“The Idea of a [Junior High] Writing Center”

**The Problem Statement**

This past year, I established a student-staffed writing center at the junior high where I teach 8th grade language arts. The idea of a student-staffed writing center, a designated area where peer-tutoring in writing occurs, is nothing new. Most colleges and a growing number of high schools claim one. However, this type of writing center at the junior high level is unusual. In fact, I’ve only come across two other middle schools in my research, one in Connecticut and another in Nebraska, with operating writing centers that are staffed by students.

The idea of creating such a center has been brewing in my mind for some time. The notion of students talking to one another about their writing with the end goal of improving each other’s composition skills holds much appeal to me. As a writing instructor with over one-hundred students, I usually race around in triage mode, addressing whatever student needs I can with what little class time I have, often leaving some needs unaddressed. If only there were a dozen of me, I could provide all my students with the individualized writing instruction they require. Of course, the technology for such self-duplication doesn’t exist, but I came upon the next best thing—a student staffed writing center.

I attained my principal’s blessing this past summer for this project and pitched the idea of a student-staffed writing center at our first faculty meeting of the year. There was little push back from staff, but there was also not much encouragement. I asked the sixth grade and seventh grade language arts teachers for recommendations of students who they believed would make effective peer tutors, students who were responsible, friendly, and capable writers. Using these recommendations, I began to assemble a staff. Because of strong interests among students, I ended up with a few more tutors than I intended—twenty-two total. During the first nine weeks, I met with these students over lunch twice each week for training (lunch seemed to be the only time available to do this). We discussed and practiced the principles of non-directive tutoring and how to help students through each stage of the writing process. In late October, our center, deemed “The Writin’ Titan Program,” was in business.

Our peer tutors, “Writin’ Titan Coaches,” are available during lunch (in an “optional homework room”) and study hall (in our computer lab) for consultations. To date, we have conducted 132 sessions with sixth, seventh, and eighth graders. In addition, we’ve also worked with a third grade classroom (from the grade school across the street), conducting 68 separate sessions with them over the course of four specific projects. I’m pleased with these numbers, especially with it being our first year. However, these numbers are slightly misleading. Of the 132 sessions with junior high students, 110 of the teacher referrals came from me. “Teacher referrals” are required in order to work with a writing coach; teachers may hand them out or students may request them. Accounting for the other referrals are one from the eighth grade science teacher, three from the sixth grade teachers, five from the seventh grade language arts teacher, and fourteen from the seventh grade science teacher. Our writing center has been of great benefit to my students and me, but it appears only one other junior high teacher’s classroom is gaining much from our peer tutors. Can a writing center survive mainly on referrals from one classroom? For this year it may have to, but this clearly isn’t a sustainable model. For the Writin’ Titan Program to truly be a success, I need to gain the investment of all the teachers in my building. My colleagues and our students must *buy into* how our writing center can be of value to them if it is to be fully utilized. The problem statement I’ll attempt to address, then, emerges from my need to convince students and faculty that a student-staffed writing center is advantageous: How might a student-staffed writing center be of use to the students and faculty of a junior high school? My approach, with the audience of staff unfamiliar with the concept of writing centers in mind, will be to first define what a student-staffed writing center typically is and what it is not. Following this will be a discussion of the methodology by which writing centers promote constructive collaboration and conversation. The final section of this statement will explore several specific benefits of student-staffed writing centers: the advantages of peer tutoring, instruction that is Common Core-aligned and supportive of differentiation, and the cultivation of a school-wide writing environment.

**The Influence of My Course of Study**

For the past two years, I’ve served on the Illinois State Writing Project Leadership Team. Our meetings, led by Dr. Julie Cheville, focused on the creation of a network of local secondary school writing centers. The idea of creating a writing center was first planted in my mind by Cynthia Dean, a visiting professor from the University of Maine-Augusta, whom our team hosted in the fall of 2012 when she gave a talk on writing centers at the IATE conference.

I was still struggling with the logistics of how to establish a writing center at my school when I participated in last summer’s Illinois State Writing Project Summer Institute. The course’s focus, how to create and maintain a student-staffed writing center, afforded me the opportunity to work through these issues. We read two books on the subject and hosted Rich Kent, a leading scholar in research addressing secondary school writing centers. For the course’s teaching demo assignment, I created a presentation that outlined some rudimentary training for peer tutors.

