

# Beyond the Budget: Sustainability and Writing Studios

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*ABSTRACT: This essay discusses our failed attempts at the College of Charleston to sustain a Writing Studio course. Specifically, we explain how the failure of our Studio course revealed underlying problems in the department concerning the formation of writing program policy, the role of adjunct faculty, the oversight of our first-year writing curriculum, and the program's coordination with other stakeholders on campus. We contend that our experience can inform programs elsewhere because it shows, on a larger level, how Studio courses reveal potentially damaging tensions within a department or program. We conclude the article by identifying areas of our broader writing program in need of repair and explaining our vision for a new and improved Studio program that incorporates elements of supplemental instruction.*

*KEYWORDS: basic writing; writing studio; sustainability; writing instruction; program description*

Sustainability is an issue that is frequently mentioned in the scholarship on Writing Studios. Rhonda Grego and Nancy Thompson, whose work has laid the foundation for other Studio programs and courses across the country, write convincingly of the benefits Studio programs offer, but they simultaneously worry that “Studio may not be tolerated too long in any particular institutional space/place because it transgresses into those details... that do not make for neat assessments or happy-ending stories of student (or program or faculty) successes, that do not fit the expectations, tolerances, or timeframes that the academy or a particularly institutional site may have for either research or program administration” (*Teaching/Writing* 219; “Repositioning”; “Writing Studio”). John Paul Tassoni and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson, in discussing their efforts to implement a Studio program at Miami Middletown, argue that sustaining a program takes “flexibility, and improvisation, tolerance, and some complicity with ‘norms’ and values one may wish to contest” (88). While these comments about the precarious institutional

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status of Studio programs and the need to be adaptable are instructive when it comes to running (or even growing) a program, the existing scholarship on Studios hasn't yet thoroughly addressed the issue of sustainability.

Some would contend that Studio programs, unlike more formalized first-year writing programs, are best thought of as contingent, temporary, and readily adaptable, and therefore present a different set of concerns when it comes to addressing their sustainability or make the question of sustainability irrelevant. We agree that one of the advantages Studio programs offer is their mutability, and we likewise agree that Studio programs confront different challenges than those faced by more formalized writing programs, but we believe the issue of their sustainability is vital because the provisional nature of Studio programs makes them easy targets for budget cuts, especially in the current economic climate.

The following essay, therefore, attempts to fill this gap in the scholarship by discussing, from different perspectives, our failed attempts at the College of Charleston to sustain a Writing Studio program. (Chris, an Assistant Professor specializing in composition and rhetoric, administered the program; Emily and Samuel at the time were M.A. students whose training was primarily in literature.) We believe our story has important implications for our own institution and for Studio theory. On a local level, our Studio program revealed fault lines within the broader institutional culture that show us our department, despite significantly revising its first-year writing course, has not made as much progress as we thought it had toward building a coherent writing program. Specifically, the cancellation of the Studio program revealed a broken committee structure that diminishes the role composition experts have in the formation of department policy concerning writing; disenfranchised adjunct faculty who understandably do not see themselves as having a stake in the program; a nebulous writing "curriculum" that more closely resembles a collection of autonomous courses that in reality aren't required to address the larger goals of the program; and a first-year writing program that fails to coordinate with other stakeholders on campus. These tensions, which we imagine are all too familiar to compositionists in other departments and programs, were much more damaging to the long-term health of the program than the budget.

In terms of Studio theory, our experience confirms the idea that Studio programs are sites of institutional change because the dismantling of our Studio program has shown us which aspects of the broader writing program are in need of repair. However, our failure has prompted us to consider how the small workshop model of Studio that Grego and Thompson and Tassoni

and Lewiecki-Wilson describe might be adapted to also include supplemental instruction pedagogies. We conclude the essay by discussing our ideas for an improved Studio program that incorporates elements of supplemental instruction—including large-group workshops led by trained faculty, podcasts that present students’ views on academic writing, and public lectures where faculty present their views on the writing process and invite students to reflect on their processes as writers.

## **The Studio Concept**

Broadly defined, Writing Studios are spaces located outside the classroom, but within the larger institution, where students work with instructors to address both practical writing concerns and what Grego and Thompson call the “metarhetorical aspects of student writing” (*Teaching/Writing* 88). That is, one of the larger goals of Studio pedagogy is to create a “learning space rather than a teaching one” (Gresham and Yancey 15) where students and instructors together investigate the context within which students write and how that context both shapes and can be shaped by students’ writing. Described in more practical terms, a typical Studio session involves a small group of students, with the assistance of a facilitator, sharing feedback on one another’s writing and exchanging ideas on how to address the concerns they face as writers—whether it’s tackling sentence-level errors or interpreting an instructor’s comments. While students’ writing is central to the conversation that happens in a Studio session, just as important are the materials and attitudes that inform students’ writing; thus, students are asked to bring to their sessions not only copies of their rough drafts but also assignment sheets, rubrics, outlines, brainstorming notes, course readings, class handouts, and papers with teachers’ comments. Facilitators prompt students to explain their understanding of these materials and to discuss any challenges they face interpreting them. For example, a student might use a particular week’s Studio session to discuss the comments she received on a recent paper; the facilitator and other students might help this student process the instructor’s feedback and offer suggestions for how the student might address any questions they have about the instructor’s response.

