***Student-led Writing Centers: A Rationale and Guiding Principles***

Briefly, a “writing center” is any location where students can go to receive assistance on their written work. “Student-led” denotes that students do the assisting. In my experience as a writing instructor, I’ve seen education initiatives come and go. I feel that writing centers led by peer tutors is an idea that will truly benefit high school students. I can honestly say that the junior high’s writing center, The Writin’ Titan Program, has greatly benefited my students in just five months of operation.

***Rationale—Five Great Reasons to Host a Student-led Writing Center at the High School***

**1. Support for Student Writers—**Writing scholars have long advocated the idea that collaboration and conversation are key elements of the writing process. As the old adage goes, “two brains are better than one.” Another quotation along these lines I admire is, “For excellence, the presence of others is always required” (Hannah Arendt). How much more effective does our writing become when we’ve had the chance to bounce our ideas off others? Often, writing is thought of as a solitary task—a student sits at a computer, lays out his or her ideas own their own, and turns in the assignment. Writing doesn’t have to work this way, and in fact, is strengthened when we allow others into our writing process. Most writing is intended for an audience other than ourselves. What a student-led writing center provides for students is an opportunity to tests their ideas and expression on a peer before their writing finds its way to its eventual audience. It allows for students to sharpen their written work before turning it in. Essentially, writing centers allow for better writing and higher achievement.

**2. Teacher Support--**As a writing teacher with nearly one hundred students, I struggle to provide individual attention to every student who needs it. When my students are writing in class, I find myself in triage mode, rushing from raised hand to raised hand until the bell rings. Because of time constraints and added teacher duties outside of the classroom, I worry that there are students slipping through the cracks, students I should be helping more, but can’t. This is where our writing center has supported my instruction. If I see a student slipping behind, and I know I won’t be able to meet with them individually, I hand them a writing center referral. This way, I know the student will receive some additional assistance from a trained peer tutor. Writing centers, however, are intended to assist writers of any skill and knowledge level, not just struggling students. Occasionally, my more advanced students will request a read-through of their paper when I’m strapped for time. They can also benefit from the availability of peer tutoring.

**3. Support for Standards Alignment*—***Common Core standards suggest that writing become a higher priority. What’s striking about the standards is that they dictate that writing fall not just within the realm of the English classroom, but that every classroom becomes a writing classroom. Educators in science, social studies, and even math to some extent are now required to have students complete high-level, complex writing tasks. As an English teacher, I think this is fantastic. However, in talking with colleagues, I’ve come to find out they’re a little hesitant about it. Writing assignments can be difficult to design and time consuming to grade. Sometimes teachers outside of English feel out of place teaching the “nuts and bolts” of composition, such as proper grammar, punctuation, and citation. Student-led writing centers can help teachers in implementing Common core writing-related standards in a number of ways. In existing high school writing centers, teachers often consult with peer tutors in designing writing assignments that will make sense to students. In addition, if teachers don’t feel comfortable or have the time to work with students on the “nuts and bolts,” they can refer students to the writing center. Lastly, Common core speaking and listening standards mandate that students employ peer revision in completing their projects. Student-led writing centers are terrific resource for helping the high school address these standards. For time-strapped teachers unable to fit peer revision into their class, writing centers are a godsend.

**4. Differentiated Instruction—**I’ve always found it difficult to vary my instruction according to student needs. It’s difficult enough for teachers to craft one effective lesson plan, let alone augment that plan so that each student in a classroom receive a level of instruction that challenges them at their own individual skill level. This is one reason I’m excited about our junior high’s writing center. It’s built-in differentiation that extends outside of the classroom. Struggling students can receive the extra attention and support they require by working with a trained peer tutor. I have often wondered why Response-to-Intervention applies to just reading and math, when students could also use interventions in writing. An intervention like working with a peer tutor could help address the needs of struggling writers. Moreover, peer tutors, typically stronger, advanced writers, receive supplemental instruction by having to pass along what they know about writing to classmates. To truly learn something, the saying goes, you must teach it. So, through our student-led writing center, my top students and my struggling students are receiving true differentiated support.