The readings, discussions, and activities from the summer institute pushed me to think critically as I formulated plans for the Writin’ Titan Program. I was adequately prepared to get our school’s writing center underway. However, two challenges I had not anticipated were the flexibility necessary for my coaches to exhibit while tutoring and the fact that I would need to conduct an extraordinary amount of educating and convincing to get students and teachers to use our writing center. In terms of tutor flexibility, the initial training procedure I had devised was too rigid, dictating that tutoring sessions should proceed in a specific order. After five months as a writing center director, I have begun to realize that because students and their needs are so diverse, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to tutoring, a reality reflected in the following readings. In reference to need to educate and convince, my initial belief was that once our writing center was open for business, students and teachers would gradually come to understand its value and our center would stay busy. This is not how things have progressed. In my reading, I happened upon this quotation from high school writing center director James Upton: “Simply making the services available to students and staff is not enough; we also have to create the need for the center” (80). This is a sentiment I have found incredibly accurate. The discussion that follows is generated in part by my new awareness that I must engender a sense of need among staff and students.

**The Review of the Literature**

**What a Writing Center Is (and Is Not).** In promoting the idea of a writing center, it is important to clearly articulate what a writing center is and what it is not. Among my colleagues, I’ve noted confusion as well as misperception as to the purpose of our Writin’ Titan Program. For her recent book *Peripheral Visions for Writing Centers*, Jackie Grutsch McKinney conducted research illustrating the many roles writing centers fulfill. She surveyed over one hundred college and high school writing centers to find out what services they offer. Answers ranged from offering student workshops and classroom visits to sponsoring writing contests and advising teachers on how to create writing assignments (McKinney 77-79). However, despite differences in size, staffing, and services offered, all the writing centers in her study offered one-to-one tutoring. McKinney points to Muriel Harris’s summation of approaches to tutoring that are shared by writing centers. Harris states that writing centers offer tutorials in a one-to-one setting, tutors act as collaborators rather than teachers, student’s individual needs are the primary focus, experimentation and practice are encouraged among tutors, writers and tutors work on writing from a variety of courses, and finally, writing centers work with students of all proficiencies (McKinney 59). In addition, McKinney cites Nancy Grimm in identifying three common objectives writing centers share: “1) A good tutor makes the student do all the work, 2) The ultimate aim of a tutorial is an independent writer, and 3) Our job is to produce better writers, not better writing” (60). Rich Kent, who directed a high school writing center in Maine for many years, provides this matter-of-fact definition of a writing center:

Writing centers... are places where writers talk with fellow writers about their work in an effort to discover a thesis, overcome procrastination, develop ideas, create an outline, evaluate a draft, or revise a draft. Writing center staff members support, tutor, and confer with writers in an effort to encourage and motivate. In the most effective writing centers, student writers feel at ease as they create and revise lab reports, applications, essays, songs, research papers, personal letters, iMovies, resumes, and cover letters

(Kent 2).

In a student-staffed writing center, a peer-tutor and a writer work as equals to tackle any number of writing-related tasks. However, it is not merely about getting writing “done.” As Harris, Grimm, and Kent describe, elements of encouragement, motivation, counsel, and collaboration are aimed at students’ growth as writers.

An easy assumption for students and teachers to make is that the writing center is a place for poor writers to get their grammar fixed. This doesn’t have much of a positive, appealing ring to it. Katherine M. Fischer and Muriel Harris discuss misunderstanding as to the function of writing centers in “Fill’er Up, Pass the Band-Aids, Center the Margin, and Praise the Lord: Mixing Metaphors in the Writing Lab.” One misperception is that of “the writing center as prison... a place of student punishments for committing linguistic crimes” (Fischer and Harris 23). From this perspective, writers are conceived as angry prisoners sentenced to do time against their will, while tutors are jailers charged with ensuring writers fall in line. Meanwhile, teachers are judges with no responsibility for struggling writers other than to detect and sentence them (23). The prison metaphor limits the scope of a writing center to that of “correction,” and “inhibits tutors from seeing their *prisoners* as the writers they really are, capable of collaborative dialogue and discussion” (Fischer and Harris 24). Also pejorative is the perception of writing center as hospital, “a place where students come with diseased texts” (Fischer and Harris 24). Under this metaphor, tutors act as doctors, diagnosing problems and working to cure sick patients and their papers. Fischer and Harris point out this medical metaphor “implies a movement from original health to disease to recovery, totally distorting the real growth and development of writers” (24). One final harmful view of the writing center is that of a service station, a place where passive students bring their work for a tune-up and tutors are reduced to “mechanic[s] in the conveyer-belt world of academia” (Fischer and Harris 25). For the Writin’ Titan Program to benefit my school, students and teacher must eschew the ideas of grammatical offenders being punished, injured essays being bandaged, and compositional clunkers being repaired.