The dialogue that occurs in Studio is designed to be mutually beneficial to students and instructors. From listening to students discuss the broader context of their writing, Studio faculty gain a richer understanding of the context they provide (and fail to provide) students in their own classrooms. Tassoni and Lewiecki-Wilson describe this process when mentioning how

they changed their own commenting practices after facilitating Studio sessions and learning the problems students faced interpreting teachers' written comments: "After one semester teaching Studio classes, Cindy...started using tape-recorded responses, changing a twenty-year practice of written commentary. And while John still writes comments on student papers, he now follows each marking session with a one-to-one conference to explain further and negotiate with students the significance of his comments in relation to each assignment" (90).

We were attracted to the Studio concept because of its investment in context, collaboration, and reflection, values we believed informed only a fraction of our first-year writing courses. However, we found that the small-group workshop model of Studio that Grego and Thompson and Tassoni and Lewiecki-Wilson describe was among the factors that limited our ability to reach both faculty and students. Designing the program around weekly small-group workshops prevented regular classroom faculty, who were already teaching three classes per semester, from participating in the program other than recommending students. Low enrollments in the program (we typically served around 2% of all first-year writing students) made it difficult for us to guarantee that all sections of the Studio course would have more than one student. Students expressed less interest in small-group workshops, with many commenting on end-of-the-semester surveys that they would have preferred individual assistance. Eventually, the workshop approach our Studio course was centered on became redundant once the department instituted a new four-hour first-year writing course, which led most writing faculty to use this extra instructional hour for small-group workshops of their own. We contend that any new Studio program at the College should be embedded in this writing course and, in addition to offering workshops, draw from supplemental instruction pedagogies.

### **The Beginning and End of Writer's Group**

Part of what motivates Grego and Thompson's interest in Studio is making the knowledge of composition more institutionally visible. They recognize that undergraduate majors and doctoral programs in composition and rhetoric are means toward this end, but they're aware these choices aren't available to compositionists who work in smaller schools with few, if any, graduate students or faculty trained in composition. Studio programs, they suggest, can be one way to elevate the status of composition at such schools "Where there may not even be infrastructures for writing program

administration" (*Teaching/Writing* 65). This last phrase aptly describes our situation in the English department at the College of Charleston, a public M.A.-granting liberal arts college. Located in a historic downtown and made up in part of restored antebellum homes and buildings, from the outside the College appears to be a quaint southern liberal arts college. The school, however, enrolls roughly 10,000 undergraduates, and, with the growth of programs in Management and Entrepreneurship, Hospitality and Tourism Management, and Discovery Informatics, the liberal arts no longer play as central a role in the curriculum as they once did. Of the roughly 35 faculty who make up the English department, including non-tenure-stream faculty, only four professionally specialize in composition and rhetoric—and of these four only one has tenure. Other than a First-Year Writing Committee, which recommends (but does not enforce) policies related to first-year writing courses and designs voluntary faculty development meetings, the department has no formalized writing program and no writing program administrator. While the department has discussed the possibility of creating a writing program with an administrator who has authority, it is fair to say this goal is at least several years away.

After the state's Commission on Higher Education in 1990 decided that for-credit basic writing courses could only be offered in the state's technical colleges, the department created a Studio course called Writer's Group to mainstream students who previously might have been placed into basic writing. Departmental records for Writer's Group date back only to 2000, and one of the program's directors is no longer at the College, so a complete picture of the program's beginnings does not exist. According to department lore, however, Writer's Group was explicitly based on the Studio model developed by Grego and Thompson at the University of South Carolina, although it differed in significant ways. For instance, we have been told by faculty more familiar with the program's early history that there were no formal procedures for placing students in Writer's Group. Once the basic writing course was abolished, incoming students were no longer required to take a writing placement test. Instructors for English 101 and 102, the two courses that constituted the College's first-year writing requirement at the time, were told to recommend students to Writer's Group whose papers displayed significant errors in sentence construction and paragraphing, thus making the program a space for remediation.

By the time Chris was asked to direct the program in 2007, Writer's Group was no longer strictly thought of as a mainstreaming program, in part because the perception within the department was that the College,

which had raised admission standards, was now admitting better-prepared writers. Any student in 101 or 102 was eligible to take Writer's Group, which was offered each Fall semester. Most of the students we worked with signed up for the program because their 101 or 102 instructors identified significant problems with sentence construction, paragraphing, or organization in the students' initial class writings and recommended they take the course to address these issues. Each semester, though, we would also get a handful of students who signed up for the program on their own. More often than not, these students, based on our observations of their writing, seemed to have fewer problems acclimating to academic discourse. They signed up for Writer's Group, they told us, because they lacked confidence in their writing, were worried about making the transition to college, wanted to maintain a high grade, or simply wished to talk over their work with someone before handing it in. In the two years Chris directed Writer's Group, it averaged thirty students a semester, about 2% of all first-year writing students.