**5. Promotion of a School-wide Writing Environment—**Another benefit of have a writing center is that it promotes a “school-wide writing environment,” an understanding of and appreciation for the value of writing across the subjects and among all students and staff. Standards aside, we know that regardless of what careers students pursue after high school, they will be required to communicate effectively and purposefully to succeed. Just by maintaining a writing center, teachers will be reminded and encouraged to incorporate writing in their classrooms. This is an effect noted by directors of high school writing centers, and one I’ve found to occur in my own experience. I send out occasional reminders to staff about the work our writing center does, and usually soon afterward, I’ll see students in our writing center working with peer tutors on assignments from a variety of subjects. In addition, I’ve found that as a result of our writing center, my students are more conscientious about reviewing their writing with a peer tutor before they turn it in. Writing centers facilitate and encourage better writing practices.

***Five Guiding Principles for Student-led Writing Centers***

**1. Any Student, Any Stage in the Process—** Frequently, writing centers get stuck with the stigma that they are “only for the dumb kids.” Writing centers can serve a remedial role for struggling writers, but a school should view their center as a place that will benefit students of any skill and knowledge level. Another common misperception is that writing centers are merely a proofreading service. Students and teachers should understand that proofreading is only a small part of what peer tutors can assist students with. Peer tutors should be trained to help students with any part of the writing process: coming up with a topic, brainstorming for details and support, researching, debating potential arguments, organizing and outlining, drafting, revising, etc. In addition, peer tutors should possess the technical knowhow to be able to assist students in using the various computer programs and applications commonly required by teachers.

**2. The Students Does All the Work—**A common, and indeed valid, concern teachers often have about writing centers is that tutors will be completing the assignments for the students. Students, some teachers may fear, will come to see the writing center as a place to go to have someone else write their paper for them. Our junior high writing center’s number one motto is “The student does all the work.” I’ve trained our school’s peer tutors (whom I refer to as “writing coaches”) to employ a non-directive, minimalist approach to tutoring, an approach commonly used in high school writing centers. Generally, coaches won’t even touch students’ keyboards or the papers they’re writing on. Coaches are to be on the “sidelines.” They don’t do the actual “playing,” or writing. Coaches are there to support, encourage, assist, and help focus the writer. I’ve trained coaches to ask writers questions, rather than give them instructions. For example, instead of telling a writer to rewrite their thesis a certain way, a coach might ask, “What led you to begin your paper this way?” “Would you say your thesis fits your argument, or is it too broad or too narrow?” or “What might be a better way to re-phrase your thesis so that it fits your argument better?” Such questioning forces writers to think through their own difficulties on the page, instead of mindlessly following another’s advice.

**3. Transparency to Teachers, Confidentiality for Students—**The Writin’ Titan Program is built on the principle that teachers should always know what goes on in the writing center. If a student works with a coach on their history assignment, the history teacher will know it, and they’ll know exactly what progress was made during the coaching session. This is made possible at the junior high through a referral system. To work on an assignment with a coach, a student must have a signed referral from the teacher whom the assignment is for. This way, the teacher is aware that their student will be receiving assistance. There are assignments for which a teacher may not want a student to receive any outside help. They wouldn’t receive help under this system. Coaches know--no referral, no help. When a student comes to a coach with a referral, coaches are to write on the back of the referral what progress was made during the coaching session. After the session, the coach returns this referral back to the teacher, so the teacher will know whether the student worked with a coach and know what was accomplished.

Another important principle for a student-led writing center is confidentiality for students. Students should feel confident that their coach will not reveal to anyone other than the teacher and the writing center director what occurred during the session. A struggling student won’t have to worry that the coach he works with will blab to others about what a terrible speller he is. A student writing a personal narrative won’t need to fret that her coach will reveal to other students some private detail of her life. Students should have absolute confidence that the details of coaching sessions stay private.