**Writing Center Practices and the Need for Collaboration and Conversation.** For students and staff to personally invest themselves in a writing center, it’s helpful to have a clear picture of the practices and procedures by which they typically operate. Much of writing center methodology aims at promoting collaboration and conversation, essential elements in the writing process. One of the most-cited articles in writing center scholarship is Stephen North’s “The Idea of a Writing Center.” North begins by lamenting the misperception that the writing center is meant to aid only remedial students, and that it’s a quick stop, fix-it proofreading service. North counters this perception by stating, “...in a writing center the object is to make sure that writers, and not necessarily their text, are what get changed by instruction. In axiom form it goes like this: our job is to produce better writers, not better writing” (69). He goes on to stress the importance of teaching the writing process over merely correcting students’ projects. When writers leave the writing center, he asserts, they should leave with a fuller understanding of how to complete complex writing tasks. In addition, he suggests that any method of peer tutoring be “student-centered,” not based on a strict model of composing or some framework for where a student ought to be, but based on helping students where they’re at in their learning (North 70). Of a writing center’s value, he explains, “Nearly everyone who writes likes—and needs—to talk about his or her writing, preferably to someone who will really listen, who knows how to listen, and knows how to talk about writing too” (North 71). He concludes by describing the essence of writing center method as “talking” and posits that the writing center’s “...only reason for being, is to talk to writers” (North 78).

This “talk” is often missing from faculty’s and students’ understanding of a writing center. Ken Bruffee, in “Peer Tutoring and the ‘Conversation of Mankind’,” argues that talk is a necessary element for good writing. Writing, he explains, stems from conversation. Effective writers rely on an inner monologue about their choices and purposes, and this ability to converse with one’s self is derived from experience conversing with others. Therefore, “The inference tutors and teachers should make from this line of reasoning is that our task must involve engaging students in conversation at as many points in the writing process as possible” (Bruffee 210). Peer tutoring, Bruffee continues, is a natural fit for promoting the type of conversation from which writing benefits. It provides a social context in which writer and tutor can become emotionally and intellectually invested as they work through various challenges associated with the writing process. It is a collaborative context, he suggests, that allows for the type of substantive argument which aids writers in justifying and sharping their descriptions and assertions (Bruffee 211). Establishing this environment in which peers can collaboratively refine one another’s understanding of writing “is the main goal of peer tutoring” he concludes (Bruffee 212).

In “Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of a Writing Center,” Andrea Lunsford provides further description of what beneficial talk in the writing center does and does not look like. She warns against “collaboration [that] often masquerades as democracy when it in fact practices the same old authoritarian control” (Lunsford 92-93). True collaboration, she explains, occurs when two or more individuals who value each other as equals in the writing process sit down to work out their ideas, not when one individual feigns to be equal but assumes a dominant role. Along these lines, the writing center should not be regarded as a “storehouse,” where knowledge is held and then prescribed and handed out by tutors. Rather, the center should work as a type of “Burkean Parlor” (Lunsford 97). Here, Lunsford references philosopher Kenneth Burke’s notion of a meeting place where conversation continues unabated over time despite the entrance and exit of the conversation’s participants. As each new participant enters, she benefits from the previous sharing of knowledge and contributes her own understanding of the topic before she exits. In this way, knowledge is socially-constructed and control lies with the “negotiating group.” In the context of peer tutoring, a continuous cycle of knowledge about the writing process accumulates through the contributions of both tutors and writers, benefiting all who participate. In such a setting, Lunsford writes, collaboration can aid in problem finding and solving, learning abstractions, transfer, critical thought, understanding others, active learning, and higher achievement in general (94-95).

My desire is that Writin’ Titan coaches and the students who meet with them really *talk* about the writing, not just about the task at hand, but about process and choices and purpose. The expectation of teachers and students may be for tutors to get down to business and fix that paper in thirty minutes or less. Teachers and students want “product”; they expect results. Clearly, however, peer tutoring sessions offer a richer opportunity for students to converse about writing. The “product” I’m envisioning involves students discussing and sharing the challenges of writing, collaboratively working through the writing difficulties they encounter to improve their compositional skills and knowledge. The goal, as North urges, is to create better writers, not just better writing. Unfortunately, many teachers and students don’t view collaboration or conversation as a necessary part of the writing process. Lisa Ede, in “Writing as a Social Process: A Theoretical Foundation for Writing Centers?” states, “The assumption that writing is inherently a solitary cognitive activity is so deeply ingrained in western culture that it has, until recently, largely gone unexamined” (Ede 103). But as North, Bruffee, and Lunsford suggest, writing is not a solitary process. For writing centers to thrive, Ede explains, the misconception of writing as solitary must be rebuffed: “...as long as thinking and writing are regarded as inherently individual, solitary activities, writing centers can never be viewed as anything more than pedagogical fix-it shops to help those who... are unable to think and write on their own” (102). To counter those who believe writing should be solitary, Lunsford offers this quotation from Hannah Arendt: “For excellence, the presence of others is always required” (95).