Keeping in mind the College's skepticism of basic writing and composition, and influenced by Studio theory, Chris approached Writer's Group as a place that "basic writers [and all beginning academic writers] can call their own in an environment that has often been traditionally dismissive of, and sometimes even hostile, to their presence" (Rigolino and Freel 60). Students would meet once a week in small groups, at times of their own choosing, to work on brainstorming, drafting, editing, and revising individual papers. But facilitators also prompted students to bring in and discuss assignments, course readings, teachers' comments, and other materials, teasing out the course's underlying assumptions about writing and examining where these assumptions came into conflict with their own attitudes and practices.

Chris also wanted Writer's Group to better serve the department's graduate students, who have limited teaching opportunities. Because of its mission as a student-centered liberal arts institution, the College does not allow master's candidates to teach undergraduate courses, although they can serve as interns who assist individual faculty. Graduate students do not typically work in the College's Writing Lab, which is staffed by undergraduate peer tutors. The Writing Lab director is a member of the graduate faculty in English and serves as an *ex-officio* member of the department's First-Year Writing Committee; beyond this, though, there is little formal coordination between the writing program and the Writing Lab, due in part to the Writing Lab being housed within the College's Center for Student Learning. So when Chris discussed his plans for Writer's Group with the previous chair and others in the department, he more than once got the

impression that one of the main reasons the program continued to exist was because, apart from teaching internships, it was the only mechanism the department had for providing graduate students with at least some pedagogical training. Nevertheless, Chris hoped that the metarhetorical learning that can potentially occur in Studio would be beneficial to the department's graduate students as well, many of whom go on to teach basic writing courses at the local technical college. A Studio program, as he imagined it, could offer graduate students the hands-on and theoretical experiences they could use to become thoughtful teachers who understand, and hold themselves responsible to, the larger curricular, institutional, and disciplinary environments within which they practice, avoiding what Graff has called "coursecentrism," the tendency among faculty to think only of their individual courses and not how these courses fit into the larger curriculum ("Why Assessment?" 157).

Writer's Group enjoyed some successes despite its context. Faculty who recommended students to Writer's Group reported being satisfied with the program. Students consistently gave positive feedback on the program in end-of-the-semester surveys, with most students reporting either "moderate" or "great" improvement in their writing as a result of attending Writer's Group. One comment students made repeatedly was that Writer's Group should be offered in the spring semester; some students recommended the program link up with other courses in the curriculum. The most thrilling feedback for us were those rare comments where students seemed to glimpse the program's larger goal of getting them to grow as writers aware of their purposes and contexts. For example, one student wrote, "In the writing lab, they just help for the spelling but in writer's group they actually try to help for understanding what we want to do, enlarge that to other classes." Although we questioned this student's characterization of their Writing Lab session, we were happy to see that the program encouraged her to examine her purposes in writing.

That being said, the program encountered a number a problems, enrollment and attendance being chief among them. Enrollment peaked in 2000, when 63 students signed up, but this number dropped precipitously, with only 14 students registering in 2006. Fewer faculty recommended the program, which can partially be explained by the perception within the department that incoming students were better prepared. Because students did not earn letter grades for the course, attendance was a constant issue. In their dialogue sheets, graduate assistants frequently voiced their frustrations with students who were late or who missed a scheduled session, and these

attendance problems suggested to us that students were not fully behind the small-group method on which the program was built. To address these problems, we opened up Writer's Group to all undergraduates taking 101 and 102, which we hoped would both raise enrollment while also creating an environment where writers with a wider range of experiences and abilities could learn from one another. Enrollment did rise slightly, but for reasons we will discuss later in the essay, the collaborative environment we sought to create didn't materialize. Along with changing the audience, we proposed that students be assigned letter grades for Writer's Group, but our department chair at the time denied this request. He contended that letter grades would make students think twice about signing up for the course, a concern we shared. We answered that letter grades would suggest to both students and faculty that Writer's Group was an integral part of our first-year writing curriculum, but he remained unconvinced, and we were unable to bring the proposal before the entire department.

With the budget crisis, pressure from the administration to cut the number of adjunct faculty, and a concern among some in the department that the existing curriculum focused more on literary appreciation than academic writing, the department's First-Year Writing Committee proposed and passed revisions to the College's writing requirement in 2009. Informed by research on transfer by Carroll, Fishman and Reiff, Wardle, and others, the Committee proposed replacing our two-semester, six-credit, literature-based requirement with one four-hour course, English 110: Introduction to Academic Writing. Department faculty felt that the addition of an extra instructional hour to the required course, which instructors could use to conference with small groups of students, would make Writer's Group a less attractive option for students. Therefore, the program was canceled and replaced with a different program, 110 Supplemental Instruction, which Chris directed, that offered monthly large-class writing workshops, designed and staffed by graduate students, open to all English 110 students. Students either attended these workshops to earn extra credit or to fulfill a course requirement.

The public workshops offered by Supplemental Instruction covered topics ranging from brainstorming to plagiarism to revision, and at times recreated the kind of "interactional inquiry" we sought to foster in Writer's Group. For example, during the opening of each workshop, facilitators encouraged students to talk about how the focus of that day's workshop, whether it was brainstorming or revision, had been treated in their individual classes. These activities prompted students to talk openly about the



differences they noticed between the writing course they were taking and others. In a workshop on integrating quotes, for instance, a group of students asked about how the workshop could help them write about photographs, which they were being asked to do in an upcoming paper. Several students joined the conversation by saying they wished their 110 courses dealt with visual texts instead of asking them to engage solely with academic essays, and they wondered aloud why each section of 110 had a different theme or approach. Facilitators asked students if they would find it helpful for 110 courses to have at least some shared readings or assignments. Several students expressed interest in this because, as they said, having more common texts or assignments would allow them to better discuss their writing with roommates or friends taking a different section of the course. Discussions such as this one led Chris to believe that many students, at least for those fifty minutes, gained a richer understanding of the metarhetorical situation they faced in their first-year writing courses.

