

Jumping off the Cliff and Learning to Fly on the Way Down: Shared Expertise, Shared Input, and Shared Responsibility as the Building Blocks of a Volunteer Writing Mentor Program

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This reflection-on-practice reports on a small-scale Writing Mentor program started in 2013 at Ghent University in Belgium. Though not a fully-fledged writing

center, the Writing Mentor program is based on writing center theory and pedagogy. Students volunteer to support other students with their writing, using the minimalist method (Brooks). When we started, writing centers were all but unknown in our context (De Wachter et al.; Leuriden et al.).

Three years into our program, Thijs, one of the mentors, as part of his master's thesis, undertook an empirical evaluation of the program. His data revealed programmatic success: students were generally satisfied with mentor support, which helped them gain confidence or motivation. A comparison of pre- and post-mentoring texts indicated that sessions with mentors also facilitated students' ability to handle HOC (higher-order concern) issues such as focus and cohesion (Gillioen). We were happy but a bit surprised by these findings. When we started, none of us knew what we were doing; we had proceeded with a "jump off the cliff and learn to fly on the way down" *modus operandi*. When faced with evidence of success, none of us could pinpoint how we managed to keep our small mentor program from splatting at the bottom of the cliff. To explore this question, seven of the charter members undertook a focus group study.

This article is the story the focus group has to tell. Before we go into detail, we should mention that we are writing to two audiences: first, to those who are part of established writing centers—and to whom the idea of a writing center, and how it is run, is obvious:

we would like to thank you for your wisdom and guidance. Publications like *WLN*, where those with experience generously share information, have been instrumental in our learning to fly. We would also like to serve as a reminder that there are still far-flung places where writing centers/writing mentor programs are not yet established as mainstream practice—and put in a plea for your continued wisdom, guidance, and patience for those of us just starting out. Our second audience is those who feel that a writing center or mentor program is a good idea, but have no idea where to start: we offer a message of encouragement. Just start. Jump off the cliff. You won't splat.

We first offer an overview of how we collected and analyzed data, then discuss themes that emerged from analysis. The section headings that follow are direct quotes from focus group discussions, with the name of person quoted appearing in parentheses. These headings capture the essence of each theme, while the sections summarize the thematic data. The casual tone used in the summaries is intended to reflect the collegial atmosphere of our group meetings.

1 FOCUS GROUP SET-UP

1.1 "Well ... I wonder how we pulled it off" (Sarah).

When Thijs presented the positive data from his master's project to the Writing Mentor group, we were pleased, but a little puzzled. When we started the program, none of us had much knowledge about what we should do or how to proceed. Sarah, the writing teacher involved, had only theoretical knowledge of writing center pedagogy, and none of the students had ever even heard of writing centers or writing mentors. We had no budget and no allocated rooms. We first met in empty classrooms and later squatted in rooms that had been vacated due to impending renovation. Along with no money and no space, everyone was working on a volunteer basis, so there never seemed to be enough time to do any proper planning. The only real ingredients we had were the knowledge that students needed help with their writing and the desire to help them. We were aware that we were probably doing many things wrong.

To explore what might have gone right, and how, we set up a focus group. Of sixty students who had initially been asked to help start the writing mentor program, thirty had persevered through the first year, twenty had returned to continue for a second year, and fifteen for a third year. Six of those fifteen—Thijs, Stefanie, Frederik, Maxim, Marjolein, and Mickael—were available to meet with Sarah in intensive focus group sessions.

Following the procedures for focus group research outlined by Rosanna Breen, we examined the general questions: 1) how did we get the program started, and 2) how did we keep it going? We met nine times for two to seven hours each time. The first three sessions were focus group discussions where data were collected via audio-recordings and notes; the next three times, we worked together to categorize the collected data; finally, we had a few extended sessions for discussing and drafting our report. Data from the focus group discussions were analyzed thematically. The analysis showed that it was an ad hoc response to a problematic situation that instigated the program, and what kept it going was a shared ownership of the program. Giving rise to the co-ownership was a partnership, constructed of shared expertise, shared input and shared responsibility, held together by trust. Each of these themes will be discussed in turn.

2 WHAT GOT US STARTED

2.1 Situation Impossible: “We want you to write, but we [can’t] really help you with it” (Frederik, summarizing the university situation).

