

Bridging Boundaries: Perceived Roles of Librarians and Writing Center Tutors in Supporting Student Research Writing

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In both library and writing instruction the phrases “research skills” and “research process” are often used as stand-ins for “information literacy.” These skills are often taught or understood as separate from skills associated with the “writing process,” which has long been supported by a peer-to-peer tutoring model through writing centers. Unfortunately, in the workflow of student support systems, this often results in a compartmentalized structure in which it seems that libraries are keepers of the “research process,” and writing centers are keepers of the “writing process.”

However, librarians, writing faculty, and tutors have often sought to break down these perceptions and have asserted that the best way to support students working on research paper assignments is to consider research and writing as co-mingled processes, rather than self-contained skill sets (e.g., see Brady et al.; Cooke and Bledsoe; Ferer). As such, writing centers and libraries have emerged as natural partners, and there have been multiple collaborative successes, but there is still much to consider. For example, in a study from one university, librarians found that information literacy was discussed in only 13% of writing center consultations, with less than 1% of transactions resulting in a referral to librarians (Graves et al.). When taken as a whole, the research on writing center and library collaboration reveals that breaking down barriers and providing easily traversable bridges between research and writing support is paramount in helping students engage in effective and meaningful research and writing processes (e.g., see Jackson; Napier; Richardson). The interconnected nature of research and writing calls for continued attempts to join forces, demonstrating an ongoing need for fresh ideas and perspectives on this hallowed partnership.

But what happens when collaboration takes a tutor or librarian out

of bounds of their own professional purview? At our institution, when librarians and tutors come together at collaborative events to help students with research and writing, awareness over content boundaries builds: students do not always know whether their questions are better suited to a librarian or a tutor, and tutors and librarians identify areas of overlap and difference in instruction content and methods. In what follows, we describe and analyze one collaborative event in order to share how students, librarians, and undergraduate peer tutors worked together to create a flexible environment in which to support the recursive nature of research and writing.

“AFTER HOURS RESEARCH AND WRITING HELP”: OUR COLLABORATIVE EVENT

For our own version of a writing center and library collaboration, we—Jennifer, a Writing Center Director, and Christine, an Undergraduate Success Librarian—developed an evening “extra help” workshop, where both librarians and peer writing tutors provided one-to-one drop-in consultations with undergraduate students working on research papers. This workshop, which we hosted twice in the same week in mid-November 2019, became a way to understand how students, tutors, and librarians perceive boundaries and continuities between research and writing support. Before, during, and after the workshop, we gathered feedback from students, tutors, and librarians about their expectations and experiences through a pre-assessment questionnaire, post-event surveys, and less formal email and interpersonal communications, which yielded anecdotal data. The dialogues and analysis that resulted from our inquiries encouraged openness and flexibility in understanding boundaries between different types of research and writing support.

Because our Writing Center is housed in a separate building from the library, the “after hours” event offered a rare opportunity for librarians and writing tutors to support students in the same place at the same time. We held the event in an active learning space in the library designed to accommodate up to fifty people. Because the tables and chairs were on wheels, we could arrange the space to accommodate six writing tutors on one side of the room and three librarians on the other side of the room. This arrangement created a visual representation of our separate roles in supporting research and writing processes; participants could then easily move back and forth between different types of support throughout the course of the evening.

Students went through an intake process: the Writing Center Director or Assistant Director helped them determine whether to

begin their consultations with a librarian or with a writing tutor, depending on their responses to a short questionnaire. We designed this process not only to facilitate directing students to librarians or tutors, but also to help students think critically about what they needed help with and how they might go about continuing to use the research and writing support available to them in the future.

BOUNDARIES: STUDENT PERCEPTIONS

The primary way of collecting student perceptions was through the short questionnaire students filled out as they entered the event space. The first question asked, “What about the research and writing process do you need help with today?” In response to this question, students had an easier time articulating the type of help they needed with their writing, as opposed to their research. Examples of how students described what they needed help with included “need help with thesis” and “developing structure.” In articulating the help they needed with research, however, students rarely responded with anything more detailed than “finding resources.” To librarians, finding resources might involve such processes as choosing a database, differentiating information formats, brainstorming search terms, and evaluating search results. This nuance, however, was not apparent in students’ responses.