However, these discussions were also bittersweet because they reminded Chris of how far the department had to go in terms of creating a coherent curriculum. Some of this incoherence could be attributed to the rapid changes we made to the first-year writing course, but just as significant was the attitude in the department that tenured and tenure-stream writing faculty can ignore the policy recommendations of the First-Year Writing Committee. Just two months before the Supplemental Instruction workshop on integrating quotes, the department voted down the committee's proposal to adopt a guide to English 110 that would allow for the kind of shared materials some students at the workshop said they wanted. Some faculty claimed the ten-dollar cost of the guide was an undue hardship on students while others said they simply would not adopt the text, even if it were required. The department's refusal to adopt a custom guide proved to be ironic as the Supplemental Instructional program, which could have received funding through the sale of a custom guide, was cancelled after only one year because the department chair could no longer secure reassignment time for Chris.

In the sections that follow, we examine more fully the three most important factors we believe compromised the sustainability of Writer's Group and, echoing Fulwiler and Young's work on WAC programs, are the "enemies" of sustainable Studio programs elsewhere: a lack of buy-in from undergraduates, a lack of support from faculty, and an inadequate administrative infrastructure.

## **Student Buy-In**

While Writer's Group made facilitators aware of the institutional forces at play in their teaching, the program was largely unsuccessful in getting undergraduates to discuss their writing in a similar way. We were unable to articulate to students the program's larger goal of encouraging them to explore what Grego and Thompson call the "intersectional quality of student writing," the idea that student writing is part of a larger institutional dialogue in which everyone—students, faculty and administrators—have a stake ("Repositioning" 78). We were aware that students would initially approach Writer's Group like a writing lab where they could get individual advice on how to quickly fix surface-level issues in their papers. And to some extent, we mistakenly created this impression of the program in our emails to faculty asking them to recommend students based on their performance on a diagnostic assignment. However, we hoped that by collaboratively examining one another's drafts, along with assignment sheets and any other related materials, students would gradually become aware of and begin to question the institutional forces that shaped their writing. Grego and Thompson describe the collaborative atmosphere we sought to create this way:

Initially we intended that each student would bring a rough draft of his or her current 101 assignment with photocopies for each group member; we have since realized that students benefit in other equally important ways from discussing the wider range of possible texts that they ended up actually bringing: initial freewriting and other invention activity notes, writing assignment sheets from their classes, drafts or papers with teacher and/or peer comments, graded papers, revisions, even research materials. ("Repositioning" 75)

Students brought with them to their sessions these and other types of materials. Despite the fact that facilitators prompted students to talk through these materials with one another, Writer's Group sections rarely achieved the round-table quality Grego and Thompson describe. We offered roughly twenty sections of Writer's Group each semester, which turned out to be an overestimate because some sessions had only one student. In those sessions where there were two or more students, it wasn't unusual for students to become less engaged when it came time to discuss another student's material.

Emily's biggest section contained three students who approached Writer's Group as their own personal, weekly writing lab. Each was there to garner help from a graduate student on their individual essays and none seemed interested in further exploring their styles or the writing process. Still fresh from the facilitator training, Emily pushed the students hard in the first couple of meetings to share their assignments with the group and any writing they had already done. The result was that the meetings were awkward and often silent as she tried to facilitate discussions and was met with requests to look at a teacher's comment. Addressing the comments instructors leave on student writing is, of course, useful. And Emily was more than willing to help students decipher and tackle any comments made. However, she found that when students came to the group meetings armed with notions of one-on-one tutoring and an essay complete with instructors' remarks, they were unwavering in their demand for that personal attention and did not see the benefits of sharing with the other students. As a result, Emily reorganized her own goals for the section and commenced going around the table and spending time with each student, individually, every week.

One student Emily worked with in this section, Leah, brought in technically sound essays that lacked a sense of her style as a writer. Leah was enrolled in a service-learning course and her writing assignments were based around the volunteer work she had chosen. Quite often Leah would bring her essays to her professor for comments before she came to her session with Emily, and therefore her requests were almost always limited to attending to the comments the professor had made. Again, heeding remarks made by the professor is certainly important, but it left no time for anything else. Emily noticed that Leah, whose essays were supposed to build from one to the next as she spent more time volunteering, had issues revising her later essays. Leah took entire paragraphs from earlier writing and copied them into later essays rather than rework them. Emily was never able to convince her that the goal of the course was for her writing to mature as her knowledge of working in a new environment increased and as she conducted more research in her field of interest.

