows faculty to apply what they are learning as they are teaching, programs need to have deadlines that are relatively standardized across sections. Faculty also need to have an incentive to participate in these workshops during those particularly busy commenting and grading weeks. In independent writing programs that hire largely full-time faculty with reasonable teaching loads, this may be an easier feat.

However, there is value in designing such workshops even if logistically they cannot be timed at the moment when they would be most relevant to new faculty. For example, coordinating such workshops at the end of the semester could also be a useful reflection exercise in assessing the relationship between commenting practices and students' trajectories through the course. It may even be most beneficial to envision a greater role for writing center tutors from the very beginning. As the new writing center director at Pitzer College, I experimented with a smaller-scale version of these workshops by inviting a writing center tutor to participate in an early faculty workshop on assignment design, which allowed my colleagues—some of whom had taught at the college for more than a decade—to learn more about students' struggles with vague or overwrought prompts that demanded too much or too little of them. The tutor was able to share patterns of student reactions to assignment prompts and faculty feedback, which helped us explore the relationship between teaching and learning in the writing-intensive classroom. I was reminded yet again that when tutors speak from their own experience, sharing what they've learned and negotiated in conversations with their peers, their words often have more authority than ours.

This article tells the story of a faculty-development initiative developed at one institution and extended at another. Empirical research is needed to test whether such interventions in commenting practices influence students' perceptions of themselves as writers, improve the quality of revisions, and shift pedagogical practices in faculty-student one-to-one conferences. Anson (2008) has famously called for data-driven research to move "public discourse about writing from belief to evidence, from felt sense to investigation and inquiry" (p. 12). Yet I also believe that descriptive accounts of

less systematized pedagogical experiments create useful forms of knowledge for the field. This is particularly true for writing center professionals, where narratives of our work have the potential to define our self-understanding in productive or limiting ways.

In *Peripheral Visions for Writing Centers*, Grutsch McKinney (2013) has called on scholar-practitioners to challenge what she calls the “writing center grand narrative,” which limits the scope of writing center work by imagining centers primarily as “comfortable, iconoclastic places where all students go to get one-to-one tutoring on their writing” to the exclusion of lived realities (p. 3; emphasis in original). As suggested in this article, writing centers can depart from this isolationist narrative in compelling ways. I tell the story of a writing center where tutors bring their expertise outside the center and into the faculty office, consulting in small groups with faculty with the aim of enriching the quality of instructor feedback in first-year writing seminars. In other words, I describe a set of practices that are useful to consider beyond the one-to-one consultation. As Grutsch McKinney argues, such stories at the margins of grand narratives have the potential to enrich the field by preventing the writing center’s disciplinary history from being “narrowed . . . to such a degree that others do not understand the complexity of our work” (p. 85) and by expanding the discursive purview of what a writing center can be.

If Harris (1995) argues that “writing instruction without a writing center is only a partial program, lacking essential activities students need in order to grow and mature as writers” (p. 40), then writing program faculty development without tutor involvement is only a partial endeavor. Tutors bring perspectives to conversations about responding to student writing that may enable faculty to understand how their assignments and written responses are negotiated and how both might be reframed in ways that better enable students to join larger communities of readers.

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