Talking about writing may not be the most efficient way to go about getting students’ writing “finished,” but it is the most effective way to nurture writers and help them develop in their understanding of the writing process, especially at it relates to the concept of audience. A primary factor determining the success of a piece of writing is its affect upon its intended audience. When tutor and writer converse about the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of a piece, a social negotiation is enacted in which the tutor serves as a mock audience with whom the writer may test and hone his means of expression. It is considered wise practice for someone interviewing for a job to prepare by participating in a mock interview. Similarly, it is wise practice for writers to revise with the assistance of reader who is not eventual audience. In this sense, by encouraging writers to work with a peer tutor, teachers would be cultivating in their students a habit that will be beneficial long after they move on.

I intend for talk to be the prime component of the peer tutoring that occurs in our writing center, but what might be the essential features of this talk? To begin with some research, Rebecca Day Babcock and Therese Thonus review several studies concerning “small talk” during peer-tutoring sessions. Small talk might include questions like “How’s it going?” or “What’s new?” and involve discussion of the writer’s interests, experiences, or family. In their overview, they note that some studies have been dismissive of small talk, terming it “time-of-task” or “chit-chat.” However, other studies demonstrate how small talk assists in relationship- building and contributed to a “friendly, interactive environment.” Such conversation may also help in generating topics (Babcock and Thonus 114). For these reasons, the authors recommend that small talk has value, and that it not be discounted (Babcock and Thonus 120). I encourage my coaches to “break the ice” and get the writer talking, believing this talk get the writer’s wheels turning, so to speak. I envision a staff member happening upon a coach and a writer discussing the writer’s past weekend and assuming the two are being unproductive. However, what if this small talk brings to mind a topic with which the writer wants to work? A seemingly off-task conversation about the upcoming dance may lead a writer to begin crafting an essay about the ritual of the junior high dance. Of course, such small talk can do more than generate topics. A warm salutation and a sincere expression of enthusiasm on the tutor’s part could help a writer let his guard down, initiating a camaraderie that enables a deeper, constructive conversation about what is working in a piece of writing and what is not.

Donald McAndrew and Thomas Reigstad’s *Tutoring Writing: A Practical Guide for Conferences* provides a helpful prioritization for talk between tutors and writers. The authors are notable for coining the terms “higher order concerns” and “lower order concerns.” The authors recommend that during a peer-tutoring session, talk should first focus on higher order concerns (HOCs), which relate to “thesis and focus, development, structure and organization, and voice” (McAndrew and Reigstad 42). Lower order concerns (LOCs) “are vital to preparing any finished piece” and are “related to surface appearance, correctness, and standard rules of written English.” The authors advise that tutor and writer only shift their focus to LOCs once HOCs have been attended to. It is the tutor’s responsibility to determine where a writer is at in his draft and know how to spend the tutoring session. “It would be a disservice,” they explain, “to simply help a writer clean up a handful of errors in draft that is otherwise devoid of ideas, leaving a paper that is technically correct but lacking in substance” (McAndrew and Reigstad 56).

While McAndrew and Reigstad’s book is a touchstone for helping tutors know *what* to talk about and *when* to talk about it, Jeff Brooks’ “Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Student Do All the Work,” is guidepost for *how* to talk about writing, a standard-bearer for the type of non-directive tutoring by which many writing centers operate. In describing the role of the tutor, he begins by echoing North, asserting, “...we sit down with imperfect papers, but our job is to improve their writers. When you ‘improve’ a student’s paper, you haven’t been a tutor at all; you’ve been an editor...” (Brooks 219-220). . Casting off the role of a “hurried proofreader” allows tutors to focus on discussing effective writing strategies and offering encouragement (Brooks 220).

Brooks provides several tips for facilitating “minimalist tutoring.” He recommends tutors sit beside the writer rather than across the desk, where those in authority tend to sit. This embodied practice is a simple gesture that shows the writer that the tutor is not “in charge” of the session. He also suggests that a tutor begin by asking the writer to read his or her entire paper aloud, marking areas that may require revision. This approach frees writers from only seeing their writing as words on a page and allows them to experience it in a new mode, aurally. Brooks notes that writers often detect problems in their work when hearing it aloud that they would not have detected through mere reading. Hearing the entire piece aloud also permits tutors to orient themselves to higher order concerns in the writing like content and organization, without getting snagged by the surface errors that stick out in a visual reading. In addition, Brooks advises that the tutor ask the writer leading questions rather than pointing out errors. For example, “When something is unclear, don’t say, ‘This is unclear’; rather, say, ‘What do you mean by this?’” Also, “‘What’s your reason for putting Q before N?’ is more effective than ‘N should be have come before Q’” (Brooks 222). Another tip is to give the writer a discrete writing task and leave momentarily to let him do it. The tutor need not hover over the writer the entire time, but should allow him space to work independently. Going a step further, he then advocates “defensive minimalist tutoring” in which a tutor resists the pressure of a writer who insists on a quick edit job through suggestive body language and the refusal to provide direct answers (Brooks 223). Brooks concludes, “Fixing flawed papers is easy; showing students how to fix their own papers is complex and difficult... If, at the end of a session, a paper is improved, it should be because the student did all the work” (224).

