

Bringing Students into the Loop: A Faculty Feedback Program

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Abstract: This article describes a model for student/faculty collaboration in WAC development—students tutoring faculty on drafts of the writing assignments they have designed for their own students. While writing center scholarship is student-centered and invites student participation, Writing Across the Curriculum scholarship and implementation remains faculty-focused. However, students, often perceived as passive receivers of knowledge, bring years of experience as stakeholders in their own educations. The difficulty is to find ways for students to utilize their experience to improve curriculum and pedagogy. One practical way, in a model program described in this article, is to arrange for student writing tutors to collaborate with faculty. This model has been enacted in two settings. One school recruits faculty to bring their assignment drafts to the writing center for student feedback while the other, employing a curriculum-based writing fellows program, recruits faculty to meet with their assigned tutors to discuss writing assignments. Participating faculty and tutors were highly satisfied with the collaboration and with its effects on assignment drafting. Faculty gain useful information about improving assignment designs and curricula, and tutors make real and lasting contributions to pedagogic change.

In the traditional structure of schooling, students are relegated to the roles of receivers of knowledge, and faculty are the transmitters. Harvey Kail (1983) describes this relationship as lineal; that is, the arrow of knowledge goes from teacher to student, from the person with more knowledge to the one with less. This transmission model makes intuitive as well as rational sense—in general, teachers know more about the subjects they teach than their students.

Teachers, however, can learn from their students one kind of knowledge: better ways to transmit information. For instance, understanding what knowledge or skills students bring to the classroom gives teachers better footing for engaging the teaching process. This kind of learning, nevertheless, does not challenge in any fundamental way the basic transmission model of learning.

Missing in this model is the recognition that college students bring years of educational experience to the classroom that is analogous to faculty professional experience. Unfortunately, the student knowledge base remains largely untapped. Faculty frequently overlook the possibility that students can offer potential solutions to seemingly intractable problems. Yet, beyond the teaching evaluation, faculty rarely ask students to explain how they understand the learning environment and how they might help faculty to improve the education process.

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Student Tutors as Stakeholders in Curriculum Development

A survey of WAC literature shows a focus on faculty, as one might expect—WAC is considered by most a type of faculty development program. Certainly much of the literature is interested in student success and creating engaging and meaningful writing environments. But, in nearly all of it, students have little impact shaping the curriculum, with the exception of some kinds of feedback like student evaluations, "muddy points" writing, and focus groups. While WAC research is interested in what students have to say, WAC programs rarely seek out student involvement in substantial programmatic ways. Students are, in essence, passive recipients of WAC efforts.

This common WAC reality raises an important question: what greater role can students play in WAC curriculum development? For a model of student participation, one can turn to writing centers, which have long worked to involve tutors in their program development by actively collaborating with them in their scholarship. For example, one need only look at the Writing Lab Newsletter's Tutor's Column, the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing (NCPTW), and the co-sponsored conferences between the NCPTW and the International Writing Centers Association. Though tutors may not set the agenda, they are definitely involved in shaping the field.

Writing centers have a long tradition of working with student tutors, and accrediting agencies have begun asking institutions to involve students in accreditation and assessment, the latter an important component for any curriculum development. Criterion One of The Higher Learning Commission's "Criteria for Accreditation" (2003a) speaks to the involvement of stakeholders, including students: "The organization operates with integrity to ensure the fulfillment of its mission through structures and processes that involve the board, administration, faculty, staff, and students" (p. 3.1-1). The Higher Learning Commission (2003b) sees students serving on assessment committees and involved in improving areas of learning as a sign of a mature program of continuous improvement. How much a program should involve students can be debated, but students have valuable contributions that programs and institutions often neglect to take up.

Students bring years of experience to the classroom, and, having so much to gain or lose, their knowledge of how to negotiate the system of schooling can be seasoned and practical. Faculty generally think that what the students bring to the classroom is the discreet knowledge or skills they have learned, or should have learned, in previous schoolwork, or the degrees of their willingness to work—to apply themselves. But Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater (1991) has shown that students tend to have complex ideas about schooling. Those ideas can be useful to improving teaching, but the challenge is bringing together the complex knowledge of students and the pedagogic practices of faculty in order to improve both.