There was very little technically wrong with Leah's essays, despite the fact that initially she was not earning the marks she wanted, which made it nearly impossible for Emily to convince her that she should reevaluate her pieces and think about style or voice. The instructor focused comments on Leah's issues with transition statements and her repetition of certain key words. Interestingly, there were also sometimes comments about the robotic nature of Leah's essays, but she always managed to brush those aside

and focus on the issues more easily fixed. She once told Emily that she had always been a good student in English classes, writing exactly as she wrote in the essays she brought to Writer's Group, so she did not understand why her grades were not the same. It is important to note that her grades were not bad, just less than she was used to receiving. It is also important to note that fixing the transition statements and using a thesaurus did improve her grades considerably, which was another reason Emily's suggestions for extra work on her writing were likely not taken. In the end, Emily helped Leah continue to make good grades by addressing teacher feedback and practicing transitions, but she felt she had failed to help Leah become a better writer.

Another student in this section, Amanda, would come in either when she had a final draft due or after she had received a grade on a final draft and wanted help with surface errors and organization. As opposed to Leah, who had always received good marks in English, Amanda admitted she had never been a "good" writer. Amanda's writing course was part of a learning community that tied together composition and psychology. She faced a completely different set of problems from Leah. Her essays for psychology were graded harshly for grammar mistakes and her essays for composition were graded harshly for her troubles analyzing an assigned reading and constructing a thesis with well-supported arguments. Together Emily and Amanda would explicate each essay Amanda brought with her and practice rewriting sentences that had been marked as grammatically incorrect. Emily also worked with Amanda on developing a thesis and soon discovered that although her essays lacked a central point, Amanda almost always had a clear idea of what she wanted to say. She also happened to be pretty good at transition statements and she certainly had no shortage of ideas she wanted to share in her essays.

Amanda and Leah's desire for writing lab-style assistance contrasts very distinctly with the third student in Emily's section, Mario, an ESL student who came to Writer's Group for intensive work on his English abilities in general and his writing specifically. Whereas the other students expressed confidence, at the very least, in their abilities with English as a language, Mario did not have that luxury. His grammar and structure inhibited a reader from being able to understand his essays enough to notice his skill with self-reflection and his connections with the assigned reading material. In his connections to the material, Mario had similar abilities to Amanda who also strongly expressed her opinions but had difficulty expressing them coherently in an essay form. Mario and Emily therefore had supremely difficult tasks each week. Luckily for them both, they received a good deal of feedback

from Mario's professor both in the form of essay comments and via email. Emily also had some experience teaching ESL students, something Mario's professor was missing, so she was able to garner meaning from sentences and paragraphs that seemed incomprehensible to his instructor. Together they practiced drafting and redrafting his work, focusing on prepositions and quote integration. Very often they ended up meeting after their sessions were complete to continue working on Mario's essays.

Emily's sessions with Leah, Amanda, and Mario were not all they could have been, though, because the group never became a truly functioning writing group. As Beverly Moss, Nels Highberg, and Melissa Nicolas explain in their edited collection on school-based and public writing groups: "Ideally, writing groups enable writers to make decisions about their personal texts with the supportive influence of readers/writers who are like-minded in their views of what it means to belong to and participate in a community of writers but who represent a diversity of perspectives, experiences, and opinions as readers and writers" (3). Emily believed that the students could have drawn on their different experiences and areas of expertise to learn from one another. For example, she believed Leah and Amanda could have benefited immensely from each other and from shared practice with Emily. Leah could have seen how Amanda developed fresh ways of looking at a subject and her techniques for transitioning between paragraphs. Amanda could have seen examples of clear thesis statements and well-structured essays. Mario could have benefited from Leah's skill with structure and thesis development while offering Leah and Amanda his interesting perspective on English texts. More than once Emily wanted the three students to comment on each other's drafts so that Leah, the technically strong student, could help the other two, and Mario, the student with the most developed sense of voice, could offer his opinions on the essays produced by the others. Alas, it seemed that there was never enough time.

During the course of their semester together, time became the go-to enemy of Emily and her three students. One survey response recommended, "I think it should be a little longer than 50 minutes. It's hard to get through a whole paper with 2 other people to focus on in only 50 minutes." Chris, Emily, and Samuel, along with other facilitators, discussed the possibility of increasing sessions to 75 minutes but ultimately decided against this, at least for the time being, because we felt time was not the real problem. Not being on the same page with students as to their goals in Writer's Group was what prohibited us from really getting somewhere in terms of improving student writing. Rather than adding time, the meetings with Amanda,

Leah, and Mario would have been vastly improved if they had approached Writer's Group in the same way Emily and the rest of the staff approached the program. The facilitators and the director wanted Writer's Group to more resemble Grego and Thompson's scenario of shared essays and group discussions. But as Emily's largest section demonstrates, the students who came to Writer's Group not only differed from the facilitators in their understanding of the purpose, they sometimes differed from each other.

### **Faculty Support**

As mentioned earlier, there existed no formal mechanism for placing students in Writer's Group. Students either signed up on their own or were encouraged to by their classroom instructors. This lack of formal placement procedures, along with the fact that faculty relied on widely varying pedagogical approaches, some of which were antithetical to that of Writer's Group, made it difficult for the program to achieve support among department faculty.