Picking up on Brooks’ minimalist rejection of the role of editor, Paula Gillespie and Neal Learner delineate the differences between tutoring and editing in *The Longman Guide to Peer Tutoring.* Among these differences, the authors note, editors focus on the text while tutors focus on the writer’s development and establishing rapport. Next, editors take ownership of the text, manipulating it as they see fit, as if it were their own. However, tutors make sure writers take ownership of their papers, empowering them to make any final decisions. Editors give advice while tutors ask questions. Editors make corrections on the page while reading texts silently, but tutors urge writers to make corrections while reading their texts aloud. Lastly, editors tell writers what to do while tutors ask them what should be done (Gillespie and Learner 45).

Through practicing non-directive, minimalist tutoring, rather than playing the role of a domineering editor, students are able to hold substantive conversations about writing that facilitate active learning. In my own training of Writin’ Titan coaches, we’ve discussed extensively how to avoid telling a writer to do something by instead asking leading, open-ended questions that induce writers to think through their own difficulties on the page. For example, rather than telling a writer his introduction is weak, a coach might ask, “What strategy did you use for starting the essay?” followed by, “Have you considered another approach for beginning your paper?” Even for lower order concerns, I’ve instructed coaches to ask rather than tell. If a sentence is missing a comma, they might state, “I think this sentence has a pause that could require a comma. Do you see where it might go?” instead of, “Put a comma here.”

Linda Shamoon and Deborah Burns question the orthodoxy of minimalist tutoring in “A Critique of Peer Tutoring.” The authors argue that “...directive tutoring, a methodology completely opposite of current tutoring practices, is sometimes a suitable and effective mode of instruction” (225). Burns explains that in writing her Master’s thesis, her advising professor provided the most helpful tutoring she had ever received. He added transitions, deleted wordy passages, formalized her vocabulary, and offered revisions for entire paragraphs (Shamoon and Burns 229). She notes that though her advisor’s practices were authoritative and directive, they helped her learn to how to write as an academic. Shamoon and Burns point to tutoring practices in music and art, disciplines where instructors often model tasks and have students imitate their work. “Rather than assuming that this imitation will prevent authentic self-expression, the tutor and the student assume that imitation will lead to improved technique, which will enable freedom of expression” (232). Shamoon and Burns also mention the one-to-one tutoring practices of Muriel Harris, a leading figure in writing center scholarship, who models how to write in order to help students struggling with unproductive composing habits (Shamoon and Burns 235). Shamoon and Burns conclude their critique of conventional non-directive tutoring practices by cautioning that they thwart the beneficial use of modeling and imitation. “If writing center practices are broadened to include *both* directive and non-directive tutoring, the result would be an enrichment of tutoring repertoires... and increased attention to the cognitive, social, and rhetorical needs of writers at all stages of development (239). Peter Carino, in “Power and Authority in Peer Tutoring”, reiterates this sentiment, proposing, “The watchword in tutor training should not be nondirective peership, but flexibility” (Carino 110). A peer tutor’s method of assistance should be based on the level of necessary knowledge and skill the writer possesses for the task at hand. In other words, “Tutors should learn to shift between directive and nondirective methods as needed” (Carino 110). Carino suggests non-directive methods are suitable for proficient writers, while less proficient writers require directive methods.

At the junior high level, I worry that teachers might perceive any adoption of directive peer tutoring practices as something approaching cheating and plagiarism. The concern of students receiving too much help is common in writing center scholarship and, indeed, valid. Yet, if tutors are careful to model rhetorical strategies and thinking without letting clients borrow actual wording, directive tutoring could go a long way in helping produce better writers. In relation to the Writin’ Titan Program, this directive approach, for instance, might involve a coach modeling for a writer how to construct an effective thesis statement. As the coach fashions the model thesis, he might relate to the writer his thinking process, explaining his rhetorical choices. To offer another example of a directive approach, perhaps a writer is struggling with how to cite sources within a paper. A coach might pull up an example of parenthetical citation from her own work to show a writer, and then go on to explain why she cited sources in a particular way. In many respects, directive tutoring creates a context in which writers gradually claim more responsibility for their work. The approach can set in motion a process: (1) tutor does, writer watches, (2) tutor does, writer helps, (3) writer does, tutor helps, and (4) writer does, tutor watches. If enacted successfully, the result of this process would truly satisfy North’s call for cultivating better writers, not just better writing.

