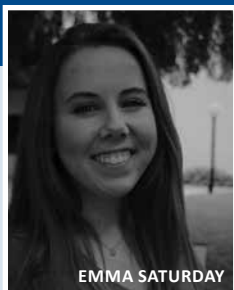


Tutors' Column: "Reflecting (on) the Research: Personal Lessons from the IWCA Collaborative"

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At the age of 17, I had my entire future mapped out: attend a small liberal arts college, major in English, earn a single subject teaching credential, and become a high school English teacher. I had assumed that everyone was as sure of their future as I was. So, I was shocked when I began my freshman year at the University La Verne, a private liberal arts university in Southern California, and met countless students who had no answer to the Big Question, "What do you want to do with your life?" I was positive about my career choice because in my eyes, there were no other real choices. I had hopes of inspiring generations of high school students through literary study because it had been very important to me, but, like many other English majors, I also naively assumed that teaching was the only career available to me. However, working as a writing tutor in my university's multidisciplinary tutoring center, the Academic Success Center (ASC), opened opportunities for me that changed how I viewed my future. Right from my first semester, I found that I loved my work in the ASC—loved helping other students with their writing and loved learning more about writing myself. I began to study the theory surrounding writing tutoring and the fields connected to it (rhetoric and composition, linguistics, etc.). Soon, this work had me developing ASC-centered research projects and participating in academic conferences, and the fixed shape of my future became itself something to question, rather than the answer it had always been.

As a student, I have always been intrinsically motivated, driven to succeed and achieve. However, I had scarcely considered graduate school. All my life, I have found myself following a superstar older sister, one who had always been on the path to a PhD program. I saw graduate school as out of my reach, but also unnecessary—to be a secondary school teacher did not require anything more than a bachelor's degree and a teaching credential (or so I thought). When I started conducting research in the ASC and un-

derstanding the implications of this opportunity, my views on my future began to change.

In January, I began working on two research projects with the ASC's director: one aimed at coding and analyzing transcripts of tutoring sessions using a recent empirical writing center study, Jo Mackiewicz and Isabelle Thompson's (2014) *Talk About Writing*, as its basis, and another studying ASC users' linguistic and educational identities. The projects were the basis for presentations I would be helping to deliver at the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) conference in Tampa, Florida.

The research had a pronounced effect on both my academic and professional identities. As an English major, I was unfamiliar with how to conduct empirical research—I knew how to write a literary analysis; I did not know how to read and summarize a body of studies on a topic, nor how to gather and analyze data. To say that I was overwhelmed and intimidated would be an understatement. I spent hours working my way through databases, journals, and articles, culling and synthesizing information in order to relay it to my director. More than just seeing the ASC as a place where I worked solely as a tutor, I now recognized it as a place for interdisciplinary scholarship. I was employing the critical thinking and writing skills I had learned as an English major but in service to modes of thinking and information drawn from sociology, linguistics, rhetoric, and other fields.

As I devoted much of my spring semester to furthering this research, I found that I enjoyed expanding my role in the ASC to something beyond a tutor. I appreciated the new connectivity I had with students through my research: I was not only helping them grow as writers but pushing them to think in new directions about their identities as students, just as I had been. I felt that this research was a new form of “teaching” that I had not previously considered. The conversations that arose throughout my research helped deepen the significance of my project as students asked themselves new questions. While I had worried that the daunting and scientific term “research” would separate me from my role as a tutor, I sensed that my projects were contributing greatly to my connections with students.

Many recent studies note the wide range of effects undergraduate research has on students, their academic motivation and goals, their engagement within disciplines, and their career paths (Willis et al.). My experience supports these findings. What they fail to capture, though, is how those changes feel. While I could

sense my growth as a student, I did not comprehend how my personal identity was changing until I reached the International Writing Centers Association conference, “The Collaborative,” in Tampa, Florida. Along with the new experiences of flying across the country alone, checking into a hotel by myself, and exploring a city I had never seen before, I matured, I learned, and I grew up. The experience of presenting research alongside my director to a room full of highly educated scholars was both nerve-wracking and thrilling. While attending other conference sessions, I was continually surprised at not only the variety of research being conducted, but also the passion these scholars possessed for the field of writing center research.

As one of the few undergraduates in attendance, I found my insights welcome and unique in many of the discussions I participated in. One presentation in particular, on empirical research involving undergraduate tutors in writing centers, helped me grasp the fuller implications of my own involvement in ASC research projects. Despite the widespread understanding of the value of undergraduate research, most students in writing-related fields do not have the opportunity to pursue real empirical research as undergraduates. A survey conducted at the University of Arizona notes how undergraduate research helps students recognize their career goals: “over 80% [of participants] believed that their undergraduate research experience had a substantial effect, including 46% who felt that it was critical in their career choice” (Yaffe et al. 29).

Perhaps the most salient outcome of my participation in the conference was that I saw firsthand the range of jobs available to me in the field through the people I met: writing center directors and assistant directors, coordinators, professors, lecturers, administrators, and more. While at the conference, I became aware that not only was graduate school entirely within my reach, but it could propel me into countless careers that I had never known about. Now, the professional and academic opportunities open to me through my writing center work seem endless. Reflecting on the IWCA conference, I recall one particular interaction in which Roberta Kjesrud, former IWCA president and a well-respected researcher in the field of writing center studies, reacted with shock when she heard that I had come to the conference as the only tutor from our center. She and I discussed my research and the conference presentations I had helped run, and she surprised me at the end of our talk when she expressed the potential she saw in me to become a PhD candidate in a writing center-related field.

Her comments were not only inspiring but also encouraged me to understand that I could have a place in this field as a professional, if I choose to pursue it.

I can see now that my high school choice to become a secondary school teacher had been the result of the unexamined belief that I had no other choices that would connect my love of literature and writing to a chosen profession. Now, although I have not decided which path my future career will follow, I recognize that my field of study will not limit my direction in life. As the result of my research and professional development in writing center studies, my problem now is the opposite: confronted with choices, I am going to face difficult decisions about my future—an outcome I never expected.



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