



Awareness, Active Learning, and Student and Faculty Engagement: The Extended Orientation Model in the Writing Center

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Many writing centers host orientations for students new to the college or college composition classes to inform them of services and familiarize them with the writing center space. Often, these are presentation-style, as a tutor explains the center's purpose and details of using the center. By nature, these orientations inform rather than actively engage students in the processes of the writing center. Students do not ask many questions or have conversations with tutors, and we do not know if students return to the writing center of their own volition or because of the initial orientation. These observations led our community college writing center to consider another orientation strategy that amalgamated tutoring and the orientation, bringing students into the writing center in a non-threatening, engaging, and organic manner.

The College Writing Center (CWC) at St. Louis Community College, Meramec campus, is comprised of around 10 professional tutors who conduct in-person, synchronous online, and asynchronous online tutoring sessions. Out of the over 14,000 students enrolled at this college (four campuses and one satellite location), about 1,500 unique students use this campus's writing center services each year; the number of student appointments vary between 4,500 and 5,500 annually. One of the oldest writing centers in Missouri (founded in 1965), the CWC has been operating with a traditional orientation model since its inception. In this model, an instructor brings their class to the writing center during their normally scheduled class time, though some take place in the classroom, and a tutor presents the main principles and policies of the CWC, the process of scheduling an appointment, and the framework of a typical session. Introducing students to the space lasts 10-15 minutes. In Spring 2019, the CWC was inspired by the University of Missouri-St. Louis (UMSL) Writing Center to expand this structure. The UMSL Writing Center hosts each First Year Composition class during the early drafting stages of their first major essay. During this session, tutors work in small groups with students, sharing outlines or drafts. When implementing this model, UMSL's writing center tutors and supervisor anecdotally noticed increased traffic and visits for higher-order concerns. Based on UMSL's model, the CWC designed what we now call extended orientations. After conducting a pilot of this program at our institution, we discovered—based on some informal quantitative data and anecdotal data—this model increases student and instructor engagement, fosters awareness of the center, and incorporates methods of active learning into the CWC.



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Through extended orientations, our focus is threefold: awareness, engagement, and active learning. We aim for students and faculty to know *what* we do as a center, not just that the center exists. Extended orientations establish this awareness, showing instructors and students what the writing center does, rather than telling them in a traditional, presentation-style orientation. Additionally, our efforts move toward student and faculty engagement. Students ask questions of tutors and their instructor, give feedback to their peers, and remember the utility and benefits of writing center sessions. Faculty also learn about the writing center and interact with tutors and students during the session. Lastly, students develop active learning; students' participation and group work offer hands-on, unique instruction through conversation with peers and tutors.

WHAT IS AN EXTENDED ORIENTATION?

During extended orientations, instructors bring a class to the writing center for most of the class period. Most orientations are offered to English Composition I and II classes, often occurring during the first few weeks of the semester when students are starting their first essay. However, these sessions can occur later in the semester, depending on instructor needs. The extended orientations are composed of two parts: the introduction (10-15 minutes), or presentation-style traditional orientation, and the interactive portion (30 minutes for a 50-minute class period). During the interactive portion, students divide into groups of five or six with a tutor facilitating that group. Groups work on the current writing assignment in the class: brainstorming, creating an outline, or receiving feedback on a draft. For example, for a class starting a narrative essay, the tutor has students state topic ideas and provides time to brainstorm, using the "Narrative Essay Topic Checklist" (College Writing Center Staff). The tutor dialogues with students, giving feedback on their topics and helping them reflect on the conflict and significance of their stories. While the group session focuses on conversing with other students and does not allow for as much in-depth exploration as a one-to-one session, students experience a snapshot of the structure of writing center sessions, elements tutors focus on, and handouts and other supplementary materials. The tutor addresses questions to each student and to the group, and instructors are present to float around the space and listen in, answering questions that arise. Peers also offer feedback on each others' ideas or writing thus far.

The CWC Supervisor collaborates with the instructor regarding scheduling, the purpose of the extended orientation, and expectations. Based on the assignment and stage in the writing process, the CWC Supervisor and the tutors craft a worksheet for students to complete during the orientation, which acts as a guide for the group and a conversation facilitator. As we started implementing extended orientations, tutors noticed that though they require additional work and planning, they are worth the time and resources: extra staffing, time devoted to preparing materials and the space, and fewer hours for walk-ins or appointments.