A more recent rendering of the role of peer-tutor is that of “trickster,” a term borrowed from mythology and folklore In *The Everyday Writing Center*, the authors describe the trickster attitude as “representing a flexibility of mind and spirit, a willingness to defy authority and invent clever solutions” (Geller, et al. 16). Rather than get boxed into a rigid methodology such as minimalist or non-directive tutoring, the trickster tutor recognizes there is no “right” way to peer tutor in every situation and adjusts her approach accordingly. There is no “one” peer tutoring consultation. Students differ, tutors differ, assignments differ, circumstances differ—the variables are innumerable. As one writing center director to confessed in a *Writing Center Journal* blog post, “I’ve never found a protocol, template, or fixed heuristic schema that survives more than a minute of writing center work” (Geller, et al. 22). In the face of such variance, a tutor with a trickster mentality might play a word game or even draw with a writer who feels frustrated or stuck. “Familiar memes—don’t write on the paper; don’t speak more than the student-writer, ask non-directive questions—get passed around as gospel,” note the authors. Yet, clinging dogmatically to such maxims can get in the way of effective tutoring. Tutors, they suggest, must learn to be flexible (echoing Carino) and listen carefully to the writer to correctly interpret their needs (Geller, et al. 21).

**Further Advantages of Peer Instruction: The Benefits of a Peer Tutor, Common Core State Standards, Differentiation Instruction, and an Environment for Writing.** The preceding section of this argument illustrated how student-staffed writing centers foster collaboration and conversation that is beneficial to the growth of writers. Particular practices (small talk, HOCs vs. LOCs, minimalist, non-directive, editor vs. tutor, directive, and “trickster”) are all at the peer tutor’s disposal to help promote an atmosphere conducive to substantive learning. Ideally, this is how I envision the Writin’ Titan Program. However, allow me to play devil’s advocate at this point and question whether this ideal is actually possible by introducing a common teacher misgiving about student-staffed writing centers—that they will become an instance of the blind leading the blind. Can a junior high student really know enough about writing and collaboration to be a skillful, successful peer-tutor? For example, if directive and non-directive approaches are useful, is a twelve or thirteen-year-old capable of knowing when and how to use these approaches effectively? Will an eighth grade peer-tutor know when to employ a conventional approach and when to play “trickster”? John Trimbur confronts such doubts in “Peer Tutoring: A Contradiction in Terms?” He writes, “...the traditional model of teaching and learning tells new tutors that they are not qualified to tutor, to pass down knowledge to their tutees... students do not possess the expertise to help their peers learn how to write” (Trimbur 289). Allow me to further indulge this notion that junior high students may not be up to the task by acknowledging that peer-tutoring is very difficult to do well. Jane Cogie describes some of these difficulties in “Peer Tutoring: Keeping the Contradiction Productive.” “The most apparent tension,” she notes, “is the speed with which decisions must be made to move [peer tutoring] sessions forward meaningfully” (Cogie 37). In addition to thinking on their feet, tutors must negotiate how to handle a pushy student who expects only a quick fix during their session. Moreover, peer tutors also may face “institutional” tensions arising from having to support the writer yet defend teachers’ assignments and grading at the same time. Differences of gender, socioeconomic level, age (a seventh grader helping an eighth grader is a big, awkward deal in junior high), as well as fears of inadequate skill also confront peer tutors (Cogie 37).

These are certainly legitimate concerns. But, students can learn to manage a challenging social task like peer tutoring, just like we expect them to learn to handle innumerable other social situations they’ll face as they grow up. How much more socially skilled will students become for having had the experience of peer tutoring? Plus, research suggests that students can make effective tutors precisely because they’re not teachers but peers. As Rafoth, Wells, and Fels relate in “The Promise of Change with One-to-One Instruction,” students possess a fuller understanding of one another’s feelings than a teacher might as they tackle assignments and endeavor to grow as writers. Thus, they are in a unique position to help each other (Rafoth, Wells, and Fels 12). The authors also observe that the absence of a classroom setting can create an environment in which students are less shy and afraid to ask questions and more likely to share ideas (13). In “The Tutors Speak: Current and Former Tutors’ Reflections” (Elchinoff, et al.), a high school peer tutor further explains the advantages of working with a classmate on writing:

How can a student helping another student be more effective to a tutee than a teacher

helping a student?... One of the main reasons is that a peer tutor is a peer of the tutee...

this can help the tutee feel less intimidated than they would in the same situation with an

adult or teacher. For this same reason, there is more of a sense of equality when it comes

to authority between a peer tutor and a tutee. Teachers have the power, ultimately, to

give grades, whereas tutors do not. So sometimes working with a peer can make the tutee

more inclined to think about their improvements, rather than automatically doing them because their teacher told them to (64).