Bringing Students into WAC

How might the WAC community involve students in meaningful ways? There are already functioning examples of students and faculty collaborating on curriculum. For instance, Brigham Young University has a program called Students Consulting on Teaching (SCOT), in which student consultants provide faculty feedback on various aspects of their teaching through note-taking, videotaping, interviewing, and acting as recorder-observers or faux students (Sorenson, 2001). Penn State offers what they call Quality Team Effort—that is "four to six students in a course ... [who] investigate ways to improve it" in collaboration with the instructor (Kinland, et al., 2001, p. 172). In addition, Miami University uses faculty learning communities that include "student associates" who are "participants and hosts in faculty development seminars and conferences" (Cox, 2001, p. 168).

Another way to develop collaborations between students and faculty is through student tutor programs. Tutoring philosophy and practice can serve as a foundation for developing a viable strategy to bridge the gap between student and teacher, particularly in the ways that tutors help student writers tackle the problem of interpreting and fulfilling writing assignments. The kinds of training student tutors receive gives shape and agency to students' experience and their understanding of institutional expectations that can be of use in curriculum development.

Specifically, student tutors can help faculty in their efforts to design and draft writing assignments. While not trained to be experts in the principles of assignment design, student tutors, as successful writers themselves, have proven to be adept at interpreting writing tasks and rendering good papers from them. Furthermore, they are skilled at providing useful feedback to writers. Thus, they are especially well placed to give faculty a sense of how students, as readers and writers, will most likely understand an assignment and thus be able to complete it successfully.

Intervention during the development of writing assignments is particularly poignant because writing assignments are a key point for curricular feedback: they are at the intersection of student learning and assessment. Effective assignments both provide students with well-structured problems conducive to learning and ensure that faculty can accurately assess that learning. But if assignments are poorly designed, students are less likely to learn or to demonstrate mastery of material. Ambiguous writing assignments fail to provide sufficient information for student writers to define the rhetorical problem well enough to complete the assignment. One useful device for thinking about the rhetorical problem is the rhetorical triangle of writer/reader/subject. Assignments, to be successful, require as their basis some regard for all three of these elements (Lindemann, 1995). However, even when assignments articulate the subject of the task and the duties of the writer, they may lack enough information for students to conceive the role of the reader and the relationship between reader and subject.

Addressing this difficulty when composing assignments requires that one keep in mind the rhetorical triangle. In other words, as Gottschalk and Hjortshoj (2004) suggest, faculty should consider writing assignments to be functional equivalents to a social scientist's research instrument. Like a questionnaire, a writing assignment is also a form of writing (hence the relevance of the rhetorical triangle), and "even minor differences in the phrasing of a question can elicit very different answers from the same respondents" (p. 31). The most effective writing assignments enable respondents to "easily understand the language and purposes of the questions and when those questions make enough sense in the context of their own experience to elicit genuine, thoughtful replies" (p. 31).

Providing feedback at the assignment drafting stage can serve to improve student learning by minimizing the difficulty students might have with writing assignments. And if students clearly understand and address the assignment, faculty will be better able to assess student learning. Tutors, with their wealth of experience tackling writing tasks, are ideally situated to offer faculty feedback.

The Faculty Feedback Program was conceived based on this rationale. The program has two goals. The first goal, a curricular one, is to find an effective way to have students provide valuable feedback to faculty about their writing assignments. Because the students are also tutors, they have the added vantage of anticipating points at which students likely will excel with assignments and at what points they likely will struggle. In their facilitative role, tutors see and engage more writing assignments on campuses than any other constituency. Thus, the position of student tutor is a powerful place from which to provide feedback to faculty. The second goal, an administrative one, is to increase, in general, the degree to which faculty make deliberate use of the tutors in creating and revising their writing assignments. Faculty/tutor collaboration can improve writing instruction by forestalling at the assignment stage potential problems in student writing.

