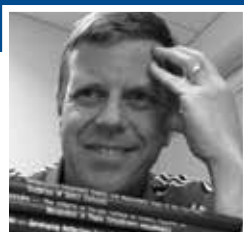


A Space for Grad Students: Peer-to-Peer Collaboration in a Writing Studio Startup

Chuck Radke
California State University-Fresno
Fresno, California



In 2009, I was tasked with envisioning a place at Fresno State University where graduate students could find supplementary writing support. At the time, little had been published on the needs of graduate student writers, and only a handful of universities had established centers devoted solely to graduate student writing.¹ For many years, our campus writing center has been a place where any student enrolled in classes at our university can find help with things like brainstorming, organization, and proofreading strategies, either in small group discussions or one-to-one tutoring. Certainly, our university's graduate students were (and still are) welcomed at the writing center, so why was I asked to start something new? With a nod to Virginia Woolf, why did graduate students need a *room of their own*?

My envisioning assignment was actually part of a larger institutional accreditation directive from the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) to create a stronger “graduate culture” on our campus, one that would support current graduate programs and others slated to launch. In fact, WASC had specifically requested in two previous visits that we demonstrate forward progress in this area. Further, a campus advisory group was calling for “strategies that would encourage student progress” at all levels as part of a statewide push to improve graduation rates. And finally, our *President’s Plan for Excellence* targeted a 20% increase in our number of graduate students, folks who would have different needs in areas like mentoring, research advising, and specifically, “scholarly writing consultation.” Clearly, it was time to act, and in a survey disseminated to our graduate students and faculty, they agreed: 82% rated as “important” or “extremely important” the need for a research, writing, and consultation space dedicated graduate students.

Because I was the dissertation and thesis consultant in the Division of Graduate Studies,² my dean considered me the most suitable person to provide support for “scholarly writing consultation.”

After all, I'd been reading student scholarly writing since starting my position in 2003, and I'd worked individually with many graduate students on all kinds of assignments, from short essays to lengthy dissertations. The responsibility of launching a supplementary writing support service for graduate students seemed a good fit, so when the overture moved from envisioning to actual planning and implementation, I agreed.

I started small: picture Lucy Van Pelt in her "Psychiatric Help" booth and you wouldn't be far off. My assigned space was a conference room artificially split by a fabric wall panel that did nothing to ensure privacy. There were no phones and no computers, but I did have a file cabinet with handouts on multiple writing concerns. Outside the door I lined up some chairs where students could sit until their appointment time. It had that waiting-room feel.

I hired three graduate writing consultants—grad students themselves—and we immersed ourselves in literature on writing center pedagogy that we would use as the basis for our work. We interviewed our graduate faculty to get a sense of their expectations. We conducted a thorough best-practice review to see what others were doing. We defined "consultants" as trained, interested readers who would ask the right questions, let pauses be pauses, and allow students to test their ideas in a safe, responsive, and focused environment. We wanted to provide a place where graduate students could engage meaningfully with the issues about which they were writing, and as consultants, we would—per Nancy Sommers—"reflect befuddlement" (155) and guide writers "back into the chaos, back to the point where they were shaping and restructuring their meaning" (154).

We made a door sign that read "Collaboration Happens Here," and in our literature, we billed ourselves as an "empowering service, not an editing service," hoping to debunk the perception of writing centers as places where students with deficiencies get help "fixing" their work. We encountered the writing-center-as-fix-it-shop view frequently in our research. But we wanted to create a space for students who were motivated to improve their writing skills over the course of months and, in some cases, years. We also knew "there was no point in having students correct usage errors or condense sentences that [were] likely to disappear before the next draft [was] completed" (Sommers 155). If those things happened toward the end of the process, that was fine, but it was not our reason for being.

Most importantly, though, we talked about why we were *needed*. What could we provide that graduate students couldn't find anywhere else on campus? Remember, we held this discussion

before the advent of dissertation boot camps and at a time when few resources about graduate-level writing experiences existed. We wrangled a bit with the differences between writing demands for graduate-level courses versus those at the undergraduate level and concluded that any discussion on the topic needed to focus first on one thing: audience.

We wanted students to see their writing as something that would have a life outside their degree programs, something that would contribute to a larger academic conversation through the creation of new knowledge. Students writing a thesis, for example, were expected to advance understanding in their field, contextualize their work against the work of other scholars, converse in a wider dialog, and prepare their ideas for publication. All of these things seemed to be givens in the research we did on graduate-level writing and surfaced in various iterations within the philosophies of the few graduate writing centers that existed at other universities.

