

Two Approaches to Writing Center Assessment

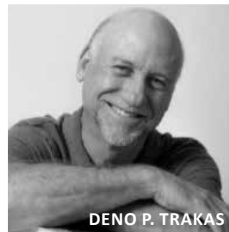
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How should we assess the work of our centers? Calls for replicable, aggregable, and data-supported (RAD) research have led to an increased focus on quantitative assessment methods. In a 2001 review of writing center assessment literature, Casey Jones lamented that she had “not unearthed a single ‘hard’ empirical study of writing center instructional efficacy published since the late-1980s” (10). Richard Haswell’s highly influential 2005 article decrying what he saw as a longstanding “war on scholarship” by the NCTE and CCCC introduced the term RAD into the working vocabulary of many writing center professionals. In 2012, William Macaulay provided three guiding questions for writing center researchers to follow when choosing what to assess, the first of which was “Can it be measured or counted?” (52). The quantitative methods promoted by these researchers can certainly produce valuable empirical data that is useful for identifying a center’s strengths and weaknesses, and quantitative measures can be particularly effective when a center director requests more funding or resources.



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As some researchers have pointed out, though, this emphasis on RAD research should not be seen as a rejection of qualitative measures. In *Researching the Writing Center: Towards an Evidence-Based Practice*, Rebecca Day Babcock and Terese Thonus “argue for RAD research, qualitative and quantitative scholarship that engages empirical evidence as mediating theory and practice” (3). Neal Lerner, known as an advocate of quantitative research, feels that “qualitative and quantitative need not be mutually exclusive (or hostile camps)” (“Of Numbers” 112). Isabelle Thompson, an early proponent of rigorous assessment methods, feels that while “quantitative measures can provide ‘big picture’ views of writing center effectiveness, qualitative measures can allow us to focus on cases” (50).

We agree with those who see value in both qualitative and

quantitative methods. In this article, we compare our two approaches to assessment—one qualitative and one quantitative—and conclude that both can demonstrate the effectiveness of a writing center and provide important insights for tutor training. Further, we would argue that the qualitative/quantitative distinction is not as important as whether an assessment offers direct or indirect evidence.¹ Direct assessments can evaluate student writing in an attempt to determine the effectiveness of writing center tutoring while indirect assessments can involve measurements such as satisfaction surveys or the number of visits a center receives. Based on our positive experiences, we recommend that writing center researchers focus primarily on direct assessment measures, whether qualitative or quantitative.

DENO'S ASSESSMENTS (QUALITATIVE/DIRECT)

With a small writing center (eight or nine student tutors, 400-600 tutorials each semester) and a small budget, I prefer qualitative procedures that are small and non-numerical. My approach to assessment duplicates what I do in my office. If one of my students brings me a rough draft and we have a constructive discussion before the student produces a revised version, I can make a direct comparison of the two, from which I can discern the effect of my advice as well as the student's willingness and ability to use that advice. In evaluating the work of our tutors, I can do the same if I have access to draft versions of student papers and revised versions completed after students visit the writing center.

We follow an IRB-approved process that includes four steps. First, the tutor asks the student for permission to use a paper for research and asks them to sign a consent form. Second, during the tutoring session, the tutor encourages the student to write down everything they discuss, and at the end of the tutorial, the tutor photocopies the student's marked-up paper and gives it to me. Third, the tutor asks the student to email me a copy of their revised paper. Fourth, to close the loop, I conduct workshops with my tutors, during which we compare drafts and revised versions.

In our workshop sessions, we read a revised draft and mark it as if we were grading it. We comment on the usual large-level concerns—thesis/focus, argument and evidence, organization, etc.—and mark the sentence-level errors. Then I hand out copies of the first draft and we line it up beside the revision. On the revision, we check with a green pen all the corrections and changes we see and note whether or not these changes were among the tutor's suggestions in the notes mentioned above. Then we mark in red any areas for concern that were not marked or addressed by the tutor or corrected by the writer. The papers under review have

neither the names of the student writers nor the tutors, but usually the tutor who worked with that student speaks up and offers an explanation.

After we mark the papers, we discuss them. I praise the tutors for giving what I see as effective feedback and then address what I consider to be problematic responses. I try to let my tutors lead the discussions as much as possible. Often, we zero in right away on the key issues. For example, one paper we looked at showed careful, helpful sentence-level revisions, but the paper was vague and there was no evidence that the tutor had made comments to that effect. Another paper showed that the tutor focused exclusively on larger elements while the paper was marred by obtrusive sentence-level errors, from comma splices to imprecise wording. The discussions are informative and revealing even if we do not always reach consensus on the key issues. Before we move on, I usually give my own assessment, which might go something like this: if the paper were written for my class, I would be glad the tutor addressed A, B, and C, especially A, but I do not care much about D, and I wish they had addressed E. Sometimes my tutors see things that I miss, and sometimes they make me rethink how I evaluate. Sometimes they ask me what grade I would give the paper, but I prefer not to answer that question.