Program Implementation

The program described here essentially involves writing center tutors providing feedback to faculty under two different administrative contexts at two different institutions. At UM-Flint, faculty schedule appointments at the campus writing center to work with a tutor on their writing assignments. The UM-Flint Writing Center employs undergraduate students who work as generalist writing tutors, serving students from all disciplines on campus. Ursinus College, on the other hand, makes use of curriculum-based tutoring in a Writing Fellows Program. Undergraduate students who also staff the college's writing center are available to be attached to specific course sections. (Please note that in this context, the distinction between "tutor" and "fellow" is primarily administrative: each receives the same training and uses the same methods. For more on the theoretical distinctions, see Kail and Trimbur, 1987.). Finally, while the administrative structures of the programs are different, the tutors at UM-Flint and Ursinus College use the method of inquiry and collaboration when working with writers.

Rather than receiving training in what WAC scholarship considers the best practices of writing assignment design, tutors are asked to rely on their intuition: to use their years of experience as students, their knowledge of writing center theory from their tutor-training course, and their depth and breadth of experience as tutors. WAC's best practices may provide general rules for a well designed assignment; however, within the context of any specific tutoring session those general rules fail to offer and may even occlude the insights tutors can bring to the session. The program is designed to seek student input, not to train tutors to serve as emissaries of WAC directors. What matters most is that students, who have extensive experience with writing assignments as writers and as tutors, read faculty assignments and give feedback. To facilitate their work, tutors use the same method when working with faculty that they use when tutoring student writers.

At the time of this writing, participants include eleven faculty members representing eight disciplines from UM-Flint and nine faculty members representing seven disciplines from Ursinus College. However, the faculty members at Ursinus College were assigned to teach an interdisciplinary freshman seminar. This seminar, with its content of primary historical, philosophical and religious works, is particularly challenging for faculty because, as a course outside of any disciplinary framework, faculty often struggle to invent meaningful and appropriate writing assignments.

For the preliminary effort to bring tutors and faculty together to collaborate, getting some sense of the experience and overall impressions of the participants seemed useful. Thus faculty and tutor exit surveys were developed. The survey for the tutors (see [Appendix A](#)) included questions about what they believed went well or not, if the faculty member was open to criticism, how beneficial they thought the experience was, and what they learned to more effectively tutor the faculty. The survey for the faculty (see [Appendix B](#)) asked questions about their experience of the quality and helpfulness of the sessions, their willingness to continue in the feedback program, and their sense of what they may have learned in general regarding writing effective assignments. Both surveys also asked for faculty and tutors to identify how this program might be more effective and useful.

Faculty and tutors responded positively to the program, both finding the tutor feedback valuable and insightful. Consider this representative sample of faculty comments:

- ...it helped to have someone read through the assignment and look at it critically for areas of confusion, etc. Also good at forcing me to think about/explain what I want from the assignment.

- I think it is great...she is trained to look for different things than I am, and has made wonderful, thoughtful contributions. I am not trained to teach writing, so I very much appreciate the collaborative process with the [tutor] as well as the knowledge that the [tutor] brings.
- It's always helpful to have another person read over an assignment—especially a good student who can put themselves in the position of having to think about actually writing the paper themselves.
- I am honestly not sure as to how to improve on something that is this enlightening.

Tutors also offered a range of positive comments, some typical examples of which are sampled below:

- I felt the professor was very open to response, which made the feedback process easier and more comfortable.
- We brainstorm well together. We discussed where we could go with the paper topic and work together to get there.
- [She was] very open to constructive feedback. She would present ideas and I felt very comfortable with telling her my honest opinion about them. I think we work very well together.
- I thought it went very well. I think I learned as much as the prof.

These comments, and many others like them, strongly suggest that tutor/faculty collaboration on writing assignment drafts can be an effective way for faculty to get a better handle on addressing the relationship between the rhetorical triangle and effective writing assignment design.