THE BENEFITS OF EXTENDED ORIENTATIONS

As we reflected on the pilot phase of extended orientations, we turned to writing center scholarship. Lori Salem contests "the idea that all (or the primary) pedagogical interactions in the writing center should take the form of tutoring sessions. Learners need instruction that is fully differentiated and we should seek to embody that in the writing center" (164). Differentiated instruction can include extended orientations that incorporate active learning, engagement, and greater awareness of the center. Harry Denny, John Nordlof, and Salem argue for this diversification to better serve varied student populations (88). Especially at a community college

like ours, these populations include nontraditional students, international students, and first-generation college students. Extended orientations increase awareness of the center for students who need these services most, such as those with tight schedules and who are not already aware of academic support systems. Since our students are diverse, we must creatively think of strategies to reach and engage them in their writing.

Extended orientations provide this more active approach. Holly Ryan and Danielle Kane reinforce this through their study comparing three different types of classroom orientations. The authors hoped to learn which method of orientation resulted in the most visits to the writing center. Participating students either listened to a podcast about the writing center, watched and listened to a presentation, or saw a student volunteer and a tutor engage in a mock session. This study found that students shown the demonstration “had the highest likelihood” to visit the writing center (Ryan and Kane 158). Extended orientations are similar to the demonstration, as they also include students participating in a session and giving feedback to peers. Also, like classroom demonstrations, extended orientations engage students in active learning, and Ryan and Kane found that “classroom demonstrations that use active learning techniques are most likely to change student perceptions of the writing center and alter the students’ indicated likelihood of making a visit to the writing center” (145). We hoped students participating in an extended orientation would also indicate that they were likely to return to the CWC in the future, altering their “perceptions of the writing center” (Ryan and Kane 145). The survey results discussed below indicate this likelihood. Instead of coming to the writing center on their own, students become a captive audience as part of class time, thus receiving the benefits of a session. Tutors model the writing process for students, with the aim of helping students understand and replicate the process later and increasing students’ confidence in their abilities.

SURVEY RESPONSES AND ADDITIONAL DATA

To determine the effectiveness of this model, we have been collecting usage data and gathering feedback from students to ascertain if extended orientations resulted in increased engagement and visits to the writing center. Between the Fall 2019 and Spring 2023 semesters, we generally increased the number of extended orientations: 17 in Fall 2019, 19 in Spring 2020, 44 in Fall 2021, 33 in Spring 2022, 39 in Fall 2022, and 35 in Spring 2023. Fewer extended orientations took place in the spring semesters due to fewer classes and lower enrollment in the spring. After each extended orientation, students completed a survey that asked about the benefits and disadvantages of this model, possible areas of improvement, and students’ likelihood of returning to the writing center. During the spring 2023 semester, 282 students who attended extended orientations were surveyed. These students commented on the strategies they learned and the most valuable aspects of the orientation:

- “Using a visual organizer when structuring your argument and finding research, making your thesis easy to argue against”
- “Learned that even good writers use the writing center”
- “I learned to use the quotation ‘sandwich’ when referencing another source”
- “How to be more comfortable letting others read my papers and ways I can get help at the center”
- “A better way to develop a thesis statement and that I have more support with my future here at Meramec than I realized”

While traditional and extended orientations both inform students of the CWC services, these responses indicate that extended orientations are unique in helping students learn specific writing techniques. From these classes, 48.3% of the students surveyed said they were likely to return to the CWC sometime in the next week or in the next month, and 44.2% said they were likely to return to the CWC sometime later that semester. These data mirror Ryan and Kane's study that found students who received the demonstration indicated they are likely to return to the writing center. Our return rate data reiterates the efficacy of extended orientations.

While we did not collect data on return rates of students receiving traditional orientations, the CWC has noticed students attending traditional orientations (i.e., a 10-15-minute presentation of the CWC's services) have fewer opportunities to interact with tutors and have a less engaging experience than those who come in for an extended orientation. In the 2019-2020 academic year, our overall usage numbers showed that we reached 1,642 unique students (27.8% from extended orientations); in 2021-2022, 1,746 unique students (56.5% from extended orientations); and in 2022-2023, 1,556 unique students (24.1% from extended orientations). We interpret these data positively; despite decreasing enrollment in our community college system, the number of students reached by the CWC has increased. In the 2019-2020 academic year, 47% of students returned for a one-to-one writing center tutoring session after attending an extended orientation earlier in the academic year; this return rate was 39.5% in 2021-2022, and 39.8% in 2022-2023. Additionally, by spring 2023, we were conducting extended orientation sessions with 36 instructors across the disciplines, including history, horticulture, graphic communications, and education, allowing us to interact with departments we previously had no connection with.