We distributed promotional materials on Writer's Group to incoming students during orientation and asked advisers to recommend it to students, but each semester only one or two students signed up for the program before the semester began.<sup>1</sup> We therefore relied on individual faculty to promote the program, either by having facilitators visit their classes to discuss the program or recommending it to students who were struggling in the course. In an email sent to faculty before the start of each semester, we suggested they include a writing activity early in the semester that would allow them to identify candidates for Writer's Group, students who exhibited significant patterns of error in their writing or expressed attitudes toward writing (i.e., lack of confidence in their writing abilities, hostility toward academic writing, etc.) that could prevent them from being successful in the course. Although faculty in department meetings and in hallway conversations expressed interest in the program, only a handful took advantage of these opportunities. We consulted with the department's previous chair to see if faculty could require students to sign up for Writer's Group and tie it to the course grade, but he rejected this motion. For all intents and purposes, what we had was a program that hinged on student self-selection.

Having Writer's Group remain a voluntary program created overlap with other student support programs on campus, especially the Writing Lab, which, as we noted earlier, is staffed by undergraduate peer facilitators from across disciplines. Because the Writing Lab is also self-selective, working

with students on a walk-in basis, students (and some faculty) were unable to recognize what made Writer's Group different. We went to great lengths, in promotional materials and in our everyday conversations with faculty and students, to articulate the differences: students enrolled in Writer's Group would work with graduate student facilitators in English, instead of undergraduates; they would work collaboratively in small groups, instead of receiving individual help; and as part of this collaboration they would examine the metarhetorical aspects of their writing. We didn't see ourselves competing against the Writing Lab; we simply offered students a different kind of learning opportunity. Despite these efforts, our message never resonated with most faculty for a variety of reasons. Faculty workload was undoubtedly an issue, but some faculty were skeptical of or confused by our belief that students would benefit from a greater metarhetorical understanding of their writing, a concept we were aware instructors would find hard to understand. And while no one openly stated that Writer's Group interfered with the goals of their own course, there were instances where an individual faculty member's objectives conflicted with the program's goals.

This was especially true with those instructors whose pedagogy could be considered current-traditional. In some cases, the current-traditional orientation of particular classes prevented graduate assistants from getting students to examine metarhetorical aspects of their writing. An example of this occurred in one of Samuel's sessions with a student named Kim, whose writing exhibited very few problems and who seemed to understand well the class material. The only domain she seemed concerned about was grammar—and this concern was fueled by the poor grade she earned on a diagnostic test. Since she was worried about repeating the errors she made on the test in future assignments, Samuel attempted to get a copy of the test from the instructor, figure out where she went wrong, and review the concepts that gave her trouble. He requested Kim ask the instructor for the test; she returned the following week and said that he refused the request because he was reusing the tests for other classes. Samuel unsuccessfully tried to reach the instructor, who was an adjunct who spent little time on campus, during his office hours. In an e-mail containing the dialogue sheet regarding Kim's latest session, Samuel explained the situation and politely requested a copy of the test.

The instructor never responded. Samuel worked with Kim on comma splices, pronouns, and other grammatical concepts, but she always seemed vaguely worried that they were not covering the mysterious material that

had tripped her up on the test. From his interactions with Kim, Samuel got the impression the course emphasized grammar over process. Grammar tests and essays on historical events comprised most of the work, and the one returned essay Kim brought to a session had no traces of comments or feedback; ink was only spilled for grammatical errors. Samuel was keenly aware of his status as a novice facilitator and relative newcomer to composition pedagogy; consequently, he went out of his way not to criticize the instructor or sow any seeds of insurrection. Like writing centers, Studios “are triangulated into the relationship between students and teachers” (Grimm 527), which places the Studio facilitator, who has no institutional authority, in a complex position. While empowered to intervene in Kim’s writing process by his status as a graduate assistant assigned to the program, Samuel nevertheless feared overstepping his bounds and overriding the authority of Kim’s classroom instructor, who would ultimately determine Kim’s grade. As a result, very little metarhetorical dialogue occurred in his sessions with Kim. Instead of engaging her in a discussion about the course’s assignments, requirements, and assumptions about writing, Samuel mostly just scrambled to address her vague grammatical worries. Kim was never quite satisfied, and after a couple of weeks she stopped attending Writer’s Group.

Tassoni and Lewiecki-Wilson suggest that moments like this highlight “the very real limits of curricular transformation that a Studio program faces, as well as the ways that Studio itself becomes complicit with values and approaches to writing external to it” (87). According to Tassoni and Lewiecki-Wilson, they also serve to remind us of the material conditions that inform writing pedagogy (88-89). Over the last few years, at least a third of our 101 and 102 courses were staffed by adjunct faculty, most of whom received little formal support from the department apart from limited office space, copier privileges, and a haphazard mentoring system that paired new adjuncts with experienced roster faculty. All first-year writing faculty are also invited to participate in regular pedagogy workshops, including one offered right before the fall semester, but given the fact that many of our part-time instructors also teach in local high schools and technical colleges it’s understandable that most don’t take advantage of these opportunities.

Just as Kim stopped attending Writer’s Group for understandable reasons, many of our writing faculty, especially part-time instructors, ignored the program not simply because it may have been antithetical to their pedagogy but because they lacked the time and support necessary to integrate it into their courses.