Reflection on how our mentoring program got started was centered on the less-than-ideal situation in which students were being expected to write: the mentor program is part of English Proficiency classes that are compulsory for all first-year undergraduate students wishing to earn a degree in English. Fifteen classroom hours were dedicated to the explicit instruction of writing, with one staff member responsible for around 300 students. From this minimal teaching, students were expected to be able to write academic essays and research papers in English. The kind of “knowledge-crafting” writing that students are asked to do in their university careers takes decades to learn (Kellogg 20) and, even then, must be done with “deliberate training” that can only be achieved “through repeated opportunities to write and through timely and relevant feedback” (Kellogg and Raulerson 237). It was thus unrealistic to think that students could learn what they needed to learn under these circumstances. The situation was complicated by the educational background of students, whose secondary education in (English) writing focused on lower order concerns (such as grammar and spelling), rather than on higher order concerns (such as coherence, cohesion, or flow) (Van Steendam et al.).

2.2 Recruiting Students: “I wanna do a thing. You wanna help?” (Frederik, paraphrasing Sarah).

In response to “situation impossible,” Sarah, who had read writing

center literature for her Ph.D. studies, but had never been directly involved, thought that even though creating a fully-fledged writing center without any budget would be unrealistic, it might be a good idea to have a group of writing mentors affiliated specifically with the proficiency classes. Writing mentoring, after all, has been successful in the United States and Canada for decades, and it is by now well established that peer-to-peer interaction can be as effective for learning as teacher-student interaction (Topping and Ehly). This, along with research showing that writing mentors can themselves benefit from mentoring (Brandt), as well as helping those they mentor (Cleary), helps explain the growing number of writing centers in European universities as well, where peer mentors are employed to facilitate the writing development of students of all levels (Girgensohn; O'Neill; De Wachter et al.).

Research has also found that when setting up writing centers, the success of the program can “depend primarily on the efforts of the student [mentors]” (Girgensohn 127). People are more likely to invest in such efforts if they are not only ‘employed,’ but are enlisted as partners in a change process (Fullan). In the current context, with the proposed change having no funding, both students and teacher would be donating their time. Partnership and the established benefits of being mentors, were all that could be offered in compensation. It did not seem like a deal students would clamor over, but it was worth a try.

Based on her impressions from classroom interaction and from students’ reflective writing, Sarah identified sixty potential candidates and sent out an email asking if they would be interested in helping set up a program for mentoring writers of English Proficiency essays. When the focus group members reflected on that initial email invitation, the mentors agreed that they had had no idea what it was all about, or what they were in for. Frederik again summarized by saying “That email, to us, was basically Sarah saying ‘Hey, I wanna do a thing. You wanna help?’ That was pretty much all we understood.” Bewilderment notwithstanding, thirty students signed on to help do the thing.

3 WHAT KEPT US GOING

The focus group discussions regarding how we kept the program going pointed unequivocally to partnership. Although the mentors agreed that there were indeed benefits to mentoring, it was the partnership existing among the program members that made this “charity work” worth doing. The focus group identified that this partnership was made of three essential building blocks, and that these blocks were held together by a mortar of trust.

The partnership facilitated a shared ownership of the mentoring program, which, according to the mentors, is essential for sustainability.

3.1 Partnership based on trust: “There was a symbiotic trust ... that [held] together ... some building blocks ... of partnership” (Maxim).

Possibly the most important component of the shared ownership of the program was a mutual trust, present from the outset, between the founding mentors and Sarah. The trust seemed to stem from the fact that *everyone* involved was invested in helping writers become better writers. In asking students to become involved, Sarah reported putting a great deal of trust in the potential mentors’ good will and good ideas. She knew that there was no way she could do it on her own, and that even if she had the time, she did not have all the knowledge she needed. The mentors, in turn, trusted that Sarah had students’ best interests at heart, and came on board, even though they did not know what “writing mentors” meant. Maxim summarized it as “a symbiotic trust, there already at the beginning, that [held everything] together.”