I quote at length here to show that peer tutoring should not be dismissed as “the blind leading the blind.” Here the student displays a keen understanding of the advantageousness of peer tutor-writer collaboration in relation to issues of power and authority in a high school. Students are savvy enough to know how to negotiate the dynamics of the peer tutoring session. As another high school tutor discerned, “As tutors of the writing center, we need to be firmly aware that we are not experts. We have as much to learn from the student as the student does from us. The moment we begin to patronize the student is the moment they tune us out” (Dean 52). While the theory and methodology behind peer-tutoring may be complex and conflicting, peer-tutors know that in practice, it doesn’t have to be that complicated. As another high school peer-tutor puts it simply, “I think tutoring is more one-on-one. They’ll [student-writers] give you something, and you’ll give something back. It’s kind of give-and-take. That’s the only way to learn” (Dean 56).

So, as to the question of whether students can serve as capable peer tutors, evidence from high school writing centers suggest they can. Personally, judging from the five months the Writin’ Titan Program has been in operation, I know that peer tutoring has positively impacted not only students’ grades, but the way they think about writing. I’ve listened as coaches have negotiated between being directive and non-directive with writers and engaged in substantive discussions about writing beyond the assignments before them. At the beginning of our tutor training back in September, I put forward a fairly rigid format for tutoring sessions that our coaches were to follow. Interestingly, I have observed my coaches adroitly trim, stretch, and twist this format to fit dozens of tutoring situations I hadn’t even anticipated. At times, I am taken aback at how to adaptable they have become.

For a junior high school, it should not be a case of whether peer tutoring and writing centers can be effective; it should be a question of whether it can afford to be without one. The arrival of the Common Core Standards, with their emphasis on writing, is further encouragement for teachers to take interest in a writing center. Writing has typically been the realm of language arts in junior high. However, new standards necessitate that argumentative and informative writing become focuses of the junior high literature, social studies, and science classrooms. For example, the standards call for junior high students in social studies to be able to “analyze evidence from multiple primary and secondary sources to advance a claim that is best supported by the evidence, and argue for a historically or empirically situated interpretation” (Appendix A 23). In science, students are asked to use data to “marshal evidence and draw on their understanding of scientific concepts to argue in support of their claims” (Appendix 23).

Included in the Common Core website’s appendix of sample student writing is a 7th grade science report that is five pages in length and incorporates fourteen sources, original research, and multiple illustrations (Appendix C 42). The appendix also provides an example of an 8th grade literature informational text is a thousand word summary of *Old Man and The Sea* noted as exemplary for features such as “develop[ing] the topic with relevant, well-chosen facts, definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples,” “us[ing] appropriate and varied transitions to create cohesion and clarify the relationships among ideas and concepts,” and “providing a concluding section that follows from and supports the information or explanation presented (and returns to the quotation used in the thesis statement)” (Appendix C 50).

These are all daunting, remarkably complex writing tasks for which teachers could use support, the type of support a writing center can provide. Assignments of this caliber would seem to require individual attention on the part of the teacher toward most writers, an amount of attention time-strapped teachers are not likely to possess. A writing center could allow students requiring extra help the opportunity to work with peers, many of whom would be in the same class and understand the assignment. In a sense, peer tutors would make larger, complex writing assignments more feasible for teachers to undertake by serving as a team of capable assistants eager to support their classmates.

Also worth mentioning, while on the topic of Common Core, is the standards’ emphasis on collaboration among students. For instance, standard [ELA-Literacy.SL.8.1](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/SL/8/1/) requires that students “Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 8 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly” (“English/Language Arts Standards>>Speaking & Listening>>Grade 8”). Another standard, [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.8.5](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/W/8/5/), recommends that students, “With some guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on how well purpose and audience have been addressed” (“English/Language Arts Standards>>Writing>>Grade 8”). Here, the standards almost seem to be advocating for the employment of peer-tutoring in schools. A student-staffed writing center would superbly address these directives.

While “Common Core” is an imperative for teachers, so is “differentiated instruction” and “RTI” (Response to Intervention). Junior high teachers commonly have classrooms of students who possess varying skill levels, yet they are asked to support and challenge each individual. A student-staffed writing center presents a unique method of providing differentiated instruction in writing. Struggling students could receive the extra support they need by consulting with peer tutors, and tutors, often more advanced writers, receive a sort of extra enrichment by having the opportunity to explain what they know about good writing to their classmates. Response to Intervention is a state-mandated program requiring that students in elementary, middle, and high school be provided with differentiated, “tiered” interventions in math and reading. As explained by the RTI Action Network website, “The RTI process begins with high-quality instruction and universal screening of all children in the general education classroom. Struggling learners are provided with interventions at increasing levels of intensity to accelerate their rate of learning. These services may be provided by a variety of personnel” (“What is RTI?”). Tiers are divided as follows: Tier 1--High-Quality Classroom Instruction, Screening, and Group Interventions, Tier 2--Targeted Interventions, and Tier 3--Intensive Interventions and Comprehensive Evaluation. If students are not successful in the first tier, they are provided with more and more interventions until their learning needs are meant. Though RTI does not address writing, it is not a far stretch for teachers to understand the need for interventions in this domain as well. Writing center scholarship has frequently bucked against the label of “remedial resource,” but there’s no reason that can’t be *part of* what a junior high writing center is. Progressive staff and administration looking beyond the need for just reading and math interventions might see in a writing center the potential for a writing intervention that benefits struggling students.