However, this model has several limitations to consider. Group dynamics vary in terms of ability level, personality, and engagement. Some students might not want to share their ideas or their writing in a group setting, and other students may be apathetic to writing. Others may be behind in their understanding of the course material or the assignment. We navigate this by making the orientation more individualized; the tutor can break up the group further, encouraging half of the group to work on one aspect of their writing and the other half to work on another. Overall, tutors must be adaptable to the changing circumstances of the orientations, considering where students are in their process.

APPLICATIONS OF THIS MODEL: HOW TO ADAPT TO YOUR INSTITUTION

While extended orientations have worked effectively for our writing center, they might need to be adapted to fit another writing center's institutional mission, values, and resources. Listed below are a few strategies to consider during the implementation process.

1. Determine writing center's resources.

Our CWC has the workforce to allocate four tutors per extended orientation, but other writing centers may not have that many tutors available at one time. They may not be able to take resources and tutors away from walk-in student sessions and appointments. When planning an orientation, consider ideal days, times, and tutors for a session. Though we did find that smaller group sizes allowed for better collaboration, perhaps it is only possible to have larger groups of students with fewer tutors. For larger group sizes, consider conducting these sessions at the

brainstorming stage. It is a formative part of the writing process, and it is more manageable to brainstorm with several students than to read entire drafts.

2. Decide which instructors to collaborate with.

Typically, our writing center selects instructors and contacts them, but at times, we receive requests from the instructor. Especially in the pilot phase, writing centers should partner with faculty who already show buy-in with the writing center. That way, the instructor will be amenable to the expectations of the orientation. Productive buy-in centers on an understanding of the purpose of the writing center, in that we focus on the development of writers and the writing process.

3. Create a clear, focused plan of action before the orientation.

The instructor should provide the assignment guidelines and pertinent information to the CWC well in advance. With this information in hand, a team of tutors will construct a handout for students to complete during the orientation. For example, if students are brainstorming a literacy narrative, the handout could ask pre-writing questions to guide students toward considering different topics for this type of essay. Discussing this plan of action with the instructor helps to engage the instructor in the process and to see what the writing center does. After the pilot phase, it is important to bring in more instructors who do not know as much about the writing center because the extended orientation model can help these instructors to learn about what the writing center does. Receiving instructor buy-in demonstrates to students the benefits of the writing center and the writing center's inclusivity.

4. Communicate goals in a transparent manner to the students.

Students should understand the purpose of the interactive portion decided by the instructor and CWC. Perhaps the goal is to learn how to construct a thesis statement or to understand summarizing strategies. Clearly communicating the focus sets the students up for success because it allows students to be more metacognitive about a particular writing skill. Identifying this goal also allows the tutor to gauge where students are in their writing process and divide the groups accordingly. If students are working on transitioning their outlines into body paragraphs but half of the class have unfinished outlines, the most productive use of time would be to divide into groups that are at the same stage. Additionally, tutors should be specific about the goal of peer feedback in the session. The tutor provides expert assistance but should clarify that the students can also help one another.

5. Collect data on relevant statistics and conduct a post-orientation survey.

A post-orientation survey allows writing centers to see what students thought of the extended orientation and how they perceive the writing center after the orientation. Additional data establishes the importance of conducting these orientations to administrators. Data could include the total number of students from extended orientations, unique student visits, and return rate.

CONCLUSION

Despite decreasing enrollment, the CWC is reaching more unique students. We attribute extended orientations to part of this increase; we are interacting with students in a more intentional way. Through our satisfaction surveys, return rate statistics, and discussions with

students, we know we are engaging students more than prior to implementing this model; more students are scheduling follow-up appointments.

Overall, are the extra resources needed to conduct extended orientations “worth it”? As writing centers, do we seek to be data driven, or student driven, giving more weight to one or the other in making decisions about the center and its services? How can we balance the two? Do we give more weight to return percentages than individual student feedback? Would the student who said that through the extended orientation they “learned that even good writers use the writing center” have responded the same way if they had received a traditional orientation? We continue to explore the questions presented here and propose them for future research. We are striving to fill a gap in research on the topic of active learning, student engagement, and awareness of writing centers, as called for in writing center scholarship.¹

NOTE

1. Special thanks to the entire CWC staff and to one of our former writing center tutors, Niara Jackson.

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