This assessment/evaluation process can be more difficult than it sounds. Sometimes the tutors forget to ask the students to sign the consent form, or they forget to copy the paper after the tutorial, or—more often—the student signs the form, allowing us to copy and use the draft, but forgets to send the revised version and won't respond to a follow-up email from me. A more complicated problem, though, is that my tutors would rather not engage in the assessment process. Usually they're busy, and collecting the artifacts adds an extra task to their work. Furthermore, they're somewhat resistant to direct evaluations of their tutoring if we meet one-to-one after the group discussion. Most of them are perfectionists to some degree, so they hate to make mistakes, especially ones I can see. Even though I tell them there is no one correct way to revise a paper, most of them do not like for me to question their work.

However, with a little persistence, I can collect twenty papers in a semester, which means that each tutor only needs to collect a few papers each semester, and it is enough to give me a direct, qualitative assessment of the work in my writing center. My tutors and I learn how we can be more effective: we see what we don't see, which helps us to see better; we evaluate and revise our own standards of good writing as we compare them to those of our peers; we share ways to articulate our suggestions for producing

good writing; and by observing the results of our work, we validate it and/or motivate ourselves to do better.

One of my colleagues has pointed out that this exercise is useful primarily in assessing those tutorials that begin with a rough draft, and I agree, but going forward, I plan to encourage my tutors to do this: if a student comes in with no paper but leaves the session with a page or two of notes or an outline, we will copy that. We should then be able to compare those preliminary efforts with the final paper and see the results of collaborative brainstorming.

SCOTT'S ASSESSMENTS (QUANTITATIVE/DIRECT)

The assessment approach I use for my center owes much to the theoretical work of Neal Lerner—especially in his article “Counting Beans and Making Beans Count”—and to two empirical studies conducted by Luke Niiler, in which he collected quantitative ratings of pre- and post-intervention versions of papers and conducted statistical analysis on that data. Deno does not take a quantitative approach, but he examines the papers he collects in much the same way I do. That is, he considers both the overall (holistic) differences between pre- and post-intervention papers and the differences in specific traits such as thesis, organization, development, and sentence-level issues.

Our assessments reveal what our tutors are working on with students and help us make informed judgments about how effective their advice and guidance is. I have chosen a quantitative method in part because my writing center serves a larger population than Deno's does, in part because I have been lucky enough to qualify for university funding for these studies, and in part because one of my goals in evaluating the work of my writing center is to generate numerical data for yearly assessment reports. The tradeoff is that my approach provides less opportunity for the kind of individualized tutor training and evaluation that Deno's method lends itself to.

In my IRB-approved study, I work with first-year composition (FYC) faculty who volunteer to participate in an assessment of writing center tutoring. I visit their classes and explain the study to students before asking them to sign informed consent forms. These students agree to contribute both the draft and final versions of their semester-ending research papers. In half of these FYC class sections (the “intervention group”) the students are told they are required to visit the writing center for assistance after completing their drafts. The other half (the “non-intervention group”) are not told to visit the writing center. (Students in the “non-intervention” sections are allowed to visit the center. Their papers are simply removed from the study if they do so.)

I also work with a professor from the English Department to train graduate students in a composition pedagogy course to become raters in the study. These students learn to use a nine-point scale to rate papers holistically and a five-point scale to rate papers on six traits (thesis, organization, development, style, surface features, and formatting/citations). At the end of the semester, I hire several of these students to serve as raters. After a norming session in the morning, they rate all of the submissions for the study (two different raters for each paper). To protect student privacy and prevent bias in ratings, all identifying information is removed from the papers, including whether each paper is a draft or final version and whether each paper is in the intervention or non-intervention group. I have conducted multiple iterations of this study, the most recent of which produced these results as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Holistic Ratings of Intervention and Non-Intervention Groups

HOLISTIC RATINGS (9-point scale)	Draft Versions	Final Versions	Difference
Intervention Group (n=17)	3.12	4.97	+1.85
Non-Intervention Group (n=27)	4.17	4.22	+0.05

As Table 1 shows, the intervention group improved by nearly two points on a nine-point scale while the non-intervention group made little improvement. Interestingly, the intervention group’s mean holistic draft rating was much lower than the same rating for the non-intervention group. While I do not have a satisfying explanation, it is important to note that the intervention group started with a mean draft rating that was more than one full point below the non-intervention group but ended with a mean final version rating that was three quarters of a point higher than the non-intervention group. Thus, the intervention group not only made more improvement than the non-intervention group but ended with better final versions. The trait-based ratings in this study follow the same pattern as the holistic ratings, with the intervention group improving more than the non-intervention group on all traits.