To contextualize this discussion for ourselves and for the students with whom we'd work, we modernized Kenneth Burke's parlor metaphor, with the *unending conversations* taking place in each of the many Starbucks on our planet. At the time, I was working with a student who was researching crab bowel movements, a conversation admittedly taking place in a Starbucks much smaller than the ones needed to house conversations about diabetes and depression or vaccination strategies or race relations in Faulkner's novels. Still, there was (and is) a Starbucks where the topic *is* crab feces, and my student wanted to "put in [her] oar" (Burke 111). We'd tell our students from the get-go that they should expect their writing to be read by an audience of like-minded peers. They should expect to enter a discussion that started well before they arrived and would continue long after they left. Wrote Burke, "The discussion is interminable [and] remains vigorously in progress" (111), featuring both allies and adversaries. To engage in that discussion, our students needed to use research to analyze current debates and develop original ideas. In short, if they wanted in, they needed to know their material. No more flipping through index cards. No more highlighter pens. No more reading straight from PowerPoints.

So one Saturday in October 2010, we announced our operation in an email to more than 2,000 students. We did not describe our aims as thoroughly as I have above. Simply, we said we were available to *empower* grad students and help them become *stronger, more confident writers and researchers*. Within ten minutes of my hitting send, we got our first response, a nursing student in her final year, Lillian, who asked where we had been her whole graduate career.

We were thrilled by Lillian's quick reply, and scheduled her for the first available opening: the following Monday at 4:00 p.m. We now had someone to be ready for, and others would follow.

Lillian arrived on time with a patchwork quilt she hoped to mold into a publishable article on culturally competent health care for the Hmong. Bingo. Our very first student, and she embodied everything we'd discussed in our training. She had an "interminable discussion" she wanted to enter. She had original ideas she wanted to contribute to extend current thought on a specific topic in her field. She was simultaneously enthusiastic and confused, and—more than anything—she wanted someone *other than her program faculty* to shepherd her through the writing process. I think that's an important point here; using the precept that you teach best what you most need to learn, it was vital for Lillian to become the *expert* in the relationship and to share that expertise with a layperson, in this case her consultant, Iris. It was also important for Lillian to be "in charge," and knowing that Iris wasn't issuing a grade also helped set her at ease. The more Lillian was able to talk through her ideas with Iris, an attentive non-specialist who could help her organize thoughts and clarify meaning, the more confident Lillian became in her ability to communicate her ideas on paper and in conversation.

It helped, too, that Iris was available on a regular, sustained basis to provide a level of attention that Lillian's faculty mentor—given the rigors of a full teaching load and a robust cadre of mentees—was not. Lillian and Iris met for an hour every Monday from October 2010 through May 2011, chiseling away at the paper, refining the ideas, and—in due time—addressing lower-order concerns like appropriate transitions and accurate documentation. As they journeyed together, Iris earned Lillian's trust, which has become one of the hallmarks of the Graduate Writing Studio over the last seven years; the consultants stick around, and the students they work with stick with them. Students have come to expect they'll see the same consultant—their personal trainer, if you will—every week, and in many of our student surveys, we see language that builds on that metaphor: consultants "push" and "challenge" and "drive" our students to meet their weekly writing directives, holding them "accountable to goals for return sessions." On the rare occasion when their regular "trainer" isn't available, most students are nimble enough to work with another. One student, in fact, called our staff her "personal team" who collaborated with her each week: "They challenged me and taught me something new in each session," she said.

Others, however, say they'd rather postpone the appointment than acquaint themselves with someone new, and we're okay with

that, too. “Nothing personal,” they’ve said. “It’s just writing.” But writing is, in fact, *deeply* personal, even academic writing, which is why some don’t want to work with a different consultant; putting ourselves out there on the page with the expectation that others will read what we have to write can make even the most experienced writers feel vulnerable. In our space—in our *room of our own*—it’s common for consultants to spend two years or more with the same student or students, becoming—as one of them has said—“as much a source of social and emotional support as writing support.” They aren’t trained counselors, but it can sometimes feel that way, and when you’re talking about writing, an empathetic listener can sometimes be as valuable as an accomplished wordsmith.

This sustained, intensive-learning model has worked well with our graduate students. In our state university offering master’s degrees in a number of applied areas—e.g., social work, public health, education, nursing—many of our students are returning to school after spending a number of years in their fields. Their primary goal is to make themselves more employable, not necessarily to earn a doctorate. Some are a bit older than the norm, they keep their day jobs, and they have responsibilities at home as wives, husbands, moms, dads. Most haven’t written a paper since college, which for many of them has been a decade or more. And when they show up for the first time, they bring with them a suitcase full of personal and professional concerns. “Our students,” wrote one of our consultants, “are probably spending more time, energy, money and emotional vitality on their programs than at any other time in their academic lives.” Given this, it makes sense they’d want someone to come alongside to help navigate expectations for their writing, someone who has an ability to extend an analytic position, refine a methodology, and challenge current thought, all while helping them gain fluency in the language of their disciplines.