BUILDING BLOCKS OF PARTNERSHIP

3.2 Shared Expertise: “We knew we wouldn’t just be minions” (Stefanie).

That the mentors and Sarah were sharing expertise was established early on. Stefanie reflects, “We knew we wouldn’t just be [Sarah’s] minions. We were going to be bringing our own expertise [to the table]. She knows lots of things we didn’t know, but we knew things she didn’t know, too.” A writing teacher may have more theoretical knowledge about writing centers and mentors and be more of an authority on academic writing and writer development, but mentors are authorities on being students in their context. Mentors know much better than their teachers what they had had for previous writing instruction, and they have a much better understanding of students’ prevailing attitudes towards writing, writing-in-English, and peer learning—and thus insight into what might help facilitate a useful mentoring program. In our partnership, our shared expertise and knowledge was augmented by the complementary skills that each person contributed.

3.3 Shared Input: “We each came with our own superpowers” (Marjolein).

Along with knowledge, each person brought with them their own talents and skills, perspectives, and ideas, all of which contributed

to any success we can claim. In Marjolein's words, "we each came with our own superpowers and put them into the program." Some students excelled in analyzing text, which proved important for understanding how to mentor. Others had above-average empathy or insights that offered new perspectives. Some excelled at organizational or reflective skills; some added impressive lack of ego or willingness to learn. Some members were simply good at not feeling sorry for themselves and passed that attitude on to mentees. With all the different input coming from different places, a shared responsibility for the success of the program developed.

3.4 Shared Responsibility: "[We] just did stuff" (Thijs).

Everyone started to feel that there was a shared responsibility for program success. People saw from different perspectives what needed to be done and took action. As Thijs put it, "[we] just did stuff." Someone with good organization skills took over the administrative side of the program; soon after the start of the program, a "PR" group formed, and a Facebook page was made. One mentor took on the pastoral care and team-building aspects of the group. Others sketched metaphors and diagrams to try to help students understand argumentation and quality in writing. With everyone working together, feeling responsible for the success of the program, and contributing different knowledge and talents, we all started to develop a strong sense of shared ownership.

3.5 Shared ownership: "It's our program ... [which is] important for... making it all work" (Mickael).

The conclusion of the focus group was that the partnership ultimately constructed a shared ownership of the mentoring program that seems to be important for keeping everyone willing to continue working on a volunteer basis. As Mickael summarized, "this means that it's our program: we aren't just doing [someone else's program]. And that's important for keeping us here, and [keeping the program working]."

4 CONCLUSION: WE ARE STILL LEARNING TO FLY, BUT WE HAVEN'T HIT THE GROUND YET

Even though some things seem to be working well, our situation is still far from ideal, and our mentoring program is far from perfect. We still face some of the old challenges of too many students and not nearly enough support for writers. And we are still squatting in rooms that are temporarily vacated. We still feel we have too little time to train and practice mentoring. We still feel we do not know nearly enough about what we are doing. Adding to

the old, we now have new challenges: If it is true that feelings of ownership are important for sustaining the mentor program, we will now need to consider ways to maintain that feeling of shared ownership even though the program is now established, and mentors coming in are no longer building something from scratch. Here is where we will continue to appeal to the wisdom of those with experience.

Challenges notwithstanding, things are better than they were when we started. We aren't a writing center yet, but there is evidence that we are actually helping writers, and it looks like we will be able to keep building our program. Thus, we want to send out the positive message that it is possible to set up a mentoring program with no budget and no rooms, and that such a program can work and grow. We cannot generalize to every situation, but in ours, a partnership built on trust, leading to shared ownership of the program, seems to have contributed greatly to sustainability. Thus, we would like to suggest to mentors that they should be confident that they each bring expertise and superpowers to their programs, and that they should take on shared responsibility for program success. With these raw materials, a mentoring program can be started, and we are hopeful that the situation, and the program, can keep improving. We hope that what started out as the nebulous "I wanna do a thing. You wanna help?" might eventually develop into a fully-fledged writing center. To be sure, we are still learning to fly, but we have not hit the bottom yet.

NOTE

For their support in this project we thank Mieke Van Herreweghe, Miriam Taverniers, Chris Bulcaen, Tom Parlevliet, Bram Vanderbiest, Mary Deane, Carol Varner, Ruth Johnson, Sean Burns, colleagues from writing centers around Europe, and all mentors who have been part of the program.



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