One way to understand what fresh insight tutors can bring to the collaboration is through some reflection on the tacit cultural assumptions required to function successfully in school settings. While there is copious literature that identifies the presence of a tacit cultural knowledge that makes up academic thinking and behavior (Berkenkotter, et al., 1991; Brandt, 1992; Casanave, 1995; Lillis, 1999; Prior, 1995), there has been little work done to identify exactly how this tacit knowledge operates in local, situated conditions (MacBeth, 2006). Clearly, students tackling an assigned writing task is one example of just such a local condition. According to MacBeth, student writers struggle with understanding and implementing faculty instructions—especially instructions on generating writing—because all assignments presuppose a tacit knowledge of the practices of academic culture. It is this tacit knowledge that makes up the rhetorical context of a writing assignment, and it is here that student tutors—working effectively in the liminal space between student and faculty—have been most useful. Furthermore, their work in this liminal space becomes itself a tacit knowing about the difficulties students have completing writing assignments, a knowledge that can be made concrete and useful through tutor/faculty collaboration on writing assignment design.

One way, for instance, that a tutor's familiarity with the tacit cultural assumptions of the academy can be helpful is to assist faculty in anticipating an appropriate level of challenge for students. Faculty want the course and its writing to be intellectually challenging while keeping in mind that not all students arrive at college with the same level of development. For faculty, collaborating with tutors can be a useful way to gauge that degree of challenge. For example, one Ursinus faculty member wrote that working with the tutor helped "to make sure the writing prompts are not too complicated so that they can write about difficult literatures with more confidence." Furthermore, by tutoring faculty members, the Ursinus tutors gained useful insight into how to better help students who would be completing the assignment. As one tutor wrote, working with the teacher "gave me a better impression of what she is looking for in the students' papers, which will facilitate my helping them improve their drafts"—evidence that this particular endeavor can be helpful for faculty, tutors, and students.

But identifying the appropriate level of challenge only addresses one aspect of how to design a successful writing assignment. Equally important is how assignments fit into a course and where standardization of assignments within a course might benefit writers (Williams, 1998; Millis, 2006). For example, one UM-Flint faculty member wrote on the survey, "Standardize design of assignment sheets. Include goals statements for each one. Use bullets rather than paragraphs for assignment instructions." In a follow-up interview, the faculty member commented that she had never thought so systematically about her assignments as she did sharing it with a tutor. What may seem like simple tips on organization to that particular faculty member bears out the efficacy of some of the best practices in assignment design (Bean, 2001; Lindemann, 1995; Williams, 1998).

Furthermore, in a different session, a tutor had suggested a sociology/criminal justice faculty member include websites and examples in an assignment from her Introduction to Criminal Justice course. During the discussion between the faculty member and tutor, it became clear that students needed more information and context to successfully research in a discipline with which they have little or no experience. From these examples, one can see that in this program, tutors consider the assignment in the context of classroom instruction and demonstrate their ability to understand what information may best aid student learning and what might make a successful curriculum. Gottschalk and Hjortschoj (2004) point out that faculty need to know if an assignment calls for "knowledge and skills the students [do] not yet possess," or if an assignment is "misplaced" in the course's curriculum (p. 40). The placement of an assignment in a course, and how assignments are sequenced, is critical for students who are learning the cultural markers and conventions of a discipline. The struggles of the academic novice are well-documented (Bartholomae, 1985; Rose, 1985, 1998; Macbeth, 2006), and the tutors participating in the program can bridge the gap between faculty and students working to navigate academia.

To bridge this gap, tutors must earn the respect of faculty, and faculty need to believe they can trust the insights of the tutors who work with them. Interestingly, one Ursinus faculty member made a telling comment: "I found it helpful to get a student's perspective, particularly a student who was not emotionally invested in the topic." For this faculty member, intellectual objectivity and disinterest is a significant component of acceptable collaboration with students. A potential barrier to student involvement in program development and assessment is the divergent interests of students and faculty. Many students may have a short-term interest in their grades in a particular class or assignment, whereas faculty are more concerned about the learning outcomes of a course. Tutors can provide valuable feedback without the danger of becoming entangled in the struggle for the perfect grade that students in the course are unable to ignore.