## **Administrative Infrastructure**

Throughout its history, Writer's Group was directed by unprotected faculty members. In a situation that is unfortunately all too common in the field, the second director of Writer's Group left the College after being denied tenure. The program was then directed for two years by a Senior Instructor, a non-tenured faculty member who taught a 3-4 course load in first-year composition. When Chris, an Assistant Professor, was asked to lead the program in 2007, he had only been at the College for one year. Being aware of the second director's fate and having little formal training in Studio pedagogy, Chris was hesitant to direct Writer's Group. At the same time, though, he felt Writer's Group provided an opportunity for him to continue teaching basic writing, something he didn't think he would have the opportunity to do at the College. In addition, he felt the program would allow him to work alongside graduate students in creating a graduate-level concentration in composition and rhetoric that would prepare them, in part, to teach basic writing. Chris recognized that approaching the Studio in this way created overlap and potential conflict with the graduate program, yet he also hoped that it would revive the discussion some in the department had started years ago about instituting a graduate concentration.

During staff meetings, graduate assistants frequently discussed their frustrations with the existing graduate program and talked with Chris about what they thought a composition and rhetoric concentration should look like. While these conversations were instructive for both Chris and the graduate facilitators, efforts to create substantive change through the program were compromised by working conditions. Although the department chair actively worked to secure release time for Chris when he directed the program, she wasn't always successful. In fact, he received release time for one course only once in the four semesters he directed the program, which meant he typically taught three writing courses, many of them new preps, each semester. Besides directing Writer's Group, Chris also chaired the department's First-Year Writing Committee, who during his tenure revised the first-year writing requirement and assessed the newly created English 110 course. These other demands gave him little time to do the work necessary for building a graduate concentration.

All too late, Chris learned that Writer's Group, and the graduate assistants in the program, would have been better served if, in terms of workload, its administration had been separated from the administration of other areas of first-year writing. The lack of adequate release time certainly contributed to

the program's unsustainability, but just as damaging was Chris's tendency to take on too much responsibility, especially given his status as a relatively new junior faculty member—a common story with non-tenured writing program administrators. The joint administration of first-year writing and Writer's Group, instead of building coherence, created further fragmentation.

### **Moving Forward**

Chris plans to begin efforts to recreate a Studio program in the future, and we believe that the insight gained from the dismantling of Writer's Group and Supplemental Instruction will help him and others work together to create a more successful and sustainable program. The remainder of this section, then, identifies the areas of the broader program in need of repair and explains our current vision for a new and improved Studio program.

First and foremost, we learned that a formalized first-year writing program that both supports and coordinates with other areas of the writing curriculum must be established before a Studio program could be reinstated. When Chris initially accepted the offer to direct Writer's Group, he naively thought that the Studio course could temporarily serve some of the functions of a more formalized writing program or at least lay the groundwork for one. In hindsight, though, we learned that this goal was misplaced given the provisional and critical nature of Studio work. With no first-year writing program or director and no real consistency in the first-year composition curriculum, each section of 101 and 102 was a self-contained island following the rules of isolated instructors who ostensibly answered to no one. Thus, when students examined the material conditions underlying their class writing they sometimes did so in narrow terms. In other words, their comments and questions suggested that they saw some of the writing demands they faced as quirks of an individual instructor, rather than a materially conditioned attitude they might encounter elsewhere in their coursework. To some extent they were right, and no future Studio course (and no formalized writing program) could alleviate this concern entirely. However, to go back to Emily's observation about students not sharing our goals for Writer's Group, a future Studio program might have more success in this regard if the curriculum and ideas about writing they were being asked to reflect on were made more visible, which is something a formalized writing program could help provide.

While any future Studio program would coordinate with the first-year writing program, we would recommend that both programs have different

directors. Our decision to allow the same person to direct Writer's Group and the department's First-Year Writing Committee created some coherence, but this was offset by the workload issues that came with these additional responsibilities. We recognize that creating and maintaining multiple administrative lines is more difficult at smaller institutions like ours, but we would also argue that this is one concrete way Studio programs can elevate the status of composition and rhetoric.

The second most significant change we would make would be to embed the Studio into our current required four-hour course, English 110. In this effort, we have been influenced by the work of Deanna Martin who first developed Supplemental Instruction at the University of Missouri-Kansas City over thirty years ago. As she and Maureen Hurley have written, Supplemental Instruction involves such core principles as helping first-year students "develop a culture of learning" and making students more critically aware of classroom materials like the syllabus and assignments (310-11). While the model of SI Martin and Hurley describe employs undergraduates as SI leaders who are embedded in a particular course and hold multiple breakout sessions each week, it shares the goals of Studio programs in that it, to use Martin and Hurley's words, "provide[s] the opportunity for open and free-flowing dialogue, spontaneous questions, lively discussions, trial-and-error experimentation, and, most important, the help and support of colleagues" (319). We need to survey more Supplemental Instruction programs and models, but our approach toward a new Studio program imagines it as a resource embedded into the 110 course that could serve students and faculty in a variety of ways.