The second question asked students to select whom they came to the event to get help from: writing tutor (64%), librarian (3%), both (14%), or not sure (5%). The remaining 14% of students chose not to circle anything, or circled one response and then crossed it off, demonstrating general confusion about how to answer the question. Our analysis of whom students sought for different types of help revealed that boundaries perceived by librarians and writing tutors were sometimes unclear or nonexistent in the minds of students grappling with their research papers. Students often didn’t seem to know (or care) whom to get help from—they just wanted help! For example, out of the thirteen students who needed help with citations, eleven circled “writing tutor” on their questionnaire, indicating that a librarian was not their first choice for support. Undoubtedly, students defaulted to requesting to speak with a writing tutor as opposed to a librarian; out of the fifty-eight students who attended the events, only two circled “librarian” on the questionnaire.

Despite the initial hesitancy to seek help from a librarian, the evening ended with many students talking with both a librarian and a writing tutor, and sometimes students moved back and forth across the room as their needs evolved throughout the session. For example, when working with a writing tutor, sometimes initial concerns about the organization of an argument revealed a fundamental absence

of supporting research; to address this, students would physically move across the room to sit with a librarian instead. Emboldened by new (or more appropriate) sources, some students opted to return to their initial writing tutors, hoping to brainstorm ways to incorporate this new material. Typically, writing tutors encouraged this “transfer of support” whenever they noticed significant gaps in content or heavy reliance on individual sources, often signaling the need to revisit and revise students’ research process.

In our anonymous follow-up feedback survey, we asked students to briefly explain when they would seek help from a librarian and when they would seek help from a writing tutor. These responses reinforced our assumption that students are often guided by a presumed chronology of the “research process” and “writing process”—they assumed that one necessarily precedes the other. One student, for example, said they would seek help from a librarian “early on,” and from a writing tutor “after my paper was written.” This imagined progression is often different from the reality of how students write their research papers and points to how much student frustration may lie in the difficulty of lining up their actual research and writing processes with an imagined or idealized process.

BOUNDARIES: LIBRARIAN PERCEPTIONS

All five librarians who participated in the workshops felt the evenings were a success and, in follow-up emails and conversations, expressed that they enjoyed participating. Some librarians pointed to the novelty of experiencing the library at night; feeling the “buzz” of students in the library in the evening hours made the space less familiar and provided an opportunity to develop new perspectives on reference interactions.

The presence of the writing tutors also provided a new experience for librarians. One librarian noted in an email how impressed she was with the tutors and how beneficial it was for librarians and tutors to see each other at work, fostering a climate of mutual respect for each other’s consultation work, which usually takes place in different buildings on our campus. She explained that the writing tutors “seemed very confident, competent and knowledgeable. I was impressed with them and wouldn’t hesitate to refer a student to them.”

Another librarian commented that his work with students ended up being in what he called a “gray area between composition and research” because he was often helping students find resources that supported their theses but then, in the process, saw the need to help the students revise their thesis statements. In this

way, the event provided librarians with a unique opportunity to bridge the research and writing processes. A third librarian also commented on how she helped students better support their theses but described it as students having to “work backwards to find sources.” The librarians, then, naturally became more flexible in extending support to student writing by supporting the students within the context of where the students actually were in the research process, as opposed to an idealized vision of where they were “supposed” to be.

In an informal survey we sent to a small group of librarians before the event, on which librarians were asked to check off which of twenty-one different types of research paper help they felt comfortable supporting students on, eight out of eight librarians checked off types of help having to do with database use and source evaluation. Only three librarians, however, checked off “developing a clear and effective thesis statement,” and four librarians checked off “synthesizing information from sources to support a thesis.” However, at our event, all the librarians involved not only helped students find sources, but also remained flexible in guiding students on how sources were integrated into other aspects of writing their papers. The librarians experienced firsthand the nervousness, energy, and even desperation that tutors and writing faculty see on a regular basis as paper deadlines approach, writing center appointments are booked solid, and lines of students form outside of faculty offices. This energy is not always as palpable in a chat, reference interaction, or one-off library instruction session. Being placed within the excitement of the event offered a chance for librarians to both meet students wherever they were in their process and also reinforce research and writing as evolving processes that must inform each other.

