

Tutors' Column: "Graduate Writing Workshops: To Generalize or to Specialize"

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When, as a PhD student, I started working as a peer tutor and administrator at Penn State's Graduate Writing Center (GWC), I assumed I could just pick up where I had left off at my undergraduate writing center, where I had worked five years earlier. But after struggling to grasp the basics of some tutees' doctoral-level papers—especially in STEM fields I hadn't encountered since high school—I realized there was one big difference: graduate student writing reflects the intense disciplinary specialization required for successful academic careers. That specialization poses a challenge for generalist writing centers.



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Increasingly, the unique needs of grad students are gaining attention from the field of writing center studies. *WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship*, for instance, has been examining the topic for over a decade, most notably in a special issue in 2016 dedicated to graduate writers. Much of this research has focused on one-to-one tutoring, but here I concentrate on large-group instruction. The special issue broached this topic with an article by Kristina Reardon, Tom Deans, and Cheryl Maykel; their center's programming for grad students includes instruction via five-week seminars and thirty-minute workshops. For centers like mine that lack the resources to provide a seminar, workshops offer a more feasible way of reaching an array of students. Because of workshops' potential to do more (for graduate students) with less—surely a common objective of writing center administrators—I share my experience in this column. First, I explain how grad writers' needs for centralized support and discipline-specific guidance compete for precedence. Second, I describe how we have sought to reconcile these needs in our workshops; collaborating with disciplinary specialists seems to be the most successful strategy.

CENTRALIZED SUPPORT VERSUS DISCIPLINE-SPECIFIC GUIDANCE

"Where should graduate support reside? Should we consolidate or distribute graduate resources?" (Simpson 288). That is, should there be a centralized resource for graduate writing, or should each aca-

democratic unit be in charge of supporting its own students? Either option has benefits and drawbacks. When units take charge of writing instruction, they can teach their students about the specialized conventions of the discipline. But a downside is fragmentation; if there is a patchwork of resources unevenly distributed among units, it can be hard for students to find what they need. Conversely, students may have an easier time accessing the consolidated resources of a centralized program, but staff—especially tutors who, like me, are ensconced in the humanities—are unlikely to be acquainted with the writing conventions of every discipline.

Graduate writing centers like mine rely on a centralized model, adhering to a generalist pedagogy. Generalism holds that there is a university-wide discourse community that shares standards. However, some contend that the university actually comprises dozens, if not hundreds, of distinct discourse communities, with each field and sub-field maintaining its own conventions (Harris). How can educators satisfy the student need for both centralized support and discipline-specific guidance? To address this question, I draw upon my experiences as GWC Coordinator.

WORKSHOPS: A CENTRALIZED RESOURCE OFFERING DISCIPLINARY SUPPORT

Penn State has a small graduate writing center (three tutors, all English PhD students, jointly working approximately forty hours per week) serving a large graduate student body (over six thousand). In a typical semester, we work with about a hundred students in one-to-one tutoring and teach about a hundred more through several two-hour workshops. Workshops thus double our reach. In them, we try to simultaneously instruct students from over a dozen colleges, from fields as disparate as philosophy and petroleum engineering. Why take on this task? Well, students appear to want workshops, given their steady attendance. But as we attempt to design materials relevant to all members of these diverse audiences, we run into the tension of generalism versus disciplinarity. As I explain below, generalist workshops tend to fill the classroom—yet, attendees consistently express a desire for lessons better tailored to their fields. We have tried to address this demand by harnessing interdisciplinary collaborations to develop several new workshops.

Starting with Generalism: Identifying Situations Most Grad Writers Encounter For many years, we have built workshops around writing situations facing most grad students, regardless of their discipline: contexts (applications, coursework, publishing), genres (abstracts, CVs, dissertations, etc.), and lower-order concerns (sentence style, citations). Workshops on these broad situations usually attract a good number of attendees from across the university. For example, one of our most frequent workshops, on literature reviews, drew one hun-

dred attendees when I presented it during summer term. Considering that in this two-hour session we taught as many students as we tutor in a typical fifteen-week semester, generalist workshops can greatly expand our influence.

Yet, attendees often critique workshops for failing to offer discipline-specific guidance, leaving comments like, “I think it has to be done by major or field” (cf. Crews and Garahan). When we lecture, sometimes we present guidance that directly contradicts the expectations of the student’s discipline—for instance, we have suggested starting research articles with a “hook,” which doesn’t comport with how scientists write introductions. Similarly, when we present samples, we get complaints for favoring the humanities. I sympathize with these critiques, questioning the utility of “universal” writing advice.

Nevertheless, we cannot offer discipline-specific versions of each workshop without severely reducing staff hours available for tutorials. Prep time is significant when, on occasion, we fulfill a professor’s request for a workshop adapted to their class. For instance, to design a lesson for international affairs students, I had to do time-intensive research—hours that were deducted from my tutorial offerings. To satisfy the desire for discipline-specific lessons without funneling too many resources away from our primary mission, one-to-one tutorials, we have experimented with a new model: workshops that utilize the knowledge of disciplinary experts.

Moving toward Specialization: Building Collaborations with Disciplinary Experts: Finding collaborators outside the GWC is one answer. By drawing on the expertise of writing specialists beyond English, we have efficiently adapted workshops to students’ contexts. Sometimes, such adaptation entails encouraging students to investigate their own disciplines, and at other times, favoring the fields that contribute the most attendees. Interdisciplinary collaborations enable us to model how conventions differ by field, prompting students to conduct their own disciplinary analyses. For one workshop, I worked with an applied linguist to present genre as a theory applicable to any discipline, encouraging students to consider how genre works within their field. We demonstrated how, even between our “homes” in English and linguistics, conventions for a genre like a research article differ. For the workshop’s central activity, we asked students to identify a genre they need to write in and to bring in a sample from their discipline. We guided them through analyzing this sample. With this activity, we tried to inspire students to connect our general guidance to their own discipline. In evaluations, most respondents indicated that the workshop had primed them to investigate their own field’s genre conventions. Nonetheless, we again got the classic request to present “separate workshops for different fields.” Clearly, there’s no one-size-fits-all approach, but making a student’s

own project central to a workshop can make it relevant to diverse disciplines.

In response to students' requests for discipline-specific guidance, we have tailored some workshops to the domain that sends the most attendees: STEM. To suit this audience, we invite professors from that realm to lead some of our workshops. These specialists prepare guidance most pertinent to STEM writing but still broad enough to help writers in other fields. For example, a workshop led by an engineering-communication specialist offered tips on composing scientific conference presentations that I found relevant to the humanities. Attendees responded well, rating this workshop more highly than the "über-generalist" lit review workshop on criteria such as relevance and practicality. It is worth noting, however, that attendance was lower (around forty), since we only targeted STEM students.

Interdisciplinary collaborations have the potential to improve workshop pedagogy in several regards. With some acknowledgement of how conventions differ by field, like that enabled by my work with an applied linguist, a workshop on a "generalist" theme like genre can spark discipline-specific learning. Conversely, specialized workshops, like those prioritizing STEM, can present knowledge (e.g., presentation design) with relevance across disciplines. Workshops offer an affordable way for a graduate writing center to serve large numbers of students at once. Generalist workshops, however, risk alienating students who find the material irrelevant to their field. It is therefore crucial to acknowledge disciplinary differences. I described two methods of accomplishing this objective, both of which depend on administrators reaching beyond our own (composition-rhetoric) disciplinary borders to find collaborators across the university.

NOTES

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