Aside from helping a school address standards and the call for differentiation of instruction, another advantage of writing centers is that they can transform the entire environment of a school to be more conducive to writing. Robert Barnett and Lois Rosen, in “The WAC/Writing Center Partnership”, describe a “writing environment” as involving a “campus-wide recognition that writing is central to students’ intellectual development and to their success in the wider world. [A writing environment] also means that writing is visible, understood, and accepted as a valuable tool for teaching and learning across the disciplines” (Barnett and Rosen 1). Rich Kent attests that such an environment blossomed out of the student-staffed writing center he helped create. He recalls, “I’m remembering when my principal said, ‘Just having a *The Writing Center* sign hanging in the corridor puts a new focus on writing in our school’” (7). As Kent began his writing center at Mountain Valley High School in Rumford, Maine, he reports,

A ripple of writing talk turned into a swell and rolled through the school in small and large ways. I heard about journals in math class, revision talk on science papers, and creative writing in history class... The presence of a writing center created new awareness. Conversation about writing increased and so did writing across the curriculum (9-10).

A school-wide writing environment of this sort is enough to get any teacher of writing excited. It reflects an atmosphere in which teachers understand (as John Mellon wrote), “writing is the greatest tool for thinking ever invented by man” (Johnston and Speck 20). Writing teachers are well aware that such an environment should be the aim of every school.

However, organizers of new writing centers must realize that a writing environment may not appear as naturally as it did in Kent’s experience. This certainly hasn’t magically occurred in my own school. Non-English teachers may need training and support in understanding how writing can benefit their instruction. Many teachers, as researcher Scott Johnston and Bruce Speck discovered, carry misconceptions about writing. “Most of the faculty we meet with,” they recount, “feel that it is not their job to teach their students to write” (23). The pair also report wide-held teacher misconceptions about writing among those outside of English, namely that “good writing is good writing” (an uninformed simplification that does not account for the diverse conventions of writing across different fields) and that grammar is more important than content (14). Lil Brannon suggests in “Developing a Writing Center: What Can a Consultant Do?” that the establishment of a writing center provides an opportune moment for staff to be reoriented to the complex processes involved in writing. By means of a consultant-led in-service workshop, best practices in writing instruction could be explained to staff, and teachers would be provided a space to envision how their instruction could enable students to become better writers. Along with this training in writing instruction, teachers would be educated in how a writing center can support them and their students (Brannon 56).

Affirming the importance of a writing environment, Mark Waldo and Maria Madruga assert simply, “English cannot teach writing by itself... a few (at most) composition courses... will not produce the better writers for which the institution and the public long.” (63). New Common Core standards, as we have seen, dictate that English *should not* teach writing by itself. Therefore, the development of a writing environment is imperative for schools, and writing centers are ideal to serve as the “center” of this environment. As Amy Levin, in “Goals and Philosophies of High School Writing Centers,” notes, “A good writing center will aim at making writing central in the school and in students’ lives by involving students and adults in a collaborative approach to writing (28-29).

**Conclusion**

To conclude, I return to my initial question, “How might a student-staffed writing center be of use to the students and faculty of a junior high school?”, and offer the story of my own students. Yes, the creation of a writing center can lead to collaboration and conversation that proves integral to students’ writing processes. Yes, having a writing center can help teachers fulfill standards and satisfy the need for differentiated instruction. Having a writing center can even lead to the establishment a school-wide writing environment. However, what I know most about a writing center being of use comes from my own experience. I routinely turn to my Writin’ Titan coaches for assistance when I know there are students who want or need further one-to-one guidance that I do not have the time to offer. Without a doubt, my students’ writing is better for it. The shy, unassuming students who though struggling, find it easy to fade beneath the forest of raised hands in my room, the overachieving students who will not be satisfied with anything less than a 100% on their essays, even the class clowns who attempt to conceal their insecurities about their writing behind their antics—all of these students are now receiving ample attention. As a whole, my students have worked past the stigma of “only dumb kids need tutors” to recognize that the collaboration and conversation our writing center offer strengthens their writing. These days, students regularly ask for referrals to see coaches without my prompting (something that was not true at the beginning of the year). I can point to individual pieces of student writing that became more detailed, more organized, and more emotionally open as a result of the writer having consulted with a coach. My classroom has benefitted immensely from our writing center, and it is my mission to ensure that my colleagues’ classrooms benefit as well.

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