

The Writing Center-Classroom Interface: How One Student's Challenges Shaped my Writing Center Orientations

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INTRODUCTION

Writing center professionals are uniquely privileged to know some student writers over many years. Having built a relationship with a group of international students in their first-year second language writing course, I later noticed, in my role as writing center director, one of my former students returning to the center over time. However, I also noticed his peers absent from the center. This experience made me question the methods I use to introduce our diverse community of campus writers to the writing center.

Noting the scholarly underrepresentation of writing center “practice on the periphery” (4), Rebecca Jackson and Jackie Grutsch McKinney call for “a richly-textured and nuanced vision of writing centers and writing center work” (4). My present case study illustrates the impact of an undertheorized periphery, focusing on the writing center-classroom interface. Specifically, this research considers how one student’s early struggles with writing center use and later engagement impacted my understanding of writing center orientations. After exploring current research on students’ introduction to a writing center, I present some student challenges in using the center. Drawing on these challenges (and my own), this study offers recommendations to writing center directors, tutors, and instructors for smoothing students’ transitions from the classroom to the writing center.

Student data for this IRB-approved research are drawn primarily from fourteen weekly journals from a first-year second language writing course at Valparaiso University, a small comprehensive institution. This research presents the case study of a focal student, Abdullah, a first-year, multilingual international student from Saudi Arabia, whose first language is Arabic.¹ I selected Abdullah as a focal student as he made more frequent (attempted) use of the writing center during his first semester, maintaining this level of use across his undergraduate career. Though these journals informed

my teaching, they also provided new insight when I approached them later as writing center director, attempting to understand Abdullah's continued writing center engagement and the relative absence of most of his peers. While this case study focuses on students' ability to overcome challenges in early writing center use, it is part of a larger research project, including a focus group from Abdullah's class, two additional interviews with Abdullah, and writing center appointment records from 2014-2019, when these students graduated. Students were aware throughout of my research regarding their writing process, including their writing center use.

Perhaps as a result of increased center usage, Abdullah reported more challenges in accessing the center, including difficulties using our scheduling software, understanding the schedule, and finding time for appointments. Abdullah's first-semester journals present a picture of the challenges even highly motivated writers may face in writing center use when confronting common issues, such as family responsibilities, commuting, and linguistic or cultural differences. Though any student may experience issues with learning to use the writing center, first-year international students may be impacted in unique ways. For instance, Senel Poyrazli and Kamini Maraj Grahame note that "[c]ompared to their domestic counterparts, international students tend to experience greater adjustment difficulties and more distress during their initial transition into the university and report greater academic and career needs" (29). Simultaneously, however, international students are—as Cody J. Perry, et al. argue—"[o]ne group of students that may benefit the most from student services" (3), though statistically, they "had considerably less awareness of available services than domestic students" (8-9). Abdullah's story of transition to university life and writing center use is similar to many students' while also being uniquely his own—as a first-year student, an international student, a non-native speaker of English, a commuter, and a student with family responsibilities. This essay explores how Abdullah's story impacted my own as a writing center director.

Convinced of the value of writing center visits, in Fall 2014, I required my ten students in English 101 (Introductory Reading and Writing for Non-Native English Speakers), all of whom were international, to visit the center once. At this point, writing center class visits were not promoted for second language writing courses. I provided the students a brief in-class introduction, showing the writing center web page with location and schedule, and indicating that anyone could visit to discuss their writing. I now recognize the limitations of this introduction.

Had I explored writing center literature, I would have found discussion of possible advantages and limitations of required visits, though little on writing center introductions. For instance, Barbara Lynn Gordon highlights positive student responses to required visits, while acknowledging possible overcrowding. Barbara Bell and Robert Stutts discuss negative student and tutor responses to frequent required visits, reporting student satisfaction and plans for continued center use after less frequent requirements with flexible scheduling. However, beyond the literature on required visits, I would have encountered limited guidance on best practices for introducing students to the center. Holly Ryan and Danielle Kane argue, “[w]hile classroom visits are a mainstay of writing center practice, virtually no scholarship has examined their effectiveness” (146). Even in 2019, Bruce Bowles, Jr. notes scant writing center scholarship on marketing, reflecting on his own marketing strategies, including class visits.