4. **Better Writers, Not Just Better Papers—**One of the most often-cited essays in writing center scholarship is Stephen North’s “The Idea of a Writing Center,” which maintains that a writing center’s goal is to produce better writers, not just better writing. His point is that if students and tutors only focus on earning an A on the assignment at hand, they’re missing out on a valuable learning opportunity. I instruct coaches to use sessions as occasions to pass along what they know about good writing—whether that involve instructing peers about comma usage, sharing strategies for conclusions, or pointing out a web resource for properly citing sources. To use another old adage, “Give a man a fish, he eats for a day. Teach a man to fish, he eats for a lifetime.” It is the mission of the Writin’ Titan Program to offer writers knowledge they can use on future writing tasks.

**5. Training, Training, Training—**Another misgiving staff may have concerning writing centers is that its work will become an exercise in the blind leading the blind. How is a student supposed to be able to help his or her peers become better writers? Isn’t that challenging enough for a trained educator to do? I’ll answer this by referring to the first-hand research of other high school writing center directors (Rich Kent, Dawn Wels, and Jennifer Fells, mentioned at the end of this report). They have found that students make excellent writing tutors precisely because they are not teachers. Students who have worked with peer tutors indicate in their feedback that they felt more comfortable working with a peer on their writing than a teacher. Students felt less afraid to take chances and freer to explore ideas. Students may receive critical feedback from an instructor and think, “He doesn’t get what I’m trying to say. He’s just an old teacher.” However, they may be more receptive to feedback from a peer. In addition, peer tutors, who are often in the same class with and have the same assignment as the student they’re helping, may be more apt at understanding the difficulties associated with an assignment than the teacher, who created the assignment in a different frame of mind than the student.

Therefore, peer tutors are in a unique position to help their peers. They just need training. I have worked with my coaches twice a week over the first quarter and once a month since. We meet over lunch to discuss a variety of tutoring strategies. Here’s a quick overview of topics we’ve covered:

* Procedures for running a coaching session
* How to keep records of coaching sessions
* Setting goals for the session and the writer
* Actively listening to writers to understand their needs
* Using constructive small talk to build rapport with writers
* Providing writers with outline strategies
* Helping students correctly cite sources
* How to deal with suspected plagiarism
* Proofreading and revision strategies
* Addressing on higher order concerns (focus, organization, and elaboration) before addressing on lower order concerns (grammar and punctuation)
* Having students read their drafts aloud to listen for errors
* Helping students brainstorm for topics and details
* Providing writers with introduction, conclusion, and transition strategies
* Recognizing common spelling and grammatical errors
* Asking writers leading questions rather than telling them what to do
* Playing devil’s advocate without offending the writer

Given sufficient training and experience, student writing coaches can develop into valuable allies for teachers, not blind guides. It has been fascinating watching the junior high writing coaches in action, making decisions on the fly, coming up with creative ways to help classmates, and taking ownership of their responsibilities as a tutor. I have witnessed several ineffective tutoring sessions, but over the course of the year, I have also watched writing coaches grow in their tutoring abilities. What’s really amusing is when coaches come back to me with complaints every teacher has uttered, such as, “It was really hard to keep them focused,” “They wouldn’t believe what I was telling them,” and “I had to go over the same thing again and again before they got it.” Such comments not only reveal to me that our writing coaches are working hard, but suggest that coaches are participating in a very powerful learning experience as they take on the role of teacher. Coaches are picking up social skills in addition to garnering advanced writing skills. Without a doubt, it is the peer tutors who gain the most from a student-led writing center.

***Suggested Reading:***

Kent, Richard. *A Guide to Creating Student-Staffed Writing Centers: Grades 6-12.* New York: Peter Lang, 2006. Print.

McAndrew, Donald A. and Thomas J. Reigstad. *Tutoring Writing: A Practical Guide for Conferences*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001.

Rafoth, Ben, Jennifer Wells, and Dawn Fels. “The Promise of Change with One-to-One Instruction.” *The Successful High School Writing Center: Building the Best Program with Your Students.* Eds. Dawn Fels and Jennifers Wells. New York: Teachers College, 2011. 7-18. Print.