Right now, many instructors, especially those new to teaching 110, remain uncertain about how to use the course's extra instructional hour each week, and this is a place where we believe a revived Studio program can step in. We would continue to offer small-group workshops led by trained Studio faculty, which students from various sections of 110 could sign up for as part of a weekly fourth hour, but we would also provide students and faculty with a range of other activities with similar metarhetorical goals. These would include regular large-group writing workshops led by Studio faculty, podcasts that present interviews with students and faculty from across campus about issues related to academic writing, and public lectures in which instructors from different disciplines present on their ongoing research and the research and writing process behind their work. Studio faculty would also be trained to deliver whole-class writing workshops developed in coordination with 110 instructors<sup>2</sup>

Third, we would recommend that all 110 faculty be required to contribute to the Studio program as part of their regular teaching responsibilities, which would help us iron out some of the logistical problems that would inevitably arise with the type of Studio program described above. Samuel's difficulty coordinating with Kim's instructor illustrated to us that the department has done a poor job of getting writing faculty, adjuncts especially, invested in the program. Indeed, requiring 110 instructors to participate in the program, while compensating them for their labor, would help us go a long way toward solving this problem. We would recommend that a portion of the department's annual 110 orientation be set aside for training instructors in Studio pedagogy, and this introduction would be followed up with regular workshops where current Studio faculty and classroom instructors reflect on their teaching, discuss any problems they're facing, and share ideas on how specific Studio experiences might address these problems. These meetings would allow instructors who are less familiar with Studio pedagogy to build relationships with those with more expertise, and both groups could collectively think through ways in which the Studio could productively be embedded within the 110 course.

We imagine that many 110 instructors would object to this additional requirement for very sound reasons, the most obvious one being time. Non-tenure-stream faculty in renewable full-time positions typically teach three sections of 110 a semester, and adding an additional responsibility on top of this would understandably be seen as an undue hardship. Tenure-stream faculty have departmental and college service obligations that make this requirement hard to sell. However, we're not suggesting that all 110 instructors would have to run weekly workshops, although they could if they wish; instead, we would recommend that all 110 faculty make a handful of contributions to the program over the course of the academic year. They might lead a small-group workshop, deliver a public lecture, interview someone as part of a podcast, or design a lesson or workshop that other 110 instructors could use for their fourth hour. Since most faculty have at least one or two fourth-hour sessions each semester that are devoted to out-of-class activities they do not staff, we don't believe this would be an unreasonable requirement. Moreover, before implementing the program, we would consult with the Dean and Provost to develop a system whereby 110 instructors could count Studio activities toward their course load and use these hours to earn release time. In addition, we would recommend that Studio teaching be considered as part of a faculty member's College service, which would help to further professionalize this work. We imagine this to be a tough sell, but

there has been some talk on campus of having faculty who regularly teach writing-intensive courses earn release time; having Studio work included as part of an instructor's official workload might help with this effort.

Graduate students would continue to work in the program. In fact, we imagine that a newly conceived program would create more opportunities for graduate students to work alongside classroom faculty, which would address the problems Writer's Group faced gaining faculty support. We would work to strengthen the relationship by having the director of graduate studies and Studio program administrator work together to advertise this teaching opportunity to graduate students and select facilitators. In addition, graduate courses on composition theory and pedagogy could include a unit on Studio pedagogy, with current facilitators talking with other graduate students about the experience.

Embedding the Studio program into 110 in the ways we describe here would help us foster the metarhetorical dialogue among faculty that is currently lacking in the department. An embedded Studio would ideally create multiple formalized spaces in which faculty talk with each other, and with students, about the material conditions of academic writing—and the teaching of writing. Depending on the Studio activities faculty and students complete, both groups would have opportunities to look beyond their individual classrooms and examine writing within the broader context of the College, their disciplines, and everyday lives. It could be argued that these improvements would come at a price, though, as the critical function of the Studio program would be compromised once it's become part of the first-year writing class. In other words, an embedded Studio program would no longer operate outside and alongside the writing classroom, which would limit its possibilities for institutional critique. However, we contend that the revised program we describe here, compared to the small workshop version of Studio, presents more sustainable and realistic opportunities for institutional change because all writing faculty would participate and have a stake in the program.

While we unfortunately won't be able to implement these changes in the short-term, we hope the stories we tell here about our successes and failures help those involved in Studio programs elsewhere, who we suspect experience many of the same issues that led to the cancellation of Writer's Group, devise sustainability practices that best support the specific needs of their institutions and faculty. Studio programs are a vital part of undergraduate writing instruction but also serve an important role in faculty development and graduate education. Meeting these goals requires more

than financial support; it requires a sustainable administrative structure and the ongoing collaboration of faculty, graduate students, and others with a stake in the teaching and learning of undergraduate writing.

## Notes

1. In using this enrollment procedure, we were unlike other Studio programs. According to Grego and Thompson, students are placed into the Studio course at USC based on a portfolio and “writing history” submitted at the beginning of their English 101 course (“Repositioning” 63). Miami Middletown formally places students based on “the COMPASS diagnostic test” and “students’ Writer Profiles” (Tassoni and Lewiecki-Wilson 74). We wanted to institute more formalized placement procedures but were blocked by the department chair at the time. Our solution at the time, far from perfect, was to visit classes to promote the program and provide classroom faculty tools they could use to recommend the program to students.
2. We’ve modeled these activities after those in place at The University Center for Writing-based Learning at DePaul, which offers a podcast series called “Hot Topics in Writing,” and The Writing Studio at Vanderbilt, which offers a lecture series called “Dinner and a Draft” (DePaul; Writing Studio).

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