This limited previous research supports interactive class visits or orientations. For instance, Ryan and Kane show that interactive class demonstrations increased students’ awareness of the writing center as a resource for supporting argumentative writing, though they inadvertently caused students to reach false conclusions, e.g., writing centers guarantee higher grades. To promote writing center use, Valarie Pexton endorses flexible writing center workshops for first-year students accompanied by class visits, suggesting that first-year students “aren’t used to finding resources on their own and don’t always follow up on the information they *do* get” (1). As Ryan and Kane suggest in their endorsement of more interactive writing center orientations, our introductions must go beyond “information” and extend into facilitated student exploration of recommended practices and perspectives.

These introductions may be supported by “scaffolding,” which David Wood, et al. define as “‘controlling’ those elements of the task that are initially beyond the learner’s capacity, thus permitting [the learner] to concentrate upon and complete only those elements that are within [the learner’s] range of competence” (90). John Nordlof applies the concept of scaffolding to writing center tutorials, but scaffolding may also apply to work we do outside the center to introduce writers to strategies for writing center use as students are simultaneously learning to write as they learn to navigate the writing center and their own writing process. Madison Sewell, presenting impressions of her first writing center experience as a student, encourages scaffolding of required visits, including both class discussion of the center and writing center orientations (29-30). In this study, I consider additional scaffolding

that would have benefited Abdullah and his peers in their writing center introduction, such as more practice with scheduling and differentiation between writing center use and plagiarism.

SCHEDULING

Abdullah reported several issues with scheduling appointments, though he persisted and worked to become proactive. In mid-September, Abdullah notes the following on his first attempted writing center visit: "(I) tried to visit the writing center but that did not work [since] I decided to visit the writing center at Monday morning and I was not know that it does not open early." Additional scaffolding prior to Abdullah's attempted visit would have benefited him. For instance, to make writing center orientations or class visits more interactive, rather than just showing the writing center schedule, in my classes I now ensure that the writing center tutor or I take time in class for students to open the schedule themselves and book an appointment. This activity has helped to break down the initial scheduling barrier.

WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Like many students, Abdullah had personal and familial responsibilities that made it difficult to balance schoolwork and family roles. Over the semester, Abdullah developed a strategy for managing work-life balance on his own: scheduling his writing center appointments even before he began writing. I now promote this strategy for all students when introducing them to the center.

Early in the semester, Abdullah notes the challenge of balancing familial and academic roles, which impacted his intended writing center use:

These two weeks were so heavy on me. I got many assignments and midterms. Also, my nephew just came to The United states, so I spent last weekend with him. He needed someone to pick him up from the airport. In addition, he can't speak English very well so I looked [looked] up for him to find an appropriate apartment. However, I did not find good time to meet with the writing center.

Another constraint Abdullah experienced was the need for transportation, which he also sees as having a negative impact on his ability to use the writing center and to focus on his studies, writing in late October:

I did not upload the second draft with the instructions [from] the writing center because [I] was supposed to do it this morning but my note [notebook] [is] in my friends' car, so I could not do it. [...] One of my baggiest [biggest] mistakes [was] that I spend the whole time looking for a car and I could not found the car that I want. [...] I stopped my search, because I find out that I waste my time while I need my homework which are more Important.

Though this discussion of Abdullah's search for a car may seem extraneous to his writing, Abdullah took the opportunity in his journal to confide how these seemingly external events were impacting his writing process. When Poyrazli and Grahame (29) note the "adjustment difficulties" faced by some international students in their transition to college, they discuss many of the same issues Abdullah identifies, including transportation, housing, and familial obligations. It can be challenging to orient to a new culture. Importantly, Abdullah continued to attempt to make writing center appointments and to integrate consultant feedback into his drafts, despite the constraints and challenges he experienced.

A couple of weeks later in a mid-November journal, Abdullah writes of having learned a new strategy for seeking writing center feedback: "Something that I learned from my previews [previous] paper is to set early appointment to the writing center. Before I start writing my paper I should set up an appointment because later on I might not be able to set an appointment." Besides seeking a consultation early in his writing process, Abdullah has also learned to plan a writing center consultation even before he begins writing, alleviating scheduling difficulties and ensuring timely feedback.