In addition to an intellectually objective viewpoint, some faculty noted their appreciation for the tutor's insight into the students' perspective. For example, three UM-Flint faculty offered these important comments: 1) "very helpful to step back and see the assignment through another person's eyes and for me to try and remember what it is to be a student encountering an assignment"; 2) "what students expect and how to give them helpful information"; and 3) "great—a person who can empathize with students but also has the critical language and experience to analyze the student experience." Elaborating on these comments, one tutor described a discussion she had with a faculty member. The faculty member had always been interested in student feedback on her courses, and she regularly solicited it. What she discovered was that students could identify the course components they struggled with or did not like. What they could not adequately do was describe why they had identified those components and what the faculty member should do about them. Students were good at pointing to problematic features of a course, but they could not successfully convey their ideas into information the faculty member could use for assignment and/or course revision.

In contrast, the faculty and tutor observations bear out the assumption that tutors, through their training and professional experience, develop a critical and technical vocabulary that can help them express their understanding of writing assignments and classroom experience during their work with faculty. The three faculty members quoted above discovered that tutors hold a unique place in the institution from which they can provide insightful response. Macbeth (2006) notes, "The invisibility of a social practice is among the marks and achievements of membership, and our students will be the ones to instruct us by showing us what we take for granted" (p. 200). Thus, while sharing assignment drafts with fellow faculty is a good idea, sharing those drafts with writing tutors may be an especially useful strategy because tutors have learned the tacit knowledge of the academy as a still visible form of social practice. This might be the most important piece of the Faculty Feedback Program. Certainly faculty can work with a WAC coordinator or read John Bean's *Engaging Ideas*, Erika Lindemann's *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers*, and others to learn what components make successful assignments, but WAC coordinators and scholarship are relatively limited to offering general principles and strategies for addressing the local and shifting academic social conventions. Tutors, on the other hand, are in a position to collaborate with faculty as they struggle to turn general principles into specific, immediate pedagogic solutions.

The faculty participants in this program appreciated the tutors' abilities to convey what students value, how they read assignments, and how they view an assignment's place in the course. However, the faculty also moved beyond their own assignments and courses into discussions and suggestions for curricular and programmatic change. For example, one Ursinus faculty member suggested the writing center hold a workshop with instructors and writing tutors to discuss the pragmatics of drafting an assignment. Such workshops can further enhance the effectiveness of the dialogue between tutor and faculty member. If the process can be more of a collaboration from the beginning, it might further bring about a shift of the paradigm from instructor-driven to student-driven. Faculty members from both campuses suggested that tutors and/or students be included in future assignment design workshops. In addition, feedback from the faculty can be used in tutor training seminars to better prepare future tutors for working with writing assignments.

The program's positive and useful feedback shows that student/faculty collaboration in the drafting and revising of assignments accomplishes the two goals. First, based on the faculty survey results, tutors provided valuable feedback for assignment development and revision. Faculty benefited from the insight of tutors, and tutor training and experience clearly contributed to the success of the sessions. Second, the nascent feedback programs show much progress toward increasing the degree to which faculty make deliberate use of the tutors in the creating and revising of their writing assignments. For writing center directors and tutors, greater involvement in assignment design is a useful avenue to break from the transmission model of education and to involve students as stakeholders for curricular change. Students have important contributions to make to the educational system, and because of the tutor's unique position in the academy, the Faculty Feedback Program is a vehicle in which students effect meaningful and lasting change.

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Appendix A. Tutor Exit Survey

1. What was your overall impression of the session?
2. What went well? Why?
3. What didn't go well? Why not?
4. Did the faculty member you worked with seem open to constructive feedback? If so, why or why not?
5. Do you think this exercise was beneficial?
6. Do you plan to incorporate anything you learned into future tutoring sessions? If so, what?
7. What can we do to make this experience more beneficial in the future?

Appendix B. Faculty Exit Survey

1. Do you think your experiences with the tutor were helpful today? Why or why not?
2. Do you plan to incorporate anything you and the tutor talked about today into future assignments? If so, what?
3. What do you think of receiving feedback from tutors?
4. Are you interested in a follow up meeting or future session with tutors?
5. What can we do to make this experience more beneficial?
6. May we use your assignment for research purposes? And, if you choose to revise this assignment, may we have a copy of the revised assignment for research purposes as well?

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