BOUNDARIES: TUTOR PERCEPTIONS

In our Center, peer tutors are trained to consider best practices in writing pedagogy, encouraged to remain mindful of their own writing challenges, and taught to define themselves through playful improvisation, not expertise. As Paula Gillespie and Neal Lerner argue, tutoring expertise is grounded in the ability of tutors to engage with students, set a tone for the session, negotiate priorities, and manage expectations; as peers, tutors are discouraged from leveraging their own expertise, instead focusing on “respecting writers’ need to discover” by attending to social cues throughout the session (27). Our best tutors are often students who feel energized by the unpredictability of the tutoring appointment. The goal of training is not to build expertise in writing but to construct a methodology for tutoring that requires tutors to address best

practices while keeping their own abilities and experiences and our local student population in mind.

The undergraduate peer tutors who volunteered to work our library event brought this improvisational style to the evening consultations. In conventional writing center tutorials, it's common practice for tutors to recommend alternative support services whenever students request help beyond tutors' sphere of practice. In this close collaboration, however, tutors were able to literally walk students over to available librarians *if* and *when* the conversation became more focused on seeking research support, providing an easily traversable bridge between the two support systems. Having writing tutors and librarians in the same space opened up differing ways to look at the same types of questions, and most practically, made it physically possible for tutors to know that their suggestion to solicit more help from a librarian was truly heeded by students.

In advance of the event, tutors were surveyed anonymously to find out whether they felt research support should be provided by the writing tutor or delegated to another campus resource, such as the library. Although some tutors were reluctant to offer support conducting database searches or assessing search results, most tutors felt quite comfortable working with students on these information literacy concerns. While both tutors and librarians play similar roles in supporting work assigned and evaluated by the professor, it's clear the tutors' perceptions of themselves and their relationship to the university as students and peers impacts the way they approach this support. The tutors' hybrid identities as both peers and tutors may grant them more freedom to improvise than the librarians' singular identity as a faculty member trained in a particular field.

Working consistently with students who frequent the Writing Center for certain kinds of support, peer tutors do express greater comfort helping students with "writing" tasks than with "research" methods. In fact, when surveyed to find out which types of support tutors felt most confident providing (from brainstorming topics to avoiding plagiarism), our current cohort agreed on only two items: (1) reorganizing content from an existing draft and (2) writing effective introductions and conclusions, both associated with the revision stage of the writing process. Since so much of their training encourages flexibility, and since students often seek help beyond traditional drafting and revision support, however, experienced tutors are often quite willing to use their peer status to help wherever they can.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: TWO PERSPECTIVES

From Christine's librarian perspective:

It is important to show students struggling to write research papers that research and writing processes are intertwined, often in chaotic and unpredictable ways. Students might need to go through various writing process stages before they realize the value of thinking critically about searching for and evaluating authoritative sources. Crossing the room from writing tutor to librarian to re-engage with the databases and refine search terms became a physical enactment not only of the close connection between research and writing, but also of the students' developing awareness of this connection. Collaborative events like these are simple and fun ways to demonstrate the recursive nature of research and writing. The events can help librarians and tutors reaffirm their own roles, develop respect for each other's roles, and begin to question when and whether to blur the boundaries between the two.

From Jennifer's writing center perspective:

Collaborations like our "Research and Writing" event also challenge tutor perceptions of their own "expertise" and their role at the university. In many ways, these events invite questions and challenges from students who might not otherwise visit the campus writing center, forcing tutors to navigate less familiar concerns. As Stephen North says, "What we want to do in a writing center is fit into—observe and participate in—this ordinarily solo ritual of writing" (439). Once inside, however, the tutor's impact may be subtle (encouraging writers to challenge their own methodology) or more pronounced (redirecting student efforts). Inserting oneself is fundamentally risky and uncertain, and since each session is a spontaneous interpersonal communication, there is no script to rely on. The flexibility offered by collaborative events not only supports student writing, then, but also helps tutors remain open and improvisatory in their interactions with students seeking support.



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