The data in both tables suggest that writing center tutoring helps students improve their drafts not only holistically but also on specific traits. I cannot claim statistical significance for these results because I have not performed formal statistical tests on them. When I have funding for another study, I plan to aggregate the data and do this kind of testing. However, the raw data above do allow me to identify positive trends and areas of concern for tutor-

training purposes. For example, the relatively low scores in the Formatting/Citations trait in the intervention group’s final papers motivated me to develop new training materials for tutors and new handouts and audio-visual presentations for tutors and students to use when working on MLA and APA formatting issues.

Table 2. Trait Ratings of Intervention and Non-Intervention Groups

TRAIT RATINGS (5-point scale)	Non-Intervention Drafts	Non-Intervention Final Versions	Intervention Drafts	Intervention Final Versions
Thesis	2.81	2.76	2.44	3.21
Organization	2.80	2.78	2.53	3.12
Development	2.74	2.74	2.21	3.06
Style	2.87	2.91	2.85	3.09
Surface	3.15	3.17	2.68	3.35
Formatting/ Citations	2.69	2.80	2.03	2.82
TRAIT AVG.	2.84	2.74 (no diff.)	2.46	3.11 (+.65 pts.)

The good news is that this kind of quantitative data does seem to lead to ongoing improvement of our services and it allows us to assess our centers in ways that are relevant to our centers. In a previous iteration of this study, the intervention group made less than one-tenth of a point of average improvement from draft to final on the Development trait (from a draft average of 2.86 points to a final average of 2.95). After discussing strategies for helping students in this writing skill in subsequent training sessions, the most recent results show nearly a full point of improvement in development.

While I cannot definitively link any of the improvements seen in these assessment studies to writing center tutoring, I can reasonably argue that writing center tutoring is one of several possible causes. It is difficult to imagine a study that could demonstrate definitively that writing center intervention is the sole cause of a student’s improvement, but what we have determined is that our students tend to improve their drafts after visiting the writing center. Even more importantly, these assessments have provided an opportunity for our tutors to consider and re-evaluate their practice.

FINAL ANALYSIS

The approaches we take have much in common despite being on different ends of the qualitative/quantitative spectrum. Through these assessments, we seek to determine whether the tutoring in our centers yields positive results. For both of us, the tentative answer is yes, and we base that answer on direct evidence. Also, we are both interested in determining the specific writing traits

our tutors tend to work on. Deno noticed, for example, that some tutors devote too much attention to lower-order concerns like sentence structure when there are higher-order concerns like thesis development in the paper, while Scott's most recent assessment suggested that tutors needed a refresher training in documentation and citation strategies. Perhaps most importantly, we both use the data we gather for ongoing tutor training and development. The difference is that Deno looks at features of individual papers during tutor-training sessions while Scott reviews trends from the full set of data.

What we have learned from our contrasting approaches to assessment is that direct qualitative and quantitative measures are, as Lerner says, not actually in conflict. Quantitative methods are sometimes thought of as the best way to generate meaningful data through research that might be called "scientific." Carl Sagan once wrote that "If you know a thing only qualitatively, you know it no more than vaguely. If you know it quantitatively ... you are beginning to know it deeply" (21). However, we would quibble with Sagan on this point, at least in the case of writing center assessment. We feel that qualitative and quantitative methods can yield useful results when researchers focus on direct rather than indirect measures.

NOTE

1. Direct assessments provide evidence of student learning or growth by evaluating actual student work while indirect assessments focus on data about perceptions of student learning (for example, Likert-scale surveys asking students to rate the effectiveness of a tutoring session).



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CALLING ALL TUTORS!

The WLN blog, *Connecting Writing Centers across Borders*, invites creative, academic, or hybrid pieces for their Tutor Voices page! Consider submitting a blog piece (1000 words) that takes a specific angle on an issue within writing center praxis and/or a 30-second video or photo with brief description about what's keeping you resilient during these challenging times. For more detailed guidelines, visit our submission guidelines page: www.wlnjournal.org/blog/submission-guidelines/. If you're not yet subscribed to the blog or our newsletter, we'd love you to join us. To do so, visit: www.wlnjournal.org/blog/subscribe-to-blog-newsletter/. Questions? Email us at writinglabnewsletterblog@gmail.com.