In response to stories like Abdullah's, we now explicitly discuss this strategy during class visits, explaining how a scheduled appointment might help with motivation. Referencing Muriel Harris' idea of rhetorical frames for presenting the center's work, I often frame the tutor as a "jogging buddy." I then ask students about their likelihood of skipping a morning jog if they are tired or if the weather is bleak, to which many confess that they would. I follow up by asking the likelihood that they would skip if they know their jogging buddy is waiting for them. Typically, most students appreciatively nod with this analogy, often voicing a new perspective on the value of planning a time to work(out) with someone else. These plans can help students manage issues of work-life balance, carving out more time for their writing and for the writing center, as seen in Abdullah's use of this strategy.

THE WRITING CENTER AND ACADEMIC HONESTY

Though questions of scheduling are undoubtedly addressed in most class visits, one issue that may be addressed less frequently relates to academic honesty. For Abdullah, this lack of direct treatment caused concern. Explicitly stating that writing center use does not breach academic honesty may help to welcome some students who are worried about accidental academic misconduct. As our institution has an honor code, instructors must specify authorized aid (permitted resources) and unauthorized aid (involving academic misconduct). While I had explicitly listed the writing center as

authorized aid for papers, since journals were short and ungraded, I had not thought to list journals as writing they could bring to the center. This unfortunate oversight resulted in the following misunderstanding, reflected in one of Abdullah's mid-October journals: "Sometimes I wish I could visit them [the writing center] for the regular journal, but I am afraid that I will violate the honor code. Does my visit to the writing center for journals considered violate code?" Most writing centers invite students to visit with any writing, but an explicit class discussion and clearer syllabus language, e.g., highlighting the center as a university-sponsored, free resource for all students and all writing, could have prevented Abdullah's misunderstanding. As an instructor, I now list the writing center explicitly in each area on authorized aid in my syllabi; and as a director, I proactively discuss the writing center as authorized aid, encouraging students to address any questions or doubts with their professors.

CONCLUSION

Abdullah's journals were invaluable to me first as an instructor and later as a writing center director. They helped me craft a guide for class visits, including a list of questions to discuss with students, such as why the writing center is authorized aid; strategies to introduce, such as scheduling appointments before writing; and activities to complete, such as actively making appointments together as a class. Our class visit guide, refined by student feedback over the years, helps to remind us of questions students might not ask during a particular visit, while also prompting additional student questions. Gathering first-hand accounts of writing center use may be helpful not only in responding to international student needs in writing center orientations but also in responding to the needs of other student populations, such as commuter students, students with families, and students from other under-represented groups in your community. The practice of attending to individual student needs is central to writing center tutorials, and this same principle must guide our work in class visits and other writing center introductions. By attending to individual needs, over time, we serve the larger campus community, in part because student needs may overlap and in part because we cultivate our own responsiveness.

Lori Salem compares writing center users and non-users, highlighting the importance of addressing why some students do not use the center. Salem considers lack of engagement with writing assignments, the availability of other resources, and embarrassment as factors influencing writing center use (162). Referencing Abdullah's narratives, we might also add time constraints and other personal or institutional barriers to this list.

When I consider the obstacles Abdullah encountered during his first semester, he had every reason to be one of the non-users. However, he sought writing center feedback throughout his first semester and his undergraduate career, before graduating in May 2019. Though I encouraged him to engage with the writing center, Abdullah used the center regularly not because of a particularly well-scaffolded introduction but ultimately because of his strong motivation to succeed. Unfortunately, most of Abdullah's peers did not demonstrate this same persistence, and even Abdullah reported struggles with writing center use.

Without careful attention even—and perhaps especially—to questions and expressions of personal struggle, we may find ourselves relying too much on the motivation and persistence of determined students. To better understand students' challenges and triumphs in using the writing center, we must endeavor to listen to their stories and earn the trust that supports their candor. Asking students to journal their writing center experiences is just one way to listen, but there are many ways from focus groups to interviews to surveys. In listening, as we better anticipate our students' needs, we can share our “practice on the periphery” and our related writing center research, helping to explore best practices in these areas and helping one another to kindle and support motivation in all writers.

NOTE

1. Abdullah is a pseudonym.



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