For Lillian, it was imperative to have a companion on her writing journey. She was in her 40s, established in her career, and was juggling life as a student, wife, mom, and working professional. Anything she’d learned about writing as an undergrad, she’d either forgotten or didn’t feel it relevant to her graduate-level pursuits. She was heavily invested in her graduate education—financially and emotionally—and she wanted to use every resource at her disposal to help her succeed. She wasn’t just writing a paper—she was building a professional identity, of which every paper was an important part. Iris—a like-minded peer in healthcare who shared some of Lillian’s characteristics—understood that, for she was working toward similar objectives: validation, credibility, professional satisfaction. By the end of Lillian’s program, she realized her goals: she earned her degree and placed her article in

a well-respected journal. She couldn't have done it without Iris's support, she said. Her gratitude was effusive, and her story—along with so many others like hers—illustrates why we are here, why graduate students do, in fact, need a room of their own.

Our data from the past seven years confirms this point. From October to December of that first semester in 2010, we reported a modest 98 contact hours, not astounding, but enough—thanks also to some early success stories—to keep us going. The number of contact hours and students served has grown considerably; in the spring 2017 term, we logged 993 contact hours with 300 different graduate students. Thankfully, too, our workspace has grown. After two semesters in the “Lucy Van Pelt” conference room, we moved to a more appropriate space in the Henry Madden Library while construction of our 1,100-square foot Graduate Study Center was underway. In 2013, with support from our library administration and graduate dean, we opened our new space, which features two Graduate Writing Studio offices, eight private study rooms, and a common area with computer workstations and plenty of room to collaborate. We now have two part-time, on-site managers, and our number of peer writing consultants (from a variety of disciplines) has grown from three to ten. We offer approximately 100 individual student appointments per week—on-site and asynchronously—most of which are recurring; our students have really embraced the idea of having sustained, individual contact with someone who can help them meet the writing demands of graduate school.

The consultants, who share many demographic and psychological characteristics of the students they serve, have driven this success. I've described the consultants as empathetic peers who also happen to know what different disciplines expect their students to understand in terms of written form, language, and citation style. What might be important to readers of social work papers will not be the same for readers in biology. “Consultants need to understand the differences in expectations,” said one consultant, William, “so we can advise our students accordingly.” They have learned these *differences in expectations* over time, working with students in a wide range of disciplines. In one shift, they might work with students writing papers for the departments of English, Industrial Technology, and Public Health. And what's so tremendous about their work is their ability to move seamlessly from one discipline to the next without having the sessions seem derivative; the students are not cookie-cutter versions of consultants, so consultations cannot be either. “Every student has different needs,” wrote Debra, “and we have to work hard to identify those needs.” Thus, consultants must put in the time relationally, developing strategies to help each student writer grow professionally. Student success

is its own reward, and I believe our consultants would all say—as Ronald, one of our long-timers has done so nicely—that most important is the “connection made with all these different students and the human experiences that we share in our time together.” Yes, the consultants have all acquired competence in an array of academic languages and genres, and yes, they are highly skilled in helping graduate students navigate different phases of writing processes—from idea shaping to fine-tuning. These skills have developed through training and trial. But most important, I believe, is their understanding of the shared human experience which, added Ronald, “has made me into a better person and ultimately a better writer.” I love that our consultants feel this way and have this sense that they are growing too. I love that they can see the page, but also the folks behind the page, and that in helping build better papers, they are in their own way helping build better people.

I don’t think you can find that just anywhere.

NOTES

1. To better grasp how limited Writing and Writing Center Studies resources about graduate students needs were in 2009, consider that much work in the area appeared in higher education and ESL journals, and none of the following editors and authors had published their work: Susan Lawrence and Terry M. Zawacki; Steve Simpson, et al. (see Works Cited).

2. In 2016, the Division of Graduate Studies absorbed the university’s Office of Research and Sponsored Programs. We are now the Division of Research and Graduate Studies.



WORKS CITED

- Burke, Kenneth. *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*. Vintage Books, 1957.
- Lawrence, Susan, and Zawacki, Terry Myers, editors (special issue). *WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship*, vol. 40, no. 5-6, 2016, pp. 1-32.
- Simpson, Steve, et al. *Supporting Graduate Student Writers: Research, Curriculum, and Program Design*. U of Michigan P, 2016.
- Sommers, Nancy. “Responding to Student Writing.” *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 33, no. 2, 1